

WOMEN'S VOICE: A FOCAL POINT IN AFRICAN WOMEN'S WRITINGS

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Abstract:

Expressing voice of concern is the order of the day. It is due to imbalance in societal pattern. The reason may be attributed to the impact of colonization in the panorama of African Literature. Especially, Women writers wielded their artistic way of writing to seek identity in different crisis. For instance, the three pioneer African women writers Mariama Bâ from Senegal, Ama Ata Aidoo from Ghana and Buchi Emecheta from Nigeria focus on issues that concern the African women-marriage and motherhood, polygamy and power struggle, emotional and economic independence, women's education and their identity, political and economic marginalization, abandonment and divorce, oppression and empowerment and so on. In these respects they have had the feeling of depravity in their social deportment. Hence, the proposed paper brings out the essential voices of their inner most social, economical and cultural moorings through their works of art. In addition to these, the paper evaluates a sensitive depiction of the injustices and mental anguish caused to African women by the inequity of patriarchal traditions and the challenges of the westernized society.

Keywords: *Women's voice, abandonment, oppression, women's education.*

Introduction

The representation of women in early African men's writing as passive and voiceless victims of abuse is in direct contrast with the characterization of women in African women's writing where it is visualized clearly about an attempt to assert women's right to speak and to be heard. Self-conscious writing by women writers, by depicting women and their experiences, has been successfully flourishing with the entry of Flora Nwapa in the African Literary scope. In the stream, Mariama Bâ, Ama Ata Aidoo and Buchi Emecheta - attempt to parade the African woman with flesh, blood, voice and credibility to her. Through their works, these women writers encourage African women to exercise their will to change and transcend against the negative strictures like polygamy, barrenness and infidelity etc., that subvert and promote abandonment. They also present the characters who actually move further than the portraits of women actually seen in the early literary world in choosing the choices open to them beyond mere socio-gender issues.

Mariama Bâ

Mariama Bâ, the first Senegalese woman novelist, gleams on the African Literary vista by defending women's rights through her voice in public speeches and writing articles in local newspapers. She has a vision and determined commitment to conquer against the established imbalanced patriarchal customs and traditions. Mariama Bâ has launched a protest against women's inequality and biased treatment under the system of polygamy. She writes with a determination to create some space for a woman against the patriarchal archetypes and the polygamous values of Islamic society.

Mariama Bâ's two novels, *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song*, involve the painful but ultimately successful movement of a woman from a traditional African world to a very different Westernized urban life. What provokes her women protagonists to action is the intolerable prospect of polygamy. Ramatoulaye, in *So Long a Letter*, claims a rhetorical identity by giving voice to her story and gives it

permanence by inscribing it in her letter. This is an act of assertion that may be equated to Aissatou's act of physical migration. Mariama Bâ uses several metaphors for resistance such as voice, movement, reclamation of memory, formation of identity, self-definition etc., - implying an equation of Rama's reclamation of subjectivity with Aissatou's rebellious flight. Aissatou divorces her husband and moves out challengingly when her husband goes in for a second wife instead of becoming one of the partners of a polygamous marriage. She joins Senegalese embassy in the United States to look after her children on her own. Here, the decision of Aissatou to walk out of the marriage in the traditional African society that considers divorce as a taboo shows her courage and confidence to lead an independent life instead of tolerating the shackles of patriarchal customs.

If Rama's decision to stay in her marriage is conservative and contrary to Aissatou's decision to break her marriage, it does not mean that her own perception of the needs of women in general is not progressive. Her diary is full of wishes and hopes and craving for the arrival of that age of equality when men and women will hold one another in mutual respect and share responsibilities in marital relationships. Ramatoulaye, no doubt, takes comfort in many traditional values by maintaining relationships with her family members even after deserted by her husband. She is confident enough that one day women can be respected in her world that follows the best of traditional customs and welcomes the new where women have room of their own. Through her letter she makes a positive attempt to reconcile the dichotomy in her life and in the society in which she lives. It is Rama's optimism and hopefulness.

Her second novel, *Scarlet Song* begins with a similar plot but ends on a drastically different note. The marital problems noted in the lives of Rama and Aissatou (SLL) are further complicated by racial conflicts in *Scarlet Song*. The protagonist, Mireille is presented as a paragon of virtue, in every way. She is portrayed as more sinned against than sinning and a victim of the circumstances in her new world. Mireille, the white woman without racist attitudes puts considerable efforts to make her marriage with the black by converting to Islam, learning Wolof, pleasing her in-laws etc. All her efforts are futile when her husband and his family members started rejecting her love and appreciation. So she feels that the fervor of her love is her bad luck. Mireille who is independent, joyful and loving turns vengeful and kills her son and stabs her husband when her husband neglected her totally by marrying a black woman secretly. Until the traditional traits such as polygamy and suppression of women are changed women might be rebellious like Mireille.

Rama and Aissatou (SLL) react differently to polygamy - Rama resigns herself to her fate and remains the neglected first wife of her husband while Aissatou bravely walks out of marriage and becomes an independent individual, a bread-winner and a proud mother who could monitor her son's progress. However, Mireille (SS) on the other hand, is totally crushed by the relentless power of polygamy as she is a white girl, a stranger to the inexorable grip of religion and tradition in the African society.

Ama Ata Aidoo

Ama Ata Aidoo, an eminent Ghanaian novelist, playwright and poet is a reputable writer of African literary world. Women in her works are conscientious, dutiful and accept responsibilities on their own. They are courageous, self-assertive and highly self-determining in the contemporary African Society. Aidoo in her works depicts a new type of woman - a truly heroic female, who is a rebel against the old and established traditions.

In her first novel, *Our Sister Killjoy*, Aidoo portrays an African woman who encounters the European atrocities on blacks and the limitations imposed on her by her society. It is alarmed largely on the rift of the African educated class, the subjugation of Africans and the brutality of racism. Sissie, the woman protagonist is very confident and is not concerned with pleasing the white folk, but takes what is important to her from the experience of her trip to Germany and Britain. She realises that there is no freedom and liberation for Africa and Africans in the aspects of political, social, religious, economic and psychological unless homecoming of Africans and discover who they are and their profound identity.

Sissie, as a woman and more as an African woman, is given power to display that a woman can

employ responsibilities to comprehend and understand race and gender. Apart, she is strong enough to endure both discriminatory aspects of African life - gender and race - making her an admirable character in African literature. She has access both to language and power. So she returns to her native place after learning that colonisation is an unstoppable force which threatens the very thread of African cultures. *Our Sister Killjoy* offers a woman's view to post-colonial oppression and in the process it stands as a testament to African women's suffrage.

Ama Ata Aidoo in her second novel *Changes* demonstrates a vibrant, highly educated, proficient lady who is interested in her career than her husband and daughter. Esi, the protagonist, who is educated and employee rails against her marital obligations and protests the way her husband wishes to control her body and simply walks out from her husband Oko. She undergoes polygamy in search of more freedom, finding monogamy overpowering. This arrangement also dissatisfies her because she feels that the expected happiness is not to the maximum extent with her second husband. Yet, she chooses not to divorce her second husband but to live by herself, all alone. In due course of her life after experiencing dissatisfaction, Esi reclaims her strength and courage to live on her own. Esi seems to be an agent of change in the African context and who symbolizes as an empowered woman both financially and socially. Through the character of Esi, Aidoo focuses on women who are moving towards modernity. The vision that underlies this proposition for change is that men and women will be treated each other as equal human beings.

Aidoo, thus, exemplifies how African women writers can offer a different view on gender as well as racial oppression. She also challenges the traditional portrayal of African women by creating characters who question and challenge the role of the African woman in the twenty-first century. In an Interview Aidoo affirms, "There are powerful forces undermining the progress in Africa. But one must never underestimate the power of the people to bring about change" (Interview, Feb. 5, 1993)

Buchi Emecheta

Buchi Emecheta from Nigeria, the most gifted and prolific of all the African women novelists, like her contemporaries - Bâ and Aidoo - attacks gender inequality directly and forcefully. Her protest is explicit and unequivocal when she condemns sexist ideology. Repudiating the feminine stereotypes of men writers, she brings to light the dark underside of the lives of the African women. The psychological and physical toll on women due to polygamy, perpetual pregnancy and childbirth are exposed with bitterness. Through the portrayal of heroic women who manage to prevail despite their seemingly unmanageable difficulties, Emecheta's works invoke the voice and perspective of the African woman.

In her early novel *The Joys of Motherhood*, much priority is given to marriage and motherhood than polygamy. She puts forward a challenge against the standard outlook on motherhood. In this novel, the protagonist who has tolerated shame and hardship in order to be a perfect mother is bestowed with abandonment and death. But, it is clearly viewed that, Emecheta's women do not simply lie down and die. Always there is confrontation, fighting against the fate and renegotiate the terms which subsists between them and the accepted traditions.

Nnu Ego, the protagonist is a mother of seven children - three boys and four girls. In the African tradition, it is a great achievement for a mother who has sons. However, Nnu Ego, gradually realises that motherhood has not brought her any accomplishment and happiness. After years of sacrificing everything for her family and especially for her sons, she is forced to recognize that the joy of being a mother of sons is not the joy of happiness but joy of giving all to children. Nnu Ego sacrifices her life for her children - fighting with her husband in order to get financial support for the children's education and suffering because of their absence, their revolts and their needs. After all these, Nnu Ego's life proves that a woman with many children also has to face a lonely old age and a miserable death, all alone, just like a barren woman. Rather than picturing the images of the established vision of male children as a source of bliss and wealth for a mother, Emecheta portrays children especially male children as albatross around her mother's

neck and as pinching parasites who suck their mother to death.

Nnu Ego believes in the supremacy of motherhood. Emecheta mocks this notion as romantic by juxtaposing Nnu Ego's expectations with her actual experiences as a mother - her poverty, endless suffering and miserable death. It is no surprise that when her sons build a shrine in memory of Nnu Ego, she fails to answer the infertile women's prayers for children as her lonely death demystified the ideal of motherhood. She denies them fertility to save them from the fate she has known.

Emecheta's another novel *Kehinde*, can be considered an advancement in the African women's liberation as the protagonist - a wife and a mother - takes an unconventional decision to keep her individuality and her self-esteem intact and has no regrets about it. Kehinde, a Nigerian woman, lives in London and hence no longer accepts the values and the traditional social structures of her country of origin. Neither does she readily assimilate into the alien and adopted culture. She, rather, she attempts to reconcile the two cultures. When a need arises for her to join her husband in Nigeria, she is reluctant to leave her job and relinquish the independence she has come to treasure in London. But she convinces herself that she will be respected at home as a "been-to" woman, only to discover that, her husband has taken a second wife and that she is no longer respected. The bold Kehinde has not bowed down to fate or tradition. She asserts herself by leaving her deceitful husband, returns to London, finds a new job and begins to enjoy life as a woman in control of her own destiny. She is able to create an identity for herself in London.

Nnu Ego and Kehinde represent the African woman at the post-colonial and the contemporary period. In spite of their close similarities, there exist obvious differences too, thus, making their study an interesting one. Both Nnu Ego and Kehinde are married and in some respects beneath their status and both of them are mothers of children and working hard in their own way, to supplement to their husband's income. However, one major difference is that Nnu Ego is illiterate and a petty-trader while Kehinde is well educated, doing a good job with a substantial income, even better than her husband's income. Both of them have migrated from their places. Nnu Ego from Iboya to Lagos and Kehinde from Lagos to London.

Nnu Ego, to be a perfect mother, endures shame and hardships in her life including adjustments with a co-wife. Her reward for that is abandonment and miserable death. On the other hand, when Kehinde finds herself in a similar situation having to get adjusted to living with a co-wife, she reacts in a different way. She refuses to accept an inferior status of being a senior-wife in Lagos and goes back to London to live a life on her own terms. Kehinde does not feel guilty for having made a choice, a terrible one. She is not prepared to accept life as it comes to her but with immense confidence in her, makes life, as she wants it to be. Thus she is a step ahead of Aidoo's Esi (*Changes*) who has to compromise with her situation however empowered she may be. Realising a deep-felt need for self-fulfilment, she yearns for a change that hopefully a new life may begin for her one day.

Writing about the multifaceted nature of the African woman's struggle against oppression that has historically erased her voice in the society, Mariama Bâ, Ama Ata Aidoo and Buchi Emecheta have provided a platform from where the voice of the oppressed African woman can be heard. No doubt, they have a strong affinity for tradition but a stronger attachment to self-respect and individuality have forced them to demonstrate that women are by no means inferior to men and that they can challenge gender inequality and assert their identity.

The six novels discussed so far, offer an exercise in consciousness-raising. These texts raise in women the consciousness that women do have powers to actualise themselves and that by refusing passivity and by developing faith in their own powers, women can certainly dethrone the myth of femininity and can aspire to the subject positions. In each of these novels, the novelists have attempted to create a central figure, who questions the tradition sooner or later, who resists paternalism and dominance, who fights against female subordination and who, even in the face of an oppressive system of deep rooted norms and practises, strives to assert her identity. They provide a positive function of female identity and have created women who do not compromise with the forces of patriarchy. These three novelists have felt

that education has offered social mobility to women as a means of negotiating the process of change and to aspire to a state of equality. They see it as a means to overcome marginalisation and to empower women.

Conclusion

As women assume dynamic identity, they reaffirm the rebellious spirit, discard the smile that has functioned as a mask and assert their individuality and independence. Challenging the patriarchy that demands submission and obedience, they look within themselves to find the courage to break free. A new approach to the well-known theme of marriage and motherhood is proposed by Aidoo who shows in her novel, *Changes*, that a married woman would be in need of sexual and emotional satisfaction followed by Buchi Emecheta's *Kehinde* which affirms it.

These three novelists are militant in attacking the female subordination in Africa and are deeply preoccupied with the woman's need for a fulfilled and unrestricted personality. They are also engaged in a search for the woman's social equality and a critical enquiry into the quality of her life. They raise appropriate questions about the shortcomings of entrenched social attitudes.

What emerges, then, in their novels is the potential for women to speak with united voice and to create spaces for them, so that their voices will be attended to. Thus these writers have now become the best symbols of female achievement and growth. Mariama Bâ, Ama Ata Aidoo and Buchi Emecheta have succeeded, to a great extent, in challenging the social order as a result of which there will be no more silence and there will be no room for the victimisation of women. The women characters in each successive novel grow up intellectually and psychologically and finally emerged as autonomous, empowered and self-fulfilled individuals. All these novels by Mariama Bâ, Ama Ata Aidoo and Buchi Emecheta:

... speak of female solidarity, power, independence: of the liberation of women's bodies, minds and spirits. They reconcile feminist aspiration and African integrity: they bestow wholeness and call for rebirth and renewal. And if these things do not yet exist, these writers dream of a time when they shall and we should be grateful for the power, beauty and enduring truth of their vision (Frank, 33).

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