

CHAPTER II

WOMAN IN AFRICA :
SOCIOLOGICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXTS

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The study of the sociological evolution of African woman and the literary projections and creative visualizations of women in African society by African fiction writers-both male and female, establish the significance of woman as a valid approach in comprehending African experience. The brief survey of the sociological and literary background of woman in Africa is, hence, divided in two parts :

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syntax

I African Woman : The sociological Context

II African Woman : The Literary Context

I African Woman : The Sociological Context

Sociologically, the history of African woman can be seen as a phenomenon in three stages which parallels African political history: (i) Pre-colonial (ii) Colonial (iii) Post - colonial

i) **Pre - Colonial Woman in Africa**

Anthropologists Leacock (1972), Boserup (1970), Gough (1971), and Sacks (1974) studied four African societies prior to European domination , the Mbuti of Zaire, the Lovedu and the Pondo of South

Africa, and the Gonda of Uganda to study the economic, social and domestic status of women. They found that in most respects in the egalitarian Mbuti and Lovedu societies women were equal of men, among the Pondo women occupy a fairly subordinate position. According to Leith Mullings, in village communities, 'where private property had not developed, women participated in the production of the primary resources of the society and had equal access to the products of their labour.'¹

Eleaner Leacock says, 'in the hunting and gathering and early horticultural societies, relations between sexes were equal. This equality ... deteriorated with the advent of class society.'² Although forms of stratification were developing in Africa before colonialism, the European intrusion through slave trade and colonialism accelerated the division of the population into classes.

ii) Colonial Woman in Africa

The relationship between economic exploitation of the colonised people and the development of capitalism as a vested system emerged most clearly in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century. One of the consequences of capitalism was that the value of traditional women's labour was reduced as the home and the work-place were separated under the new system. Cindy Courville observes, 'under

colonialism many African women were raped into submission, were exploited as labourers, and endured subhuman status as slave as a result of colonial European and African patriarchal oppression and capitalist exploitation.³

Patriarchal culture, and its associating sexual hierarchy, was not only followed through colonisation but also further enhanced. The colonisers saw women as sexual objects and made them valuable commodities which led them to widespread prostitution. Women sold their sexuality – sometimes being helpless, sometimes to get advantages offered by the whites in exchange. However, this situation helped Collocat. antagonism between sexes to develop.

iii) Post-Colonial Woman in Africa

The worst condition of women in colonial period continued in post-colonialism in most of the African countries. Both the ordinary men and the men in power did not like the emancipation of women. Restricted scope for employment has limited the migration of village women to the towns. M. J. Mbilinyi states, 'except for some casual jobs, urban women find few openings' and 'in the higher income group some may join professions such as teaching, nursing, medicine etc.'⁴ In Kenya, for example, only a handful of girls gain access to higher education. Higher education is possible only for selected few and it

helps to produce, 'a privileged elite.'⁵ Kenya's Republic Constitution rejects any discrimination whether racial, ethnic, class or sexual. Yet, there remains a wide gulf between the attitudes of the educated and the uneducated or the tribal women who are made to accept their position as 'beasts of burden' in society.

While race and gender unite South African women, class divides them. The effects of apartheid play a major role in the present situation. South African women are seeking political guarantees that will open doors of progress for them in every field. The possibilities of such progress lie in the hands of all South African politicians, men and women of all races. Women politicians have to play a great role in stabilising society.

In general, African women who have gained access to western education in post-colonial period have taken up mainly 'feminine' professions like teaching, clerical work, nursing and mid-wifery. Besides these, women are engaged in other occupations like preparing cooked food for market, production of craftwork, manufacturing goods etc. Polygamy is practised in Africa but is not universal. Women continue to suffer verbal and physical abuse at the hands of ordinary men, police and soldiers. The few women who bravely participate in

politics are reminded by men that their place is in the kitchen with the children.

II African Woman : The Literary Context

African fiction includes novels by both male and female writers although female creativity in fiction is a later and, so far, very limited phenomenon - only a small group of women writing novels. The brief survey of treatment of women by both male and female novelists clarifies various degrees of awareness of women.

Syntax

Three kinds of roles of woman in African society appear to be focused in particular by the male and female novelists although they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Though the roles are gender-oriented including woman as wife, mother, political activist or sexual victim, they are transformed into a gender-transcendent interpretation of woman as a leader, saviour, goddess, a symbol of the future of a nation or society as a whole. The three major roles are :

- i) Woman as Mother / Wife
- ii) Woman as Political Activist
- iii) Woman as Sexual Victim

i) **Woman as Mother/Wife**

Preoccupation with motherhood is evident in almost all modern African fiction. Glorifying the motherhood and Africa, became an important mission of the African writers in colonial and post-colonial Africa and it often led to stereotyping the role of women and denying them a place outside their homes. Male writers in Africa present motherhood and womanhood with the frame of larger social problems while female writers often successfully attempt to release women from the mystique of motherhood by presenting both its joys and sorrows, and the details of the woman's experiences of motherhood.

In his novel Things fall Apart⁶, Chinua Achebe tells that the most common name given to child in Igbo society is Nneka-Mother is supreme. The novel's central concern is the conflict between motherhood and femininity and nurturing as opposed to fatherhood, masculinity and aggression. Okonkwo, the male protagonist in the novel fails to reconcile the male and female qualities and principles of his Igbo society. He fails also because he ignores and cannot accept the wisdom of the traditional respect for 'Mother'.

The plot of Elechi Amadi's The Concubine⁷ revolves around its female protagonist Ihuoma's successive attempts to seek fulfilment in marriage and the attempts made by three men to make love with her

and marry. According to Roopali Sircar, 'Amadi's main preoccupation seems to be to portray a character who will epitomise female perfection from a sexist perspective... .'⁸

Asare Konadu's Woman in Her Prime⁹ traces the sorrow, concern and preoccupation of a woman as a mother. Pokuwaa had not been able to conceive, despite marriage to three husbands. Her days and nights are spent in making sacrifices, propitiating the spirits, and waiting agonisingly for the signs of conception to appear. At the end of the novel, Pokuwaa is expecting a child, but she has freed herself from pressures in her daily life which favour motherhood than womanhood.

Tayeb Salih's heroine Bint Mahmoud in Season of Migration to the North¹⁰ is a widow who lives a quiet and secluded existence amidst her people, content to take care of her two sons but she is not spared the lustful eyes of an old man who wants to marry her. Her parents arrange this marriage. On the wedding night Bint Mahamoud shoots the groom, his genitals cut off and she too, stabs herself and lies dead. Salih appears to believe in violence and bloodshed as a possible way to set right the wrong imposed upon women.

Ndabningi Sithole draws a typical male perspective of a polygamous household in a traditional rural setting in his The Polygamist¹¹. The polygamist's household is an ideal one. His seven

wives are stereotyped women who wish only to serve and please the master. They lack complexity and remain mere caricatures of male fantasy. They do not suffer jealousy, inadequacy, humiliation, or anger.

Bessie Head records the contribution of women in the villages of Golema ZMahdi in When Rain Clouds Gather.¹² The women she says were capable of the 'hardest most sustained labour.' Forming themselves into a co-operative under the able guidance of agricultural activist Gilbert, these women bring better economic benefits in agriculture.

In Flora Nwapa's Efru¹³ and Idu¹⁴, Efurú and Idu are very earthly and primordial in nature. When fate deprives these women of their children, their anguish and loss is not shared by their husbands. Yet they are able to overcome personal grief to pick up the threads of their lives, returning to other important roles with the structure of their society - like farming and trading. In One is Enough¹⁵, Nwapa's heroine Amaka, starts off in a state of feminine submission and dependence. She has failed to conceive in six years of marriage so she begs her mother-in-law not to be 'thrown away.' Amaka reflects on her fate with negative thoughts, which she later rejects. Her economic freedom and her success in business release her from the burden of showing her womanhood only through motherhood. In Women are

Different¹⁶, Nwapa shows the perspective in which the society must view women. Chinwe divorces her husband without demanding a maintenance allowance. The narrator tells that the lives of the women can not be ruined because of a bad marriage. They have a choice to marry or divorce their husbands, they are different and marriage is not the only way for them.

Sembene Ousmane's Xala¹⁷ is a novel about polygamy and the man's impotence. On his wedding night with the third wife, the young virgin, El Hadji struck by the dreaded 'xala' becomes a mental and financial wreck. The virgin girl once again is put for sale as one of the partners turns out to be bankrupt as the marriage was a business contract.

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Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's Wanja in Petals of Blood¹⁸ longs for a child despite her material success. It is expressed in her mournful call to Karega, 'Karega, give me life ... I am dying ... and no child.' (p.237) Later she marries Abdulla and sheds several of her images - 'an outsider,' 'a virgin whore', an 'important prostitute' so that she acquires the image of a mother, purified and reborn.

While the fear of inferiority and the disappointment of producing a female child dogs the African woman, Buchi Emecheta's Joys of Motherhood¹⁹ questions the futile purpose of woman's life completely

devoted to bringing up her children through hard troubles, only to be abandoned by the very same children who run after their pleasures. With the character Nnu Ego, Emecheta questions the importance of children. Her lonely death is a reminder of women's folly in devoting their whole life to their husbands and children.

Motherhood and the consequent glory conferred on it does not spare the African woman the pain and humiliation of being replaced by a younger wife in a society where polygamy still provides the male with the power to marry a number of women as is revealed in Mariama Ba's So Long a Letter²⁰. Ba's Un Chant écarlate²¹ translated as Scarlet Song tells the story which takes place in post-independent Senegal. It exposes not only the universality of patriarchal oppression but also the difference between the European woman's cultural background and experience and her Senegalese counterparts.

ii) Woman as Political Activist

Woman in African fiction becomes a strong political activist. She fights with both the blacks and whites.

Chinua Achebe's A Man of the People²² marks radical departure from his idea of woman as an inferior being. Eunice in this novel emerges as a strong feminist and participates actively in the political events of the novel and avenges the death of her lover, Max, by killing

the murderer herself. In Anthills of the Savannah²³, Achebe experiments with a far more vital role of woman through Beatrice. She is anxious to know how an 'embittered history' of a people could be appeased. Achebe shows a ray of hope, through Beatrice for Nigeria's political instability.

Sembene Ousmane dedicates his God's Bits of Wood²⁴ to 'men and women who, from the Tenth of October, 1947, to the nineteenth of March 1948, took part in this struggle for a better way of life, (and who) owe nothing to anyone : neither to any civilising mission nor to any parliament, or parliamentarians. Their example was not in vain. Since then Africa has made progress.' The women in this novel reflect a broad spectrum of ages, classes, ethnic groups, occupations, and degrees of political awareness.

Buchi Emecheta, in her foreword to Destination Biafra²⁵ says, "the subject is as they say 'masculine'. But I feel a great sense of achievement in having completed it." She details the exposure of women in traditionally masculine world of politics and war, as Debbi Ogendemgbe, daughter of a corrupt and wealthy father dedicates herself to a mission to reconcile two bitter enemies who have plunged Nigeria into a devastating and brutal civil war. Katherine Frank observes, 'Debbi Ogendemgbe is the most compelling example we have

of the New Woman in Africa. She embodies a liberating ideal.. is an autonomous future she embraces, a future without men.'²⁶

In Nadine Gordimer's My Son's story²⁷, the heroine Aila is a wife, mother, grandmother, comrade and revolutionary. She establishes her identity in society where black people, men as well as women have to collect their strength, gather together their resources and fight against a common enemy. Aila fights when her daughter's house is burnt and there is the possibility of her grandchild's death. In None to Accompany Me²⁸, Gordimer portrays both black and white women and shows their important roles in South Africa in transition. Vera, a white lawyer represents blacks' struggle to reclaim the land. The return of exiles and liberation leaders including her black friends Didymus and Sibongile Moqoma is in progress. All must change, the reader experiences the strange dangers that are to be faced in the new power. Sibongile is threatened by death for her social work and Vera has to live alone to work for blacks but both these women want to lead the South Africans to golden future.

iii) Woman as Sexual Victim

Under the rule of the whites the conditions of blacks deteriorated. The main factor in this respect was the dislocation which affected the natural balance between males and females. In mining and industrial

centres the congregation of men of all races and nationalists aroused a heavy demand for the sexual services of women who happened to live under extreme poverty. Many women successfully combined all the four roles simultaneously : wife, mother, prostitute and extra bread-winner for the household. Alan Paton shows the evil effects of rural migration to the towns in Cry, the Beloved Country.²⁹ Reverend Stephen Kumbalo's Sister Gertrude goes to Johannesburg to search her missing husband. Her brother later finds her in a brothel but she refuses to go with her brother and blames herself as a bad woman, then she moves back to a convent.

Cyprian Ekwensi portrays a black whore in Jagua Nana.³⁰ The corrupt and money hungry society is imagined in the portrayal of a beautiful prostitute, Jagua Nana. Jagua is a liberated woman who enjoys her sexuality and holds her victims with it. Kenneth Little observes, 'other women may have university degrees and diplomas; but these have no meaning in Jagua's world. In this world of love, sex and glamour, Jagua reigns supreme'.³¹ Ekwensi portrays through Jagua the uglier and disturbing elements of post-colonial African society.

In his novel Prostitute,³² Okello Oculi's narrative shows the prostitute's meditations. She stands for society at the frustrating stage of lack of integrity on behalf of individuals, classes and nations.

In Nguigi wa Thiong'o's A Grain of Wheat³³ Mumbi the heroine of the novel, becomes sexual victim of Karanja and suffers from this guilt throughout her life without any fault of her own. The most important significance of this event is that Mumbi is raped not by the white but by her own black man working for the whites. He has chosen to be a homeguard for them as it would allow him to remain near Mumbi. This is the tragedy brought by the colonial exploitation which has taken her husband to detention camp. In Petals of Blood, Wanja is exploited primarily because she is a woman and a prostitute. Each time she decides to start afresh, the establishment, in the guise of Kimeria, decreases otherwise and she is brought back to this world she hates. According to Chimalum Nwanko, 'Wanja's search as a woman, a key creative factor in the quest, is for the birth of another child. It is the quest for the real Independent Kenya created under the proper circumstances.'³⁴ In Devil on the Cross³⁵, Ngugi makes a woman - Jacinta Waringa - his principal character assigning minor roles to his male characters. She shoots her lover's father who had ruined her life by impregnating her. After avenging she walks out of the house without once looking back. Guthera, in Matigari³⁶ by Naugi is the heroine of revolution. She is a prostitute. When cops let their trained

dogs on Guthera her blood-curdling cries of terror show her humiliation in full public view.

Rebeka Njau, in her Ripples in the Pool³⁷ shows a complex socio-historical meaning of the image of the prostitute. The woman Selena allows men white and black to sexually use her and represents the debilitating after effects of colonialism.

Apart from the roles of wife, mother, prostitute, leader, the African woman is also present in the fiction as a daughter, sister, girl friend, worker, trader, market woman etc. While responding to the oppressive environment of the African woman, the African writers often prefer to co-relate Africa's future to woman rather than man.

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