



Identifying the Woman: Gender as a Cultural Game in Selected African Literature

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Abstract

Character model of the exemplary woman has persisted in African literature than any other literature in the world. From studies, the woman in the African traditional context is not clearly defined. The woman, for instance, is not born; she is made, and if this is so, she is expected to be an embodiment of culture, which classified her gender as one who is physically weak, economically dependent, and emotionally feeble when compared to the man. She, as well, must be submissively placed under a man. This is the characterization of womanhood which is contested in feminist studies. Following Olu Oguibe's critique of "Otherness" and the Third World and Obododimma Oha's idea of 'Nwokeness' and 'Nwanyiness', this paper looks at gender as a cultural game that stifles female behavioral consciousness to the satisfaction of the man. This patriarchal game informs various female characters and characterization in African literature and criticism from African feminist conceptions like Stiwanism and Womanism. This chapter evaluates the women's identities in selected African literature. However, we conclude that gender is a cultural game.

Keywords: feminism, culture, otherness, identity and the postcolonial consciousness.

Introduction

African gender studies are dominated by diverse opinions about a closely related ideology that is patriarchal in nature. Patriarchy is a socio-cultural dominance of men, and according to Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp (1991), it maintains the principle of womanhood as an adjunct for the reproduction of humanity and justifies by metaphysics what is unjust and atrocious in the life of women. In African feminist consciousness, womanism, motherism, feminism with a small 'f', and snail sense feminism are all similar ways of identifying the African woman. These are conceptual ideas of liberal feminism in which the woman is admonished, even in the most civilized culture, according to Sarah Ellis (1962), to consider herself as thus: "I am but a feeble instrument in the hands of Providence but as He will give me strength, I hope to pursue the plan to which I have been accustomed, of seeking my own happiness only in the happiness of others". Ellis' ideology was a virtue preserved and transferred from mother to daughter even in civilized cultures before industrialization and capitalism.

In Africa, patriarchy, according to Celestin Gbaguidi (2018), imposes on women such values like disinterested love, economic dependency, as well as fear and submissiveness to male folk. These attributes Gbaguidi believes are disillusioning to the consciousness of postcolonial African woman who is doubly confronted with the difficulties of indigenous culture and colonial urbanization. He aptly points out that "The African women are also portrayed as incapable of making their own decisions in life and that men have to make decisions for them". Lois Tyson (2006) believes that women are not born but culturally made. Therefore, women are culturally constructed according to individual cultures that inform their background.

In postcolonial Igbo society of Southeastern Nigeria, the woman is polarized, and according to Oha, Obododimma (2019) she is defined in a concept of femininity known as *nwanyinessa* symbiosis of *nwokeness*. Oha persistently draws his illustration from Achebe's Okonkwo as an archetype of African masculinity, whose *nwokeness* according to him, remains untainted by *nwanyinessa*. Yet masculinity and femininity exist at the level of symbiosis in the African context. This idea of gender symbiosis is highly celebrated in African feminist discourse which even theorists had to come up with such branded feminism like womanism and motherism, signifying socio-cultural inclusion of women in a vast patriarchal society like Africa. Patriarchy is an established culture of binary opposition and male dominance. It does not include women in power sharing and therefore creates rivalry among different classes, including sexes. In recent studies, Fashakin Folashade (2018) calls for a new reading of gender in African literature as situated in post feminism. According to Ann Brooks (1997), post feminism is about a political shift in the conceptual and theoretical agenda of feminism. It does not imply the death of feminism, but feminists believe that women have come a long way through liberation, and, therefore, the woman archetype should be characterised in nobility and conquest to oppose initial misogynist representations.

Olu Oguibe (2004) maintains that the Third World is not geographically located, perhaps in Africa or other parts of the world, where upbringing of deprivation may have left a child, in that case, technophobic. In his illustrations, Oguibe locates his Third World model in a fellow in the neighbourhood of New York City, who knows the computer only as a word. Yet, he is without a bank account and therefore does not have access to the computerized banking system that even many in the remotest Africa take for granted. Oguibe concludes that such fellows are the 'Other' of his discourse. On this note, the African woman is unfairly signified since qualities considered to be feminine are equally found in the man as well. If this is so, she cannot be defined and subsumed in the obscurity of emotional weakness and economic dependency since the period of only 'mothering' and educational deprivation. Although the woman is a mother, she has beaten domestic constraints to succeed in different spheres of life. That the woman is weak are issues founded as culturally constructed which are perceived as a game of power possession in patriarchy. It is the man whom like the technophobic fellow in the neighbourhood of New York city that is weak. Considering the privileges and right given to the man, there should not be one said to be weak, yet many abound. But the woman must be understood from the perspective of the other child, whom an upbringing of deprivation may have left technophobia or economically incapacitated; how unfairly is she judged as the 'other' of a patriarchal culture?

In this study, however, it is demonstrated that existing as a woman does not imply participation in male power but calls into question the very concept of power. For, it is in order to avoid this attack that women are now fairly represented with a level of inclusion for a symbiotic existence. Female archetype in African literature however, remained unnoticed and unidentified for Chinua Achebe's Okonkwo as already established in studies, is not just a hero but a model of African masculinity.

Gender and Womanhood: A Precolonial Image of the African Woman

According to Taiwo and Omotayo Oju (2016), Senghor, in his "Black Woman" is unwitting in his image of the woman for taking examples from European negative depictions of the African woman, who is 'naked' and only 'mothering'. The Ojus may have forgotten that this naked and only mothering woman symbolizes the entire Black race in which there are great and mighty. Again, the nakedness in question signifies feminine purity, clarity, and innocence. Senghor's representation appears to be a hybrid of sorts in which the woman, as a metaphor for the land, appears to be beauty and the hope of the person. Friday Okon shares this same view in his comparison of "Black Woman" and "I Will Pronounce Your Name". Friday Okon (2013) maintains that Senghor's idealization of Africa is metaphorized in "Naett" and the woman whose skin is dark and can be qualified with cultural feminine innocence, vulnerability and only mothering. Senghor, therefore, depicts Africa in the image of a dark, beautiful woman who excelled in beauty until colonization reduced her to ordinary ashes used as manure to the root of life (line 20).

For Senghor specifically, the woman occupies a special place. His reason, according to Donatus Nwoga (1967), is that the woman does not leave the family, and she is the giver of life. The woman has been made the source of life and guardian of the house, that is to say, she is the depository of the clan's past and the guarantor of its future. This generally, is at the bottom of motherhood that humanity should continue to appreciate. But in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, we find several characters depicting the African woman. These characters include Ikemefuna's mother, Oijugo, Ekwefi, Ezinma, Chielo Obierika's wives, and many others. Although Ekwefi, for instance, is courageous and could dare Okonkwo and even Chielo the priestess of *Agbala*, there is no appreciation of her womanhood. She is rather condemned and silenced by the plague of *ogbanje*, a possessing spirit that sends children to and from the world. Ezinma, like her mother, is qualified in beauty and ingenuity. Okonkwo always wishes Ezinma was a boy. These are female characters that genuinely play their socio-cultural roles without interference with what was then called masculine. The identity of the woman in Achebe's perspective is one devoid of significance and culturally subsumed in a society capable of existing, possibly without a woman. In precolonial Umuofia, masculinity is at the center of discourse such that Okonkwo is epitomized as the identity of an Igbo man who says yes strongly, and his *chi* agrees (21). Does it imply that a woman is denied of *chi* or the ability to speak to it? Ekwefi fights courageously in obedience and indifference, the omniscient voice never bothers about what she says that her *chi* might agree or disagree. She is an ill-fated being who suffers from the depression of her children's death and her husband only wishes her only daughter had come as a boy and not a girl, who, in his understanding, grows into the nothingness of womanhood. Nwoye is a boy but grows into a woman according to his father, who feminizes him for his non-violent nature, which, for Okonkwo is a hallmark of masculinity. This way, Unoka is referred to as a woman because he is economically poor. Why does Okonkwo always wish that Ezinma was a boy? The reason is that, in precolonial Umuofia, such elegance of beauty and intelligence characterizing Ezinma cannot be fully explored by a woman who is culturally committed to being dependent upon a husband. In Achebe's *Arrow of God*, Ezulu hardly heard Oduche's mother out on the issue of sending the child to the White man's school before slamming it into her hearing that the child is his and her opinion is not asked for. It is final, but definitely, a part of Ezulu's flaws. Achebe's women are silent, unrecognized beings devoid of selfhood / independency and are only identified from marital background.

In Achebe's literary world, men are equally feminized following Aristotelian assumption that a woman is a failed man. Men considered to be socio-economically poor are simply called women. Examples are Unoka, Osugo and Nwoye who all in the single perception of Okonkwo are never to be identified as men instead, they are rather women. Unoka is referred to as *agbara*, which is a man without any title but for Okonkwo his father is a woman for all that he cares and he would rather die than have himself associated with such qualities of femininity. But he is a coward who is quite dominated by the fear of failure and weakness (11). He puts on the mask and in Carl Jung (1980), the theory of individuation for instance, is characterized when Okonkwo suppresses the *shadow* figure as if it is only known to him. He is the first to refer to a fellow man

as a woman before everyone. Example is Osugo who contradicts him in a kindred meeting held to discuss the next ancestral feast, without looking at the man, "Okonkwo had said: this meeting is for men. The man who had contradicted him had no titles. That was why he had called him a woman" (21). The identity of the woman in African literature is from this point problematized. Should she still be sought in male authored text or in responsive female authored ones? Again, does femininity signify womanhood or does it appeal to any form of ambiguities or ambivalence to suggest that a failed man is a woman, if this is true, what is a failed woman?

Femininity, Ambiguities and the Game of 'Otherness'

That femininity signifies emotional weakness and economic dependency does not mean that women are lesser beings of despondency. Like Oguibe says, the 'other' of his Cyberspace discourse is not the child with a deprived upbringing of an African background. As a game of 'otherness', women are culturally oppressed in gender. Femininity is, therefore, a concept deployed as a critical tool of opposition and ambiguity. Femininity had since been scrutinized in feminism but in African culture and literature for instance, studies show some interrogative distinctiveness of models of masculinity as though an opposite of femininity. But it is understood that both are culturally made. Why then is obscurity of human behavior and ability referred as womanly? How is it that men with all the socio-cultural privileges are simply referred to as woman when they fail irrespective of the fact that women are not culturally privileged to try even as the failed man? Despondency is rather found in those men whom with all the socio-political and economic privileges are yet economically dependent like Achebe's Unoka. It is again in other men who are hysteric and can inconsiderately commit both murder and suicide like Okonkwo. Such people are the 'other' and Achebe's Unoka and his son Okonkwo are good examples of our feminine ambiguities where feminine male is culturally located

Chielo with all her spiritual and physical strength, is never said to be a man. Okonkwo only wishes Ezinma was a boy and never calls her one. Ekwefi in her beauty and courage is never referred to as a man. While Okonkwo's mother and his sisters who cannot fend for themselves but make Okonkwo do extra work as a beginner are also women and not called men at least for their failure. Achebe carefully plays the game that the woman is found nowhere other than in what men say they are. Ngugi Wa Thiong o' in his *Petals of Blood, A Grain of Wheat* and *A River Between*, Sembene Ousmane in *God's Bits of Wood* and Ezenza Eze in his *The Cassava Ghost* represent the woman of Africa in her fullness of strength and ability that Chioma Opara (1994) commensurate with. She mentions that in *O! Pays Mon Beau Peuple, Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu, Le Docker Noir* and *Xala and Voltaïque*. Ousmane projects his female characters as lionesses on the path. These lionesses are moving on a revolutionary path for liberation, against patriarchy, racism and colonization In *Gods Bits of Wood*, it is quite clear that Ousmane (0000) appropriately assigned roles to characters like Ramatoulaye, Penda and the Maimouna to depicts his assessment of what is already in existence as the image and identity of the African woman. These are female

characters of low background like Achebe's Okonkwo. These women fight against colonial oppression to victory without guns and matchet.

In Ngugi (1965), Muthoni's rebellion against her father's bigoted Christianity stems from a personal conviction that contradictions should not be admitted between the values of the people and the acceptance of the Christian religion. Muthoni's actions according to Kerz Okafor (1994) mark the beginning of awareness in Waijaki, the male protagonist and give him the desire to reconcile the conflicting Christians and traditionalists in the text (131). In Ngugi (1977), Wanja's complex roles portray the dynamism of the female nature in which resilience and determinism rules her world. Palmer Eustace believes that Wanja is the most important character and the cause of Munira's disintegration. She associates Wanja's enduring potentiality with the fields and plains and concludes that she belongs to that remarkable breed of Ngugi's women – Muihaki, Nyambura, Muthoni, Mumbi, Wambuku – all of them brave, resilient, resourceful and determined (297). Ngugi and Ousmane are male authors of positive female representations. Whatever is given to masculinity is directly found in their female characters, and from here it is believed the game goes to whichever gender the author wishes for. It is pertinent to note that never in any of these works does a female protagonist refer to another female character as a man. In the culture game, femininity is ambiguated and left open so that obscurity can be continually situated around it. So that the woman is the 'other' in whom there is no stability or definiteness.

Identifying the African Woman: *Nwanyi*ness and the all-inclusive Indigenous Feminism

It is clear, even though as a metaphor, that the life of the Africa woman has never been the same following Senghor postcolonial depictions. In Africa, colonization is like a baggage and as Achebe would put it, Africans should cling to all that is good. An example is the English language which enables him to communicate his experience to a global audience. The precolonial Africa is a patriarchal society, civilized in its culture and tradition with a deep sense of gender segregation and feminist oppression. This global audience communicated by Achebe includes women whose womanhood is delineated at zero point. No wonder Oha, in his "*Nwokeness: A Journey into a Disturbing Igbo Philosophy of Masculinity*" suggests that a woman is an appendage of her husband and it is for this reason that he makes a passing reference to the Igbo *nwanyi*ness as a way of explaining some existing challenges of masculinity in Igbo contemporary society. He worries that his study could be a deliberate attempt to continue the marginalization or even an erasure of *nwanyi* the woman in considering the values of the Igbo people. At the end, he reconciles African womanhood in the models of Catherine Acholonu's motherism and its gender inclusiveness.

In contemporary African literature, few women authors, particularly, take to a remodeling of the woman's identity, which for long has been crushed in a patriarchal twist of masculinity and femininity. These writers are predominantly Nawal El' Saadawi, Chimamanda Adichie and Ifi Amadiume who

in their various works posit that the world is made of two sexes and that one is female and the other male and both are found in every sphere of life. El' Saadawi (1983) does not only paint an African woman of an Islamic background, she makes it clear that Firdaus is an archetype and she is everywhere. She can be identified anywhere, in local communities, on the street, on the continent, and in all parts of the world. Firdaus is just but an archetypal figure of womanhood. Catherine Acholonu's motherism, for instance, may have left a good deal of Firdaus characterization. However, motherism poses more questions than it answers to various background to womanhood. Womanhood is not only about mothering, for manhood is not as well signified in the ability to impregnate a woman only. Women are human beings and as the interpretation of a literary text is inexhaustible so is the understanding of the human mind. Therefore, the African woman in her varied experiences cannot be identified or summarized in a single epistemology, be it literary or philosophical. She is alive and susceptible to growth. This is plausible in a psychoanalytical reading of *Woman at point Zero*. Firdaus's existential quest begins very early in her life, rhetorically, she is often found with expressions like "who was I" (15)? Who am I" (19) "Am I really of any value" (58)? Is this what I am going to do for the rest of my life (15, 52, 60, 74, and 81)? Hers is a unique kind of experience enshrined in a patriarchal Islamic society. What makes Firdaus a feminist masterpiece is her summation to die than to continue in her endless quest for identity. In her world, there is no hope for women of her economic class. One either submits to the existing powers of oppression or continue in worthless life of prostitution. For, according to her: "I now knew that all of us were prostitutes who sold themselves at varying prices and that an expensive prostitute is better than a cheap one" (82). Firdaus becomes an expensive prostitute. Cheap ones according to her are the working-class ladies including the educated ones. These ones, she says live in fear of losing their jobs and therefore, had to give in their bodies for good annual reports and a fair treatment without discrimination.(82).She becomes again, fearless and like a hero, she fights patriarchy and dies for womanhood. She is indeed a hero like Achebe's Okonkwo even though, she is but one of numerous African women traumatized in gender oppression.

Chimamanda Adichie (2006) showcases Beatrice, Anty Ifeoma, Kambili and Amaka in a complexity of femininity and femaleness and allows her readers to make their choices. Beatrice and Kambili are typical of Ezigbo's 'snail sense models' yet they are frequently battered. Anty Ifeoma is a radicalist model who suffers early widowhood in a corrupt academic environment. Anty Ifeoma is strong, confident and daring yet she is found defeated at the end that she must leave to join the countless number of African migrants in the U.S. She probably forgets the taunting grip of gender following her academic qualification and sound understanding of her Igbo culture. She often defeats Eugene in argumentative tussles, but the university administration does not take it lightly on anyone who crosses their way, especially as it involves a woman. She experienced neglect and eventually gets sacked. Anty Ifeoma is nevertheless a typical of an African mother who is an embodiment of culture and tradition irrespective of Western education.

In *Half of A Yellow Sun* Adichie's Olanna and Kainene are typical of Ifemelu of the Author's *American* these three are good examples of an existing radicalism for those who fear to associate radicalism with African gender studies. These three at some point encounter gender subjugation but at no point does such experience appear to them as insurmountable. Olanna rejects many suitors and find Odenigbo for herself, Kainene lives with Richard out of personal desire. Ifemelu goes to America to discover that racism is worse than all forms of human marginalization. She suffers as a Black as well as a girl who finds herself in dire need of survival. She eventually returns to Nigeria and finds Obinze rich and married to another woman. Ifemelu at that point cannot bring herself to fall for another man than Obinze her first love. Now that Obinze is married and had forgotten about her, Ifemelu is faced with a sense of cultural loss. It is culturally suggested that her identity is no better for Obinze after all these years of wandering in the U.S. In patriarchy, the young man can marry again if he wants and his wife to be should still be a well cultured girl, with all possibilities of humility and virginity. Ifemelu in African traditional culture does not deserve Obinze anymore. However, she should either continue to hide from her love Obinze within their home country or take courage and identify with him. It takes courage to call Obinze and cowardice to hide she says. She keeps experiencing what she refers to as ghosts of Obinze. And eventually, "Back in her car, she turns on the air conditioner and decided to call him, to free herself of the ghosts" (427). Obinze meets her and contrary to their cultural demand, knows he will always submit to her will. Ifemelu again conquers masculinity, not by death like El saadawi's Firdaus but by her enduring femininity which to Obinze is none comparable and invaluable. She moves from Nigeria to the U.S and to Nigeria again and finds her first love is fixed in a domestic tension, ready to lose so much for her to accept his marriage proposal. The African woman like the character of Ifemelu is everywhere conquering and shifting cultural barriers for histories and identity.

The voice in Ify Amadiume (1999) is that of terror and optimism signifying some emotional pronouncement of a depressed being who in pains of oppression cries:

If you were to squeeze me and wash,
squeeze me and wash,
squeeze me and wash,
and I foam,
again and again, like bitterleaf
left out too long to wither,
you would not squeeze
the bitterness out of me. (1-8)

The imageries are transparently applied to the context of the present study. Bitterness connotes anger and aggression which are commonly given to feminist's ideologies by patriarchs. It is for such aggressive connotations that Adichie says: "So I decided to call myself a Happy Feminist" (Adichie, 2015, p. 17) in response to a Nigerian Journalist who advised her in 2003 never to call herself a feminist irrespective of her work which is already believed to be

feminist. In the lines quoted above, the oppressed is bitter and this includes women from all over the world in various backgrounds and society. In Africa the woman is culturally manipulated and squeezed and she “foams again and again”. The irony of the poetic imagery is that butterfly comes with bitterness naturally and that is why bitterness is likened to anger and aggression here. Anger is a human disposition which could be reactions to actions and circumstances that are considered inhuman. It is usually aroused, and in Amadiume’s “Bitter,” the voice is aggressive and full of anger and cannot be intimidated anymore.

Short as this poem may be, Amadiume leaves her readers with the suspense of reasons for such height of aggressive disposition. It is rather in “4th Witness-the petty Thieves” that one is confronted with reasons why the voice in “Bitter” becomes bitter and chooses to remain so. The sestet goes thus:

The eye sees, but not itself!
The rat says it steals,
because nobody has given it its own share!
We have nothing to lose now,
for flaying cannot hurt a goat
that has already been slaughtered!

Metaphorically, the short poem suggests that women in contemporary times are more critical of gender marginalization than the earlier feminists. However, the critic who is metaphorized in the eye is often out to judge others and not itself. Rats are known for stealing fish but ironically the rat in this poem accuses the feminists in the image of “the eye” of stealing. The third line depicts an embodied reality of feminist grudges, which is a case for the accused. From the voice, denial is an injustice which must be critiqued and identified in all its shades and forms. The woman is battered and emotionally broken, as can be found in the texts discussed above. Slaughtered goat signifies the consciousness of a broken woman whom flaying is thus insignificant.

How can feminists be intimidated out of the discourse? What happens to the consciousness of the woman whose identity is on a crossroad in history and imagination. For gender continues to shift boundaries following the changing world, and all negativity is given to female beings. But femininity or *nwanyi*ness is an archetype which according to Jung is susceptible to individuals and individuation. Archetypes, according to Jung are predispositions of similar response to certain stimuli. “In reality, they belong to the realm of activities of the instinct, and in that sense, they represent inherited forms of psychic behavior” (42). In *Psychological Reflections*, Jung states that these psychic instincts:

are older than historical man and have been ingrained in him from oldest time and eternally living, outlasting all generations, still make up the groundwork of the human psych. It is only possible to live the fullest life when we are in harmony with these symbols; wisdom is a return to them. (42)

Therefore, it is wise to look deep and interrogate the inherent inappropriateness in gender opposition, which is but a game of culture to set men ahead of women. Having identified the woman in varied textual representations, Amadiume's "Bitter" and "4th Witness-the petty Thieves" suggest that the era of maneuvering is gone and that the rules need to be set aright for a peaceful coexistence.

Conclusion

From pre-colonial Africa, the image of the African woman has been contested in literature to show that being a woman in Africa is subject to the 'other' of eternal indeterminism. Femininity is 'othered' but interestingly to the miscalculations of patriarchs. Femininity no matter how negative and open ended is but a human behavioral disposition, says Jung. All that is given to cultural femininity does not refer to the sexuality of the woman. Rather, it points to an individual in whom such cultural obscurity is found. Such individuals, be it man or woman, are the 'other' of our discourse. In the same way, masculinity does not denote male sexuality in a cultural sense. This study therefore is conceptualized in the discourse of gender hybridity to stifle inappropriate oppositions which are significant in the ideological sense of *Nwokeness*. Gender is a universal phenomenon, and feminism remains the best approach to its criticism. And various attempts on feminist categorization are given to patriarchal pressures from multifarious tactics and maneuvering. Oppression is dimensional, and in contemporary literature, the voice of the African woman is loud and heard everywhere. She is identified whereupon her situations and as an archetype. She is that resilient and diligent character who helped to dismantle colonialism and patriarchy to encounter modernity. She is strong and courageous. She is a woman and bears her *nwanyiness* (femininity) with much dignity. She does not defy mothering but glorifies womanhood that interrogates culture as emerging trends in African literature.

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