

**COLONIAL LITERACY AND THE FIXATION OF WOMEN IN  
ANGLO-FRANCOPHONE AFRICAN FICTION: CHALLENGES  
FOR FUNDAMENTAL CHANGE.**

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**Abstract**

Colonial education insisted on the fragmentation of the sexes; men were prepared for public life while women were confined to the domestic space. The result was that women became "late comers" (to use Grace Okereke's apt description) to the intellectual and political scene in Africa. Literature was invoked to sustain this anomaly. This paper probes the nature of colonial education and its marginalisation of women by examining selected works by Chinua Achebe, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Sembene Ousmane, Mariama Bâ and Ferdinand Oyono. It also identifies the challenges which the fixation of women poses to Africans in the search for fundamental change.

**Introduction**

- If we assume, as did Jean Jacques Rousseau, that every man is born free, then it follows that the antithesis of freedom is an unnatural, man-made condition (Aire, 34). Individuals and societies cannot fully realise their potentials without literacy. It is critical for providing development that is both sustainable and dependable. [Inyang-Abia: 142 -143]

Colonialism thrived on the exploitation of Africa's human and material resources for the development of other continents. As Frantz Fanon writes in *The Wretched of the Earth* it is through "a kind of perverted logic... turns to the past of the oppressed people and distorts, disfigures and destroys it" (170).

This is why Aristide Zolberg remarks that colonialism insists on the innate capacities of some groups to perform better than others (69). The resulting myth of racial superiority was used to justify imperialist activities in Africa and the denigration of African culture for centuries.

But since the colonial government needed human beings to sustain and facilitate its policies, the African people were initiated as active participants in their oppression. This informs Okwudibia Nnoli's comment that the "unconditional condemnation of African culture was attended by the unconditional affirmation of the coloniser's worldview"(2). The singular avenue for achieving this in Africa from its earliest contact with Europe till now has been through formal education. Literacy is fundamental to Africa's relations with the West; and it is one of the major distinguishing features between developed and developing nations.

Literacy, according to Chukwuemeka Onukaogu, is the "key for unlocking the hidden treasures of life" (288). In this work, literacy is seen first in its general description as the ability to read and write; secondly as the conscious deployment of the awareness created by these factors for the development of individual responses to reality and their utilisation for the sustenance of the human society. Colonial literacy, therefore, refers to the utilisation of Western education to prepare an oppressed people to participate willingly in the process of colonialist oppression. This paper uses the selected works of three Anglophone African novelists, Chinua Achebe, Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta and three Francophone writers Sembène Ousmane, Mariama Bâ and Ferdinand Oyono to examine the nature of colonial literacy and the "second class" status it has imposed on women; it also proposes the need for fundamental change in gender relations in the contemporary African society.

#### **Colonial literacy in Anglophone African novels**

Colonialism introduced the Victorian concept of the woman as "the angel of the house" into African life. Prior to this, sex difference was not exploited to seclude the woman from public life even though her biological roles were important to the

survival of the society. This fact is attested to in Catherine Acholonu's *Motherism...* although she denies the existence of patriarchy in pre-colonial Africa. Olaudah Equiano has also shown in his narrative that African women fought wars along with their men as far back as the eighteenth century. The involvement of women in men's power space is corroborated by Zulu Sofola when she examines the dual lines of authority "among the Igbos West of the Niger and Onitsha, East of the Niger" in an article titled "Feminism and African Womanhood" (55). This is because human psyche is "genderless" in African cosmology which is a sharp contrast to Western notions of sex difference that fragments humanity through gender roles and exploits same to limit women's capabilities.

Thus, colonial education emphasised sex difference by placing men in public space while women were confined to the domestic space. The explanation Hess et al provide for this is that unlike men women "do not have the abstract thinking skill for public life" (112). With this assumption, colonial education adopted differential treatment for the sexes. This, according to Grace Okereke, is why it stresses qualities like gentleness and morality for the female while attributes like "valour, fearlessness, boldness, aggressiveness, endurance" were emphasised for the male (157). In contemporary African societies, women are often denied access to qualitative education in preference for motherhood. Colonial education, where it was obtainable, prepared women primarily for the service of men. This is why they "have become late comers on the political, economic and literacy spheres in Africa and the Diaspora" (Okereke, 158). Achebe's women in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* can be used to illuminate this thesis because Africa's encounter with the West is dramatised through male authority figures like Okonkwo and Ezeulu. Women are not just placed outside the historical process, they are infantilised through their biological roles.

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe recaptures the European disruption of communal ethos in Igboland (Africa) and the impact of that encounter on the African people. The missionaries form the advance party of the new administration and with western education embodied in the activities of Mr. Brown, they



systematically destroy social cohesion in Umuofia. This society survives on male principles which are why Okonkwo, the physical embodiment of this masculinist ethic, is set against the colonial government. But the West, through its civilising mission in Africa, gives succour to social rejects whose achievement

ethic falls below the standards of accepted behaviour. They are called "efulefu, worthless empty men" (101). Thus, colonial education, whether in *Things Fall Apart* or in *Arrow of God*, is a male phenomenon. The converts of the new religion are exposed to western education as the only means of internalising and propagating the tenets of their faith. Though Okonkwo resists change, his family is overtaken by it, especially since one of the six missionaries who evangelise Umuofia is his son, Nwoye. Even when Ezeulu decides diplomatically to reckon with change, he sends his son, Oduche, to the mission as his representative in the new power structure. Both Okonkwo's formidable opposition to change and Ezeulu's decision to individualise collective experience are illustrated through male characters.

Women have no place in the making of colonial history as reconstructed by Achebe. This explains their exclusion from colonial literacy which is the foundation of that history. But with their eventual rejection of silence as a virtue through the contact with formal education, women writers and critics have probed the nature of colonial education in order to unravel its impacts on women. The emergence of women writers and critics has destroyed the myth of silence and exposed the excruciating pains most women have lived with for centuries. This situation justifies Jane Bryce - Okunolola's assertion that the entry of women into the literary enterprise has challenged the "patriarchal appropriation of power over the word" (21). But since feminist criticism, as Elaine Showalter remarks, is both revisionist (critiquing the status quo) and gynocentric (creating new roles for women), the starting point of women's writing has often been the investigation of male conception of sex difference.

This is why Flora Nwapa, the first woman novelist in Africa, presents the female story by interrogating the basis of gender signification in her novels. In *Efuru*, she unfolds the

stifling circumstances to which society subjects women because of sexism she, nevertheless, presents Efuru as an enigmatic woman who retains her individuality despite collective repression. This society places great premium on consensus behaviour it deploys sex role socialisation to exploit women because they are seen as appendages to men. This also accounts for their exclusion from colonial literacy.

Literacy in *Efuru*, just like in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, is a mechanism for social disintegration; because women are seen as "the pot of culture" (to use Florence Stratton's apt expression), they are forbidden from engaging in acts that are antithetical to social values. This underlies Ajanupu's rebuke to Ogea:

You don't seem to know anything about our customs, and yet you did not go to school. Only school children are ignorant of our customs and traditions" (212).

Colonial literacy is a destructive strategy of Western civilisation in Africa. In *Efuru*, for instance, it demands that converts of the new religion should abandon their "pagan" names, which is why Eneberi changes his name to Gilbert. Molefi Asante has intimated that when Africans are

"Identified individually by white names, they are bodies without spirits, people without dignity... What changes with the changing of our names is how we perceive ourselves and how others perceive us" (34).

This is shown in the converts' uncritical rejection of African values. Since colonial literacy is an instrument of social disintegration, women are excluded from it. The two people in *Efuru*, Gilbert, Efuru's second husband and Difu, the medical

doctor, who are exposed to formal Western education are men. Even when Nwapa introduces educated women in her later works, beginning with Amaka in *One is Enough*, they are cast in relation to men. As a teacher, Amaka maintains close affinity with her role as a wife in domestic space; a position which prepares her to enact the drama of immanence and eventually traumatises her into abstinence. The selective nature of colonial literacy is also illustrated in Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* where Ada, the child narrator is restricted by the differential treatment which society prescribes for the sexes. Ada's birth is a disappointment to her parents and the community.

Ada's "second class" status in relation to her brother, "Boy", is shown through education which is a subject of debate in her case but a natural right to Boy. She takes her brother to the prestigious Ladi Lak Institute but returns home to dream. Even if she is later exposed to formal education, it will be temporary enough to enable her to "write her name and count" (9). This type of functional literacy is inextricably linked with sex role socialisation in African societies. Yet Ada eventually breaks this social stricture by running to the missionary primary school. Literacy for the girl-child is useless in this situation except when it promotes economic expediency.

#### **Colonial Literacy in Francophone African Fiction**

Unlike British West Africa where the system of indirect rule was used to undermine African tradition, the policy of assimilation in French West African territories systematically destroyed African culture. Aduke Adebayo attributes this to the fact that the "ultimate goal of the French colonial policy was to Frenchify the African in every conceivable way..." (2). The primary tool for achieving this was the emphasis on French language as the only medium for communication and instruction. This is why the "assimilés" were sent to the Sorbonne in Paris, an institution which nurtured the dreams of the founding fathers of négritude, Léopold Sedar Senghor, Aimé Césaire and Léon Damas.

Literary creations which emanate from this region resonate the problem of cultural imperialism and the aspirations

of Africans to celebrate African culture. Though written first in French, and translated later to English, these works focus more on cultural affirmation than political emancipation. But Sembène Ousmane brings a distinctive voice into Francophone African fiction through his emphasis on colonial and anti-colonial themes as well as the initiation of women into the struggle for political freedom. Whether it is in *White Genesis*, *The Money Order* or *God's Bits of Wood*, Ousmane's subject matter and characterisation mark him out among his contemporaries.

However, his works, just like Mongo Beti's and Ferdinand Oyono's, reveal the deprivations and exploitation of the African people by agents of imperialism. But in exploring the predicament of the predominantly illiterate masses in *God's Bits of Wood*, Ousmane recreates Africa's search for political direction at the moment of transition. Literacy, therefore, reflects the nature of French colonialism which produces Westernised Africans whose education isolates them from Africa's struggles for political emancipation. This is the situation in which N' Deye Touti finds herself before she is initiated into the struggle for self-determinism. The struggle is necessitated by the realisation that colonial literacy is anathema to self-reliance because assimilated Africans are estranged from the realities of their society.

Literacy in *God Bits of Wood* is a product of cultural abandonment or the denunciation of African tradition. This is a major aspect of French civilisation in Africa and an indispensable tool of the Christian religion. Ferdinand Oyono shows this in *Houseboy* where he presents colonial literacy as a tortuous experience for the narrator. Toundi is the physical embodiment of the devastation that is associated with French literacy. His extermination signals the destruction of the African elite who abandons his/her cultural heritage for Western civilisation without an adequate replacement, especially since he/she may never be accepted as a constituent member of the new social order. The functional nature of literacy in *Houseboy* enhances Toundi's interaction with and eventual exploitation by his masters. His ability to read promotes religious indoctrination; and when he speaks, it is primarily to maintain his position as a servant. The decision to immortalise colonial oppression in the



two exercise books is an attempt to impose meaning on the chaos which surrounds him; since the consciousness provided by writing constitutes a threat to the status quo, Toundi is eliminated for his awareness of the grandiose in the Western psyche.

The exploitation of African people which Achebe and Oyono portray as a male experience is recreated to accommodate the traumas of women as the most suppressed group in the human society. Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song* present revealing portraits of women which portray the nature of colonial literacy among Senegalese women. Undertaking a feminist dissection of marriage in Islam in *So Long a Letter*, Bâ illustrates how traditional gender roles determine women's aspirations. This critique of traditional Islamic gender signification follows the strict binary structure which assigns biology to women and production to men. Women are trained in professions which project their biological roles while men are deposited in the public space as conquerors of creation.

The resulting "sexual division of labour", which forms the fundamental structure of sex difference, has been exploited to dehumanise women. As a teacher, Ramatoulaye is predisposed to nurturance just as the earlier Aissatou and young Nabou, who, being nurses, provide care for the society. But Modou Fall is an administrator while Mawdo Bâ is a medical doctor – roles that empower men to design women's destiny. That Aissatou and Daba move into male power space is a product of Bâ's feminist vision which seeks to re-define women's roles. Since the feminist writer is committed to the development of other women in the society, she creates revolutionary roles for them in literature. Ama Ata Aidoo and Molara Ogundipe – Leslie have unfolded useful dimensions to this argument in "Unwelcome Pals and Decorative Slaves..." and "The Female Writer and her commitment," respectively.

Although literacy may enhance a woman's economic status, society, as Theodora Ezeigbo opines, "socialises and conditions the female to see herself as an incomplete and inferior human being..." (74). This is the reason why many women in Africa still regard marriage as the highest possibility

in life even though it does not guarantee happiness. In many cases, marriage provides for permanent conflict because it affects women's selfhood and subsumes their individuality into that of their men. This is shown through Mireille's psychic trauma in *Scarlet Song*, especially since her marriage to Ousmane is prompted by his encounter with western education. There is no doubt, therefore, that the nature colonial literacy has a destabilising impact on both Anglo-and Francophone African societies.

#### **Fixation of Women and the Challenges for Fundamental Change in African Societies**

Literacy is the basic instrument for transforming human society. Indeed, it is fundamental for all aspects of social development. This is why literacy is not just necessary for the survival of the human society, it is central to the development of personal initiatives and collective abilities. The use of colonial literacy to fragment humanity along gender lines is certainly a major factor in African women's under-development because biology is promoted as their only destiny. This confirms the conception of women either as mothers or prostitutes in the works of male writers such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Cyprian Ekwensi, John Munonye, William Sassine, Ahmadou Kourouma, Camara Laye, Ferdinand Oyono, among many others.

Society prescribes modes of behaviour by exploiting gender roles to insist on sex difference as well as sanctioning those who deviate from consensus behaviour. Yet the same society fixates the possibilities of women by setting low standards for them. This is why Achebe infantilises women in his historical novels and confines them to the body in his later works. Just like Ada in *Second Class Citizen*, women are accorded an outsider status though the same society depends on their resilience for its survival.

Incidentally, the "second class" status of women is not a product of natural disabilities, but a mechanism created by men to maintain monopoly over their privileged position in society. This male conspiracy permits Efurú and Amaka to labour for their husbands whom Nwachukwu Agbada describes as



"lecherous, frivolous, bestial and morally hollow" (55). Despite these women's resourcefulness, they are crushed physically and emotionally because they fail to fulfil the primary role of women in patriarchy - motherhood. Nevertheless, the fact remains, even as Imoh Eshiet has said, that "the child bearing function is an inadequate measure for attesting to the humanity of the woman" (28).

Indeed, compulsory motherhood dehumanises, stigmatises and marginalizes women. Emilia Oko gives an interesting insight on this when she states:

Since man in patriarchy loves only himself and what advances him among his kindred, he must love only himself and he must be allowed to love woman only within the narrow limits of his selfishness and fickleness (36).

This, as Emenyi (2001) shows, results in the feminisation of poverty because having been denied selfhood through sex role socialisation, women are expected to live out other people's dreams. Even where they are conscious of their oppression, like Ousmane's women, they are cast as mutilated creatures - prostitutes, thieves, cripple and blind.

Consequently, though Ousmane may be "the forerunner of feminist consciousness in African literature", as Chioma Opara insists (81), his women in *God's Bits of Wood* are conceived essentially as historical snapshots of a debased humanity. This is one attribute he shares with Oyono in *Houseboy* where the female is nothing but a bedmate to man; and so, women are submerged into male definition of womanhood, circumscribed, calumniated and mythicised. In these circumstances, the aspirations of most African women have gone through a process of systematic deterioration.

Since colonial literacy popularises sex difference by empowering men and dispossessing women, it poses fundamental challenges to the bifurcation of human essence into

male and female. This is because the genderised and sexualised world produced by the insistence on sex difference has pitched the male and female against each other. Just as men have strived to maintain their monopoly over power, women have rejected patriarchal monologism by interrogating the basis of men's power and women's powerlessness. The major insight this brings to modern epistemology is the awareness that women's destiny is to a large extent a product of social conditioning. Moira Monteith supports this point when she reveals that "One of the immense positive gains accruing from feminist criticism has been the realisation that the female in literature is a literary construct" (1).

This realisation explodes the oedipal myth with its multiple significations and brings tradition under scrutiny as the major tool for asphyxiating the female voice. It is now clear that African women are not as passive as they are made to appear. The 1947-1948 railway workers strike on the Niger-Dakar line, which Ousmane re-enacts in *God's Bit of Wood*, shows the revolutionary role of women as active participants in the historical process. It follows that since African women "descend from one of the bravest, most independent and most innovative woman this world has ever known" (Aidoo, 39), there is an urgent need for African societies to change those normative behaviours that constrain women's possibilities.

This is because African, and indeed Nigérian history, is replete with female power models who have defended their societies against colonial and neo-colonial tendencies. The heroic deeds of women such as Nzingha of Angola, Queen Amina of Zaria, Mrs Fumilayo Ransome Kuti of Lagos, Madam Udo Udoma of Ikot Abasi, and the late legend, Chief (Mrs.) Margaret Ekpo of Calabar, to mention a few, point to the revolutionary role of women in African history. The legacy of these power models should have smashed the myth of women's generic powerlessness and reveal the injustice which the society has perpetrated against women it is against this background that Helen Haste posits that feminist writers and scholars have developed an agenda aimed at "relocating the definition of self out of a male perspective into a female perspective" (101).



This agenda uses women's creativity to challenge men's monopoly over the intellectual space. The attempt by women scholars to dismantle the sexist tragedy of women's history is the genesis of what Sandra Gilbert and Susan Guba call "a profound sexual - literary struggle" between the sexes (184). The use of female talent to scrutinise tradition has resulted in a "battle of the sexes over the province and provenance of literature, a battle which men, rightly or wrongly, felt they were losing..." (185) Thus, the sexual crisis which follows men's insistence on women's subordination and the latter's assertion of selfhood above collective repression has affected the foundations of social relations. One institution that is adversely affected by the ensuing struggle is the family. This is because tradition makes man the "senior" partner in marriage; he naturally determines the kind of commitment he gives to his spouse. Oko validates this position when she states that marriage

as an institution does not necessarily demand loving, but the irony of human nature demands commitment and man's nearest approximation to commitment is possession in marriage (39).

It is the attempt by women to escape the negative consequences of male possession that has problematised gender relations. This explains why some women have rejected heterosexual relations and advocate abstinence and lesbianism without providing a viable alternative for fulfilling mature love. The possessive nature of men makes for the oppression of women in all cultures; it justifies mandatory motherhood, and the violation of the woman's body; it affirms women's exclusion from public space and celebrates silence as virtue. These situations fixate women's selfhood and hinder the advancement of society because meaningful development, as Emenyi (2001 b) has said, depends on the merging of the male and female perspectives (141). When women are abandoned to illiteracy,

they become victims of patriarchal exploitation. Therefore, the greatest challenge that the fixation of women presents to African societies is under-development.

But the search for gender equity does not necessarily imply a need to ignore or reject sex difference since it is impossible to completely avoid difference in relation to the sexes. Rather, it is absolutely important to choose what to do with difference. Deborah Rhode has suggested that we should make "strategic choices - about when to deny, celebrate or dislodge difference". (7). This is because sex difference is entrenched in the society and manifests in every aspect of human interaction. Estelle Freedman validates this thesis when she observes that "gender difference is alive, well, and still critical both for scholarship and politics" (257).

Consequently, the male and female human persons ought to know when to utilise gender difference, but neither of them should use it to suppress each other's individuality. This demands that both sexes should engage in constructive dialogue. Constructive gender dialogue refers to the kind of interaction between the sexes which takes as its departure point the integrity of every human being, despite sex and it affirms the experiences of each gender as historically useful materials for the development of society. This is Stella Ify Osammor's legacy in *The Triumph of the Water Lily* where she creates men and women whose dignified existence manifests through mutual trust between the sexes and the affirmation of each other's humanity instead of the manipulation of power. The emerging sexual politics relativises the influence of power but deploys it as a mechanism for constructive action.

### Conclusion

Literacy is a prerequisite for the development of human and natural resources. But since colonial literacy emphasises sex difference, it establishes lines of authority through the male agnatic tie which compels women to serve men's pleasure. Consequently, women's humanity has become a negotiable reality; literature, which by its nature reflects social realities has been used to promote male values. This explains Chikwenye Ogunyemi's description of African (Nigerian) literature as

phallic, dominated as it is by male writers and male critics who deal almost exclusively with male characters and male concerns, naturally aimed at a predominantly male audience (60).

But the emergence of women as readers and writers has affected traditional notions of sex difference by re-interpreting human experience to accommodate the realities of both sexes. The suggestion is that women's marginalisation is tantamount to the under-development of the human society because both sexes are mutually relevant despite the crises of sexual revolution. This affirms Emenyi's (2001 b) argument that there is a dialectical relationship between the sexes which accepts difference as a necessary factor for producing a multivocal approach to reality (139-140). Literacy, therefore, is an index of development that is useful to both sexes on equal terms – a fact that colonial education in Africa overlooked.

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