

WOMEN AND CULTURE: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

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PORTRAIT OF WOMEN IN CONTEMPORARY

LITERATURE

BY

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The portrait of women in contemporary literature is seen in their contribution to societal development. The women are painted as important members of any society. In today's piece of art-the women are recognised because they exhibit a comprehensive pattern of behaviour which is socially accepted. This type of behaviour provides a means of identification and placement in their different societies.

women are shown as playing different roles both in the family and within the society at large. These roles are interrelated and as such women have contributed to the different aspects of development viz: motherhood, economic, political, educational, cultural, social and spiritual. Women have contributed immensely to the development of their societies because looking at the role of women in terms of past, present and future achievements, the women have shown their worth.

This paper will show how women have helped in societal development. It will base its illustration using mainly Chinua Achebe's - A man of the people; Zaynab Alkali's - The Still Born; Buchi Emecheta's - The Joys of Motherhood; Nancy Harrison's - Winnie Mandela and in passing, other relevant literary pieces.

Evidently, the sociology of development in any society cannot be complete without the involvement of women. It is clear that in spite of the odds against women in their different societies, they have contributed to societal development with their natural instincts.

When asked why women who die in Cameroon are mourned for four days while men are mourned for only three, a woman replies: "A woman is an important thing!" (Sic). A woman gives birth to the people of the country. What work can a man do? A woman bears a child, then takes a hoe, goes to the field and is working there; she feeds the child there.

Collen Lowe Morna et al, 1990.

This assertion has rightly summed up the role of the woman in a contemporary society of today. It is the woman who contributes in all aspects of the development and survival of any society. The woman is illuminated as a beautiful "piece of art" that embodies love, care and patience to sustain the society in which she lives. The portrait of a woman has been painted in different forms, for example, Mocambique (1973) sees her as "woman who adorns the fields, woman who is the fruit of man." Furthermore, he looks at the woman as the 'light' that will "open up the way to heaven", as she "watches him go up to heaven".

Similarly, Senghor describes the woman thus: "... black woman, clothed with your colour which is life, with your form which is beauty!... I have grown up, the gentleness of your hands was laid over my eyes... at the heart of noon, I come upon you, my Promised Land, And your beauty strikes me to the heart..."

The image painted by these poets succinctly portray the woman who is the light, the fruit that gives contentment to man and is the Promised Land where milk and honey flow.

The term 'woman' as looked at from the theological point of view is a creation from a man's rib. "And the rib which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, 'This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called woman, because she was taken out of man.'" (Genesis 2:22-23).

Umoh (1986:1) asserts

My woman is made from my rib
Not from my head to top me
Nor from Under my feet to be Trampled upon
But from my side to be equal to me
From under my arm to be Protected
And from Near my heart to be Loved and
Cherished by me.

Furthermore, a woman is an adult female of the human race who is endowed with the following characteristics: tenderness, love and care. Since these traits are in-born, most women are found in the following professions: teaching, nursing and social work among others that exhibit these traits.

On the other hand women were portrayed as no more being the heplmates for men. For example as observed by Sofola (1990), the Arab sees the woman "as an accident which just happened to have happened". The Europeans only "acknowledged the women... in the homes." However, the industrial revolution of the seventeenth century brought the women to the limelight. Moreover, recent researches have shown that the greatest number of the world is made up of women. Obi (1986) states that statistics show that the women are 53% as against men's 47%, therefore the women should be recognised.

DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS*

Literature is an elastic concept with different meanings. For the purpose of this paper literature is seen as one of the great creative and universal means of communicating the 'emotional', 'spiritual', or intellectual concerns of mankind. It expresses the basic truths that are common to all mankind and which evoke a deeply responsive chord.

Literature may instruct and inform, entertain, expresses personal joy or pain. Since it concerns mankind, it reflects religious devotion, glorify a nation or hero, or advocate a particular point of view whether it be political, social or aesthetic.

On the other hand, it can refer to works of art which comprise drama, fiction, essays, poetry, biography, etcetera.

PRORAIT:

It can be defined as a record of certain aspects of a particular human being as seen by another. The character may be deified. The artist who does the painting is interested in the character's social position, his soul or his unconscious problems, while his identity remains.

The question is what is the portrait of women in contemporary literature? Women in contemporary literature have been portrayed differently from the early days before the seventeenth century. The women in contemporary literature will be portrayed under the following sub-headings viz: motherhood, education, social status and politics. It is beautiful to see that the picture of women in contemporary literature has changed from the traditional role to a dynamic and assertive one.

MOTHERHOOD:

From the creation of man, women were seen as mothers. Adam asserts that his wife's name is Eve: because she is the mother of all living. (Genesis 3:20).

The women of today view themselves and their lives differently. Though they still perform their duties as mothers, they have now extended their frontiers beyond motherhood to other aspects of life. Motherhood is the act of parenthood in which the woman gives birth to children. In the African society, motherhood is the basis of any marriage. Emecheta (1980); illustrate this concept through the image of her heroine, Nnu Ego who sees herself as a failure because she has no child for Amatokwu.

Nnu Ego is painted as a failure and she sees herself as a failure too "... she was failing everybody. There was no child." (p.31). Amatokwu, her husband is not happy with her, he uses the image of 'bones' to describe

Nnu Ego; whom he says would scratch him because she is a 'nervy female'. He sees her as infertile and is happy when the marriage breaks up as he says: "Let her go she is as barren as a desert".

The picture of a dry piece of land, filled with sand is used to describe the woman. She is seen as empty and dry without thought to her feelings.

Much as the women are illustrated as wives, they are portrayed as determined and calculating. Jellicoe (1955) sees the woman as applying the psychology of a wife. This image is seen in Nnu Ego, who after a period of time decides to carry her problems alone as she tries to find solutions to them. She believes that sacrifices would help and she offers them conscientiously. Hence Emecheta (p.32) states that the heroine performs the sacrifice: "Nnu Ego would take an egg, symbol of fertility, and pray... please pity me ...".

The contemporary women of this era make moves and venture out unto the unknown. Thus Nnu Ego travels to Lagos as she becomes married to Nnaife and her womanhood is fulfilled. She gave birth to children for her new husband.

The woman is painted as a mother as Malangatano represents women as anxious mothers in his poem thus: "Into your arms I came when you bore me, very anxious you, who were so alarmed at that monstrous moment ...". The nursery rhyme paints a beautiful picture of the woman (mother-who sits and watches over the child's cradle while it sleeps.) The image of the mother is portrayed as 'sweet' as sung in a song "sweet Mother" by Moarga Vi. "Sweet Mother, I no go forget you for the suffering way you suffer for Me". Eakin (1986) observes that 'A woman is a mother, she is indispensable'.

Motherhood is epitomised in Harrison's (1986) Winnie Mandela: Mother of a Nation. This title rightly suits the role of Winnie Mandela who has inspired millions of African women and women the world over. During her bannishment to Brandfort, she gathered the women together taught them how to bake, sew, knit as well as keep hygienic homes. She took care of the sick, the orphan and the down-trodden as a mother.

The women of Brandfort saw her as a mother and in return gave her a bedspread crocheted in the yellow, green and black colours of the African National Congress (ANC) ... when their search uncovered the pieces of bead jewellery in ANC colours made for her by the grateful townfolk, these too were confiscated. (p. 230) .

The figure of the mother is very important in Literature because as the saying goes: "Give birth to a woman and you give birth to a nation." Awe (1990) says: "woman's role as the repository of our culture and stabilising factor in the home and the rearing of children should not be ignored if we are to convince the rest of the country that we must make a contribution to the development of this country".

Awe's call is echoed in literature, for literature at times is termed the mirror of the society. The women in contemporary literature are portrayed as the pivot in which the family unit revolves. Haralambos and Heald (1980:30) quoting Tiger and Fox assert that 'Nature intended mother and child to be together'. It is this special relationship which exists emotionally between them that results in the welfare of the child.

In addition, they observe that the mother is totally essential to the well-being of the child. They say that if this bond does not exist the child will not be able to establish a successful relationship in later life.

Pearson (as quoted by Haralambos and Heald) goes further to paint the woman as 'expressive' that is she radiates warmth, security and emotional support. Nnu Ego, the heroine shows the portrait of this type of mother:

she sold all her clothes at a fraction of their cost to the Fulani street walkers, telling herself that if her sons should live and grow, they would buy all her clothes she would ever need". (p.104)

EDUCATION:

Women have asserted themselves educationally. For instance in Alkali's (1984) The Stillborn The heroine Li is determined and is "happy to be going home after completing her primary seven". The contemporary woman believes very much in education as the key to success. Her determination is not just for the present, she projects the future as she plans to be 'a successful Grade I teacher.' As such the woman of contemporary literature realises that education is the bed rock to success as seen in their reaction to Adult Literacy going on nowadays.

The new breed of women do not just dream, they make their dreams come true. For instances Alkali, (1984:82) and up Li's plans after her course at the Advanced Teachers' College. She plans to put up a mighty modern house for every member of her family. She is encouraged by the knowledge that her "regular monthly income" would help her to educate the young ones. The pursuit of education for the image of the modern woman is further enhanced as illustrated by Nwapa (1986), when she describes three of her characters who were determined and also successful in their examination into college. 'I know you, not you three I see for Port Harcourt last year when we do the exam? so una pass too? Me I pass too?' The point has been made. The language used, though it is pidgin English, has explicitly portrayed the new image of women who strongly believe in western education.

Nnu Ego in Emecheta's novel realises the utmost importance of education as she makes sure that she sends her children to school, "Nnu Ego had scraped and saved to pay the last two terms' school fees for Oshia and Adim, ..." (p. 171). She sums up the usefulness of education as she asserts "For you, the younger generation, it's a different kind of learning. It also takes longer and costs a

more. I'm not sure that I'm not beginning to like it!" (p.213).

Similarly, Idowu (1987) quoting Awa observes that: "the women are the most important teachers of mankind because they exercise a pervasive influence over the mind of young people in many direct and informal ways. More examples are illustrated in the persons of Winnie Mandela and her two daughters Zinci and Zeni. "Winnie had been filling in her lonely evening hours by studying, by correspondence for a degree in social science ... (p. 143). "... and arranged for the two girls to attend [Waterford, an exclusive school in Swaziland." (p.149). As shown in the examples cited above, the heroines have effectively carried out their functions. In essence, education is shown as the provision of learning experiences that lead to desirable change in the individual that enables him to function well in the society where he finds himself.

SOCIAL CHANGE:

The women in contemporary literature believe also in changes. From the afore-gone discussions, we have seen that the heroine has a different approach to tradition. She states explicitly, she does not have to up-hold tradition as Li converses with her sister and brother. Alkali (1984:pp4-6) "As for me, big brother, I can't wait to get out of this veil. "Well, big sister, "I had no reason to cry. Why should I? Just to keep a tradition?" The portrait is that of a dynamic woman who is also a driving force behind different ventures. Li is the force behind creating the theme of movement which is how the woman is portrayed in today's literature. There is a sort of revolution covertly or overtly shown by the characters.

The woman who changes grows out of childhood frivolities into being a mature woman. Alkali (1984:94) portrays Li in a different light. "This wasn't the sister she was used to, impetuous and critical of people. This is a different Li, tolerant and understanding. ... Li had no doubt, matured and in the process of maturing had become a better person with a finer soul." * As summer set in

the blurb, through the woman's eyes, there is a type of growth from childhood to womanhood and the struggle for independence. This short summary succinctly paints the picture of women who have grown from the traditional role to accept modern duties to bring about the total development of the society.

As observed by Awe (1990) we are witnessing what appears like a female renaissance. The output of Literature on women in the form of magazines, journals, newspaper articles, etc; is an impressive indication of the Nigerian woman and her role. The modern women in the persons of Prof. Alele-Williams, Dr. (Mrs) Doyin Abiola, Princess Edith Ike-Okongwu are performing their roles efficiently.

ECONOMIC:

Economically, the women contribute to the welfare of the family by getting jobs, working hard at their careers and contributing their quota during these SAPPY days. Flyun (1977) states that it is the wife's income which raises the family's income above poverty level. He asserts that as at 1966, in families where the wife worked, she accounted for about forty percent or more of the family income. Awe avers that though the rural Nigerian woman is not getting the basic necessities of life "Yet she carried in a very large measure the responsibility for the provision of food for the Nigerian teeming population in the rural areas."

POLITICS:

History has always recorded the contributions of women politically. As records show women like Queen Amina of Zaria, Moremi of Ile-Ife, Emotan of Benin, Modem Tinubu of Lagos, Mrs. Ransome Kuti and Mrs. Margaret Ekpo among others have contributed to the political development of Nigeria.

The contemporary woman is also playing her part as seen in the appointment of women as Deputy Governors for Lagos and Kaduna States. Egwin (1987) observes that "women because of their women's groups and economic

importance have more power than is generally thought and therefore they must be taken into account in the framing of new legislation, or the creation of new social or economic situations." He cites the example of the Aba Women's Riot of 1929 where women from different towns, and backgrounds teamed up together to protest against the government legislation to tax women. Politically, women like Mrs. Ekpo among others were patriotic in the struggle for independence.

Citing Achebe's novel - A man of the People - the women have been portrayed as actively participating in politics. Women like Mrs. Koko, Mrs. John and Eunice participated in politics. Eunice played a major role in the formation of a new political party to fight the corrupt party of Chief Nanga (p. 107).

Ôusmane (1970) shows in God's Bits of Wood how Penda led the women of Senegal to march to Dakar to make known their grievances to the French people. Winnie Mandela is today demanding for the right of her people to vote and be voted for. Harrison (1986,117) "... we are faced with a serious oppression. I will continue the fight as I have always done in the past."

CONCLUSION

In essence, woman in contemporary literature is portrayed as one who loves, is committed to what she does, is saddled with the duty of carrying, advising and educating others, she does not in the process neglect herself, she strives to achieve job satisfaction, assertion and actualization. She makes use of her numerous talents to live her life fully for the peaceful existence and total development of the society.

It is interesting to note that much as the women have asserted themselves and have become so dynamic as portrayed in contemporary literature and the world at large, they are still conscious of their traditional roles. That is to say they combine aptly their traditional role of child bearing with their newly found ones. This article has shown the new portrait of women in their growth from the traditional beliefs when women were only seen and not heard to the present era when women are not only seen, heard

but have also contributed effectively to the development of their different societies and the world at large.

Women the world over should heed the call of Sankola (1970):

Our foremothers in Nigeria and indeed in Africa have left us with a great Legacy. They have shown at serious moments of our traditional history, that when things collapsed and men did not seem to know where to head, women stepped in and put things back into gear.

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