

Gender Frustration in the African Novel: Matters Arising

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Abstract

In many countries of the world especially in Africa, men have enjoyed patriarchal domination over their female counterparts. This subjugated position women are expected to maintain is reflected in the character representation of women in some male-authored African novels. In recent times however, the focus is gradually shifting from inter-gender conflict to intra-gender conflict as well as trans-sexualism in the African novel. This aspect of gender discourse has not enjoyed adequate scholarly attention. Womanism, Marxist Feminism and Intertextuality are adopted as the theoretical framework of the study. This study adopts content analysis of two texts: *Night Dancer* by Chika Unigwe (West Africa), and *Palace Walk* by Naguib Mahfouz (North Africa). The reading and analysis of the selected texts reveal that trans-sexualism is on the front-burner of gender discourse in the African novel. In the contemporary African novel, there have been instances of male/female writers writing in favour of the opposite sex. This is evident in *Palace Walk*, where the writer, through the characterisation of the protagonist, Jawad, shows empathy for the plight of women in a patriarchal society. More so, there is the issue of intra-gender conflict in contemporary African novels. This is reflected in the conflict between mother and daughter in *Night Dancer*. The paper proffers a new approach to gender discourse in contemporary African novel in which case the focus is no longer on inter-gender conflicts in which male/female writers antagonise the opposite sex. Rather, there is an intra-gender conflict which reveals an apparent dynamic shift in the gender discourse of the African novel.

Keywords: Gender, Marxist Feminism, Womanism, the African novel.

Introduction

Gender, a socio-cultural construct, transcends maleness and femaleness of individuals in a society. A consideration of gender in a society forecloses the perception and reception of individuals based on their anatomy, physiology and biological sexes against the background of the cultural standard. As a socio-cultural construct, many scholars and critics (Emenyi 2005; Sotunsa 2009, Akorede 2011), have given a theoretical distinction between sex and gender of individuals. In their arguments, sex of individuals is static, irrespective of cultures. Gender, on the other hand, is dynamic: it varies according to respective social norms and cultural standards. Based on the cultural particularity of gender, scholars and critics have investigated the parameters which are the focal points in gender discourse. Among these parameters are: masculinity, feminism, hegemonic masculinity, patriarchy and matriarchy as they affect gender construction and perception in the human society. In their arguments, nature, culture and sociology of experience influence how individuals are perceived.

Since gender construction in any society is characterised by subjectivity, men and women have been offering series of theoretical and critical standards that can be used in assessing and critiquing their gender roles and identities. This phenomenon has resulted in gender agenda setting in life and literature. This agenda setting is tailored along selfassessment/re-assessment and an interrogation of the patriarchal/matriarchal norms that stereotypically re-present masculinity and feminism in socio-cultural discourses. Thus, the manner of discourse of gender issues in the African novel has demonstrated a sort of agenda setting. This set agenda demonstrates different ideologies that are projected by individual writers.

African literature, therefore, is consequently an ideological construct. This is because a literary writer writes from individual or social perspectives. Thus, ideology shapes and sharpens the consciousness of writers' artistic and social or critical sensibilities. It foregrounds the writer's interpretive skill of social reality. Consequently, Ruthven (1984:31) is of the view that:

Ideology is manifest in the ways we represent ourselves (and represented) to one another; 'sexual ideology' determines, for example, what is deemed to be socially acceptable behavior for men and women. The function of an ideology is to satisfy the status-quo and to persuade the powerless that their powerlessness is inevitable.

From the above, there are two factors that determine ideology: representation and perception. In the matrix of relationship of individuals and groups in human society, there are bipolar structure, power play considerations and stratifications that strain or strengthen relationships. This is what is found in gendered ideology in which men dominate the spheres of human activities, giving the impression of powerlessness and helplessness on the part of the female gender.

Since literature is a reflection or refraction of life, how women are presented in the African novel is a representation of the categorization and perception of women personality and identity by the writer. In most indigenous African societies, women were hardly recognized as individuals with independent existence. It was often taken by a category of male writers such as Chinua Achebe, Toyeb Salih, Ben Okri, Gabriel Okara and Cyprian Ekwensi, etc., that women should always be under the control of men. Thus, women were seen as passive and docile in their relationship with men. Women were not allowed to speak for themselves from their personal perspectives until more recent times. With the emergence of female voices in literary production, there have been inter-gender discourses and sharpening and re-sharpening of the thematic thrust and subject matter of literary texts. Women began to re-create themselves and subvert the presumed male dominance projected in literature and society. Accordingly, literary representation of gendered ideology is subjective and context-dependent

With this process of characterization, literary writers began to set the agenda for their gender. Through this, they invite their readers into their ideological viewpoint to embrace their respective gender inclinations. The female writers engage literature with radical and confrontationist approach to the characterization of men in their fictional works which they see as a rejoinder to how they have been subjectively presented and projected by their

male counterparts. African female writers strive to deconstruct and interrogate masculine ideology in their literary texts. They see no justification to keep silent in the face of apparent tyranny and oppression on the pages of works by their male counterparts, as well as in the patriarchal society that subjectively presents women as prostitutes, home breakers and trouble makers.

In the gender discourse of the African novels, there are four observed forms of gender ideologies: masculinity, feminism, Marxism and complementarity. These ideologies textualise male and female experiences in literature and life from perceived subjective viewpoints to uphold or subvert the socio-cultural norms of gender perception. The first generation of African novelists such as Chinua Achebe, Mongo Beti, Cyprian Ekwensi and Ferdinand Oyono have been accused of being jaundiced in their presentation of women in their works of fiction.

The most recent gender ideology in the African novels advocates complementarity. This ideology upholds the viewpoint that there is no need to separate men and women in the society. It proffers that men and women should work together to ensure peace, harmony and development in a society. Female African novelists such as Zainab Alkali and Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo have espoused the ideology of complementarity in the African novels. With conflicting ideologies in the male-authored and female-authored literary texts, there have been different modes of representation of individuality and identity. In the process of identity construction and presentation, female writers interrogate both phallogocentric episteme and the status-quo that uphold male hegemony and the suppression of women identity and individuality. This approach is common to the first generation of female writers. These female writers are apparently no more comfortable with the subjective portrayal of women and see a need for a counter discourse.

The emergence of female writers which offered to de-construct existing image of the African woman in literature led to women writers becoming creators and creatures of their personality. It became apparent that what Enwierhoma (2002) refers to as the dialogization of the text in which there is usually a counter-discourse in response to an initial discourse is evident in the African novel. The focus on the female body affords the female writer an opportunity to analyse the great roles women have had in production and reproduction as they relate to their sex (Evwierhoma 2002:22). For this reason, there is a dialogic discourse of gender issues in literature. Female writers see literature as a vessel for making their situations and experiences known from their own perspectives.

From the reading of the fictions for the past and contemporary female writers, two levels of gender conflicts identified are intra-gender and inter-gender conflicts. Most of the female writers have implicitly or explicitly point to intra-gender conflict between cowives, wives and mother-in-law, blood sisters and wives, daughters-in-law and stepmothers (and the child). This intra-gender conflict has taken different dimensions that range from bitter rivalry through victimization to termination of life. The inter-gender conflict that involves men and women take the dimension of identity construction of women in a patriarchal society. The levels and layers of conflicts are overlapping as traces of inter-gender and intra-gender conflicts can be found in a single fiction. These la-locking relationships of husband and wife/wives, co-wives and friends as observed in Mariame Ba's *So Long a Letter* and Chika Unigwe's *Night Dancer*. The deduction, therefore, is that there are apparent overarching conflicts characterizing gender ideology in a considerable number of African fictional works.

Setting gender agenda in African novels requires a clear understanding of the intricacies of human relationships in the private and public lives. This is because there are different manifestations (overt and covert) of gender oppression, gender marginalization, gender responsibility, sexuality and gender harmony in literary texts that are within the framework of gender ideology. Thus, reading of African novels should be done along the line of patriarchy, masculinity, hegemonic masculinity and women studies. All these readings will shed more light or the matrix of relationships between men and women in the African society.

Justification of the Study

Researchers and literary critics have done much on the gender issue and identity question in African novels. Sesan (2014) examined how phallogentric epistemology is questioned in Tsits Dangaremgba's *Nervous Condition*. The critic studied, among other things, the content and theme of the novel

Bestman (2012) carried out a re-reading of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* through a womanist lens. This study is concerned with gender frustration in African novels while identifying the points of divergence and convergence in the gender issues projected in the African novels. The critic argues that Achebe does not negatively represent women in totality in *Things Fall Apart*. She, therefore, cautions that Achebe should not be seen as a misogynist (a hater of women).

Since the novels are selected using the parameters of the authorship, nationality and gender in order to cater for all the variables that are central to the description of the gender frustration in African novels, the attention here is the interrogation of the degree of masculinity, femininity and trans-sexuality in the African novels. This paper focuses attention on the layers and phases of gender ideology in the African novels. In doing this, the study critiques the consistence and inconsistency of the gender treatment in the works of fiction with what is obtainable in the real world of human existence. The paper, therefore, considers the refractive and reflective capacities of literature to represent or question gender stereotypes in the African world of fiction and the real African world of existence.

Literature and the Gender Question

Literature and gender, in recent times, have become one of the foci of literary scholars and critics. This aims at investigating the gender perception, reception and stereotypes that have formed the subject matter and meaning of literary texts. The reference, in this study, is to African literature.

A thorough examination and consideration of gender issues in African literature has revealed a bipolar structure of the literary writers, audience and critics. The gender discourse of African literature has generated the idea of dominant paradigm which suggests that the societal values favour the operations and activities of members of this group. Members of the dominant paradigm is dominated and not well favoured in the social matrix and socio-human relations. Members of this paradigm do not enjoy prominence and their fate in literature and life is determined by the norms set by the dominant paradigm. In the discourse of African literature, the dominant paradigm is taken to be male writers that pioneered the written tradition of African literature while

females/women characters in narrative fictions become the creatures that are created according to the taste and desire of their creators (the male writers).

African literature, at its inception, was under the control and hegemony of male writers. It essentially interrogates how Africa and Africans were presented in European fictions of Africa. Their fictions, particularly in the genre of prose, question the derogative portrayal of African personality and identity. Thus, these fictions were regarded as reactionary. In the construction of the plot and themes of their fictions, these male African writers (un) consciously created female characters in questionable manner. This act of omission or commission by the male writers engineered gender discourse in the African literature.

Three decades of African literature revealed masculine ethos in thematic construction of literary texts. The male authors of this period, particularly in their debut and subsequent novels, focused more attention on the serviceable image of women. This is meant to covertly tell women their space and role in real life. In doing this, the male writers, in the view of Dasylyva (2003) “relegate their female characters to secondary spaces, indeed to literary ghettos, as lovers, bedmates, entertainers and sexual battlegrounds for men in power”. The relegation of women identity and person in literary texts of the first three decades of literary creativity in Africa is an extension of the sociology of human relations in a patriarchal society that upholds male dominance and female invisibility.

As part of the institutionalization of male dominance, male authors, in their early narrative fictions emphasized the serviceable and non-serviceable images of women depending on the ideology that they try to envision. As a way of extending patriarchal domination of women in a gender-biased society, male authors negatively present the personality of female characters in their texts. In the line of this argument. Stratton (1988:147) is of the opinion:

There ‘female characters are enclosed in the restricted spheres of behavior of the stereotypes of amale tradition, their human potential buried in shallow definitions of their sex. Silence, like the slave woman, by blows, - either to their bodies or psyches – they are forced to submit to the necessity of conforming with the externally imposed requirements for their masculine societies.

The entry of female writers to the literary world in Africa can be traced to the 1960s with writers like Flora Nwapa. There was, however, the boom in women literary creativity in Africa, with reference to prose fiction, since the 1980s with writers like Mariama Ba (Senegal), Buchi Emecheta and Zynab Alkali (Nigeria), Nawal – El-Saadawi (Egypt), Ama Ata Aidoo (Ghana) and Werewere Liking (Cameroon), etc. These female writers attempt, in their literary texts, self-inscription as against parochial presentation of women identity in the male authored literary texts.

Theoretical framework Womanism

The concept, womanism, focuses attention on the peculiarity of African women experience in a patriarchal society. The focus of the theory is the complementarity between men and women in the African society. The conceptualization of womanism

began with women of colour in America. Among the pioneers of the theory in America is Alice Walker (1983: xi-xii). She describes a womanist as:

A black feminist' or feminist of colour... who loves other women, sexually, and /or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility... and women's strength. Sometimes love individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of the entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist... Womanism is to feminism as purple to lavender.

The above conceptualization of womanism by Alice Walker posits that there is no place for separation in womanist ideology. Men and women are expected to work harmoniously together for the betterment of their society.

Similarly, Ogunyemi (1996:65) comments on the centrality of cooperation and understanding in the gender relations between men and women in the society. She argues that womanism is:

A black outgrowth from feminism. Womanism is black centered. It is accommodationist. It believes in the freedom and independence of women like feminism. Unlike radical feminism, it wants meaningful union between black women and black men and black children and will see to it that men begin to change from their sexiest stand

Kolawole (1997) modified the concept of womanism. She does not see the concept from the global perspective, in her opinion, African womanism is the one that takes care of the rights of women of African descents alone.

Intertextuality

The theory, intertextuality, focuses on the centrality of the text in the criticism of discussion of literary texts. It is concerned with the semblance that two or more texts share together in terms of characterization, arrangement of plot, subject matter and thematic preoccupation.

Chika Unigwe's *Night Dancer*

Written by Chika Unigwe and published by Parresia in 2013, *Night Dancer* focuses attention on the life and experience of the protagonist Adanna. She (Adanna) is in search of identity and kinship after the death of her mother. The death of her mother provided an opportunity to know much about the past of her late mother through the 'memoirs' the latter leaves behind. Before her death, Ezi (Adaruma's mother) instructs that the box containing the memoirs be not opened until she is dead. At the opening of the box, Adanna discovers some shocking revelations about her mother's identity and relatives. She also uncovers the fact that her father is not dead.

The novel can be read from two perspectives on gender discourse. First, the novel can be read from the ideological view point of intra-gender conflicts are derived from the characterization, plot and subject matter of the novel. Howe the characters in the novel

relate with one another contributes to the construction of the themes of the novel. Intra-gender relations/conflicts are concerned with the joys, tensions and strains in relationship among characters of the same anatomical sex. In this regard, the focus is on daughter-mother relationship (Ezi and Adanma, Rapu and her mother, Ezi and Mamannukwu), co-wives relationship (Ezi and Rapu) and friends (Ezi and Madam Gold). The relationships among the female characters in the novel contribute to the advancement of the plot of the novel and the shaping of the novel's themes.

The prominent instance of intra-gender conflict in the novel is the daughter-mother conflict, particularly between Adanma (Mma) and Ezi, her mother. This conflict is generated by the decision of Ezi to quit her marriage with-Mike, Adanma's father, after the latter's marriage to Rapu. In the course of her upbringing, Mma gets to know only her mother. This creates some social problems for her as no woman wants to relate with her or her mother. She only sees her mother as a prostitute who uses her body to get whatever she wants. It is after her mother's death that Mma is reoriented by Madam Gold about how she (Mma) perceived her mother. This is aimed at making Mma realise that her mother made some sacrifices for her to survive. One of the instances cited by Madam Gold is Ezi's encounter with Goody Goody; a creditor that has no mercy. In a bid to support herself and her only daughter, Ezi approaches Goody Goody for a short term loan to start a business. The business does not prosper. Ezi is unable to pay the debt and for this reason she is embarrassed by her creditor. The encounter with Goody Good is one of the trials that Ezi faced while raising Mma as a single mother.

As part of gender agenda setting, the novel also presents inter-gender conflicts as found in the relationship between Mike and Ezi, on the one hand, and the relationship between Papannukwu and Ezi. This inter-gender conflict is on the matter of ideology, particularly between traditional and modern ideological bases of marriage. The conflict revolves around the modern conception of marriage held by Ezi and Papannukwu's traditional perception of marriage. Papannukwu expects Ezi to stay in the marriage despite the impregnation of Rapu by Mike. This is because in traditional system of marriage, polygamy is tolerated. Besides, if Ezi leaves her marriage, it will affect the chances of her other siblings. With the insistence of Ezi to leave her marriage, Papnnukwu sees Ezi as being selfish and self-centred. Ezi-Papannukwu conflict is a fall out of Ezi-Mike conflict. There is conflict between Ezi and Mike because of the intrusion of Rapu into their marriage.

Mike's action of impregnating Rapu is given different interpretations by the people around him. His wife (Ezi) sees his action as an act of betrayal. Besides, she (Ezi) is of the opinion that their marriage has become loveless, whatever reason Mike gives is not convincing to Ezi. Even after her mother advises her to endure the situation and remain married to Mike, Ezi finds it difficult to cope because she thinks all the time about the illicit love-making which happened between Mike and Rapu. Ezi gives an excuse that she does not want to do the terrible thing, killing the son of Rapu:

She feared that if she stayed any longer, she would do something terrible or have something terrible done to her. Every times she heard Rapu's baby cry, she wanted to strangle it, to choke it, to kill the thing that had changed their lives. How could she live under the same roof as it? And even if the baby was not there physically, it would always haunt her. Either way, she could no longer stay with

Mike. (p. 200)

She does not see the impregnation of Rapu by Mike as a mistake. She rather sees it as an intentional etc. for this reason; Ezi expresses her unpreparedness for rivalry and intrigues involve in polygamous marriage, hence, she views quitting the marriage as the best way out for her only daughter and herself. Another interpretation of Mike's action of impregnating Rapu is the quest for a son. The first child of Ezi is a female child, Adanma. As a result, the general belief is that Mike impregnates Rapu because he wants a male child. This belief is confirmed when Rapu gives birth to a son. Nobody condemns the action of Mike because in African setting, a lot of premium usually attached to the birth of a male child.

Chika Unigwe's *Night Dancer* provides a fresh insight into the interpretation of frustration agenda in the African novel. The novel makes a balanced case for intra-gender and intergender conflicts. What only makes a difference between this novel and others is the narrative technique. The novel presents the known and familiar story of gender relations, particularly in marriage. Unigwe presents the familiar in an unfamiliar manner. Unigwe's *Night Dancer* shows some remarkable and unmistakable influences from some novels especially Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, Buch Emecheta's *The joy of Motherhood* and Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*; all of which portrayed women in toxic marriages devising several means of survival.

Naguib Mahfouz's *Palace Walk*

First published in 1956, the novel is subtitled *The Cairo Tragedy* (Volume 1). The spatial setting of the novel is Egypt while the temporal setting is between the period of 1917 and 1919. This temporal setting of the novel coincides with the period of the First World War and the commencement of revolution in Egypt in 1919. The setting of the novel reveals the private and public concerns of the Egyptians.

The plot of the novel focuses on Jawad's family, with all its stress and strains. The family comprises Jawad as the head of the family, his wife (Amina), three sons (Yasin, Fahmy and Kamal) and two daughters (Khadija and Aisha). Jawad, as the head of the family, is presented as a disciplinarian that rules with double standard. He does what he forbids for all his family members: he drinks alcohol despite his strict Islamic religious background, he engages in extra-marital affair contrary to the tenet of Islam and engages in night crawling with impunity. Because of the way he rules his house, Jawad does not see his wife as a companion whose views and opinions count in the affairs of their home. No member of his family airs contrary opinions or views around Jawad; he subjects them to the culture of silence. He expects his wife to take orders without questions or complaints. She has no freedom to air her opinions, not even on issues of her personal welfare. Amina is absolutely subservient to her husband owing to the factors of patriarchal structures and Islamic religion, which is most prevalent in Northern African sub-region. One of the tenets of Islam about marriage and marital relationship is that a woman should be totally submissive to her husband. Amina assiduously holds to this, to the extent that she loses her sense of selfhood and becomes thingified.

The docile submissiveness of Amina to the wishes and caprices of her husband informs the narrative pattern of the author who centralizes attention on her status and role in the matrix of things in a patriarchal setting. As a way to demonstrate her submission to patriarchal standard, Amina faithfully carries out her duties as a wife and a mother. She places so much premium on satisfying her husband at all cost even at the expense of her own comfort. For instance, whenever her husband keeps late night, Amina does not enjoy sound sleep because she has to stay awake to attend to him:

Habit woke her at this hour, it was an old habit she had developed, when younger and it had stayed with her as she matured. She had learned it along with other rules of married life. She woke up at midnight to await her husband's return from his evening's entertainment. That she would serve him until he went to sleep. She sat up in bed resolutely to overcome the temptation posed by sleep. After invoking the name of God, she slipped out from under the covers and onto the floor. (p. 1)

The above excerpt shows the life of lack of freedom and independence that Amina lives in her marriage. She gives her all to her husband; she stays awake to satisfy the sexual desires of her husband and she sleeps on the floor while her husband sleeps on a comfort bed.

Unlike Unigwe's *Night Dancer* in which there is inter-gender conflict between husband and wife, what *Palace Walk* reveals is husband-wife inter-gender oppression. The problem of the protagonist is compounded by religion and tradition. Jawad oppresses his wife and deprives her of all forms of pleasure and liberty. The situation gets so bad that he prohibits her from worshipping in the mosque for Jumat services. He forbids his wife from moving around probably for two reasons: (i) his experience with his first wife; (ii) the fear that other men might do to his wife what he does to other people's wives and daughters, Jawad is a chronic philanderer. The novel shares the vision of Marxist feminism which views women as members of the oppressed class in a predominantly patriarchal society.

Jawad's high handedness does not end with his wife, it extends to his daughters as well.

He denies his daughter the opportunity to acquire western education. The two daughters (Khadija and Aisha) are withdrawn from primary school and kept at home. His wish is that they are merely schooled in domestic and wifely duties so that they would be good wives to their husband in the future. He is of the erroneous view that schools have corrupting influence on women. Besides, he believes that if women are given the opportunity to move around in public, they will become corrupt. His view about the place of women in the society is the confines of a home. As a result, he is not happy with Yasin's approach to marriage, particularly with the way he involves his wife, Zaynab, in social life. Yasin (his son) who has been secretly involved in the ways of life of his father (drinking, late night outing and womanising) finds it difficult to restrict his wife to the confines of his home. He goes around in the forbidden to women in the society's sociocultural norms. Unlike his father who is able to cope with the stress and demands of marriage, Yasin is unable because he is always unrepentant of his excesses, even while praying:

He would not ask for repentance, since he secretly feared his prayer might be grated and he would be turned into an ascetic with no taste for the pleasures of life he loved and without which he thought life would be meaningless. (p. 221)

With his recklessness and unrepentant nature, Yasin's marriage with Zaynab collapses, even when the latter is pregnant for him. The deduction here is that men do not have respect for women in the novel. They do not believe that women are their companions and soul-mates in marriage. This is evident in the way the male characters in the novel treat their wives, daughters and mothers as individuals with no dignity. This novel is a good intervention from a male author that advocates for the rights of women in marriage and society. The novel surreptitiously advocates improved status and dignity for women in a patriarchal society.

Conclusion

The African novel has experienced some dynamic changes in plot, characterisation and thematic pre-occupations in recent times. The thematic concern of African novel has shifted from the issues of colonialism and misrule after independence to some contemporary sociological issues. Among the contemporary sociological issues in African novel is gender discourse. African writers from different social and gender backgrounds have been engaging gender issues in their works, using different stylistic approaches to project their bias or consolidate their positions.

The trendy issue in the gender discourse in the African novel is trans-sexualism. In writing in favour of the opposite sex. In this situation, these writers show empathy for the suffering, marginalization and subjugation of the opposite sex. This overt show of empathy for the opposite sex in the African novel is common among some male writers. In *Palace Walk*, for instance, the writer, through the characterisation of the protagonist, Jawad, shows empathy for the plight of women in a patriarchal society. What this implies is that women are subjected to a lot of oppression, hardship, humiliation, denial and misery in the guise of marriage.

Apart from the issue of trans-sexualism in the African novel, there is also the issue of intra-gender conflicts, particularly between mother and daughter. These forms of conflict reveal that women are not always in good relationship with one another. In the case of Adanma and Ezi in *Night Dancer*, there is daughter-mother intra-gender conflict. The daughter is not in a good relationship with her mother owing to the issue of single motherhood of the latter.

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