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The development of African Literature has to be viewed within the context of a patriarchal culture which has throughout the existence of literature and society set norms, values and standards that enhance male domination. Theories of writing and language are structured in a way which demands a particular response to the literary conventions. Those women authors who write, especially those who are conscious of the need to reconstruct the woman's experience and to provide an alternative mode or culture of reEgigion do so Within the male constraints.

Male authors have to a great extent shaped and simultaneously reproduced a stereotyped image of woman as "the other". This particular practice of depicting African women in literature written in English reflects a literary history which has not only been dominated by a patriarchal culture but also by the colonial and neo-colonial period which accorded a low status to women. Most of the literature which was produced during that time was written by men and reflects the impact of the pertaining culture - i.e. colonial, neo-colonial and traditional - on the male-produced image of the African woman as well as the relationship towards women.

Males have for a long time been selected for formal education and this practice was fostered by colonial institutions which made specific choice in educating male and female children. At the same time sex role distinctions common to many African societies subjected women to non-education structures with the purpose of preparing them to be good wives and mothers. It was believed that western education hampers their acquiring of acceptable traditional status. Colonial administrations perpetuated this practice by accepting that women were of secondary importance, in fact, it is evident that European colonialisation and traditional systems merged to exclude women from those processes which prepare one for the craft of writing.(1) Lp.2;Ngambika)

When examining the portraiture of African women in literature the social and historical realities pertaining to women's lives must be considered and their role and status and image in society must be seen in its proper context.

African women from different African societies have been subjects of oppression from outside (e.g. foreign invasion, colonial domination) and at the same time have also inherited traditions which sometimes were feudal, slave-based or communal. The tradition which the African woman inherited kept her outside the cultural privileges, and alienated her. Her "outsider-status" resulted in her becoming critical towards this very same traditional inheritance.

The development of African literature grows within the sphere of patriarchal culture which set norms, standards and values that promote and enhance male domination. Writing and language, for example, have been structured to achieve a particular response to suit the literary conventions in place. Those female writers who take up the art of writing, especially those who are conscious of the need to reconstruct reflections relating to the women's world and also creating an alternative culture do so from within the male domain.

An investigation of African literature exposes a vivid picture of numerous stereotypes and misconceptions presented of the African woman. Female characters have been depicted as wives, sisters, mothers, mistresses, casual lovers, nannies, whores/bitches etc. These images have been perpetuated through time thereby defining their role within a narrow frame of reference. They are made to fit into one of several limited and stoical stereotypes. They are placed on the periphery of society and seen in their relationship to men. They are invisible souls.

The idealization and romantization of motherhood is a common occurrence and motherhood plays a central role in the African society. Fertility and infertility become a theme surrounding the characterization of the female character. In most African societies motherhood defines womanhood and it therefore becomes crucial to women's status in that society. To marry and mother a child, preferably a son, entitles a woman to more respect from her husband's kinsmen for she can now be addressed as 'Mother of so-and-so. Children have been made central in the life of a woman. An expression of this centrality comes out vividly in M.S. Qwesha's story: Only God Knows the Truth. In Qwesha's story the central character Nozamile summarizes her plight (as daughter-in-law)) when she realizes that "her marriage was on the rocks unless she conceived".(2) (p.71-Staffrider, Vol.7. No. 2,1988). And when she ultimately does and gives birth to a baby boy the mother-in-law Nonje Mnyama screams "a boy" and pats Nozamile's shoulder and says "well done!" It was the first time Nozamile had ever received a word of appreciation from her.(3) lp.74.Vol.7,NoZ,1988 Here we can realize both ends of a woman's experience, where she has at different moments and in different situations in our history been both oppressed and oppressive, where she has been the victim and the agent and ally or enemy to the other women. (4) In fact, the women have contributed significantly to the maintenance of patriarchal social structures. Until women give up their status as accomplices and act as a counterforce to initiate change will their conditions improve. Molara Ogundipe-Leslie challenges the modern African woman by stating that: Women are shackled by their own negative self-image. by centuries of the interiorization of the ideologies of patriarchy and gender hierarchy. Her own reactions to objective problems therefore are often self-defeating and self-crippling. She reacts with fear, dependency complexes and attitudes to please and cajole where more self-assertive actions are needed.(5)

'lSo here I am. I have ended where I began in my father's house. The difference is that now my father is dead.'(8)

It becomes clear that women as daughter or sister has greater status and more rights in her lineage than when she is a wife. As soon as she marries she becomes righless more voiceless and inaudible. Whilst Nnu Ego places her whole life into bringing up her children she ignores all the other aspects of her life up to a point where she feels dislocated:

"I don't know how to be anything else but a mother. How will I talk to a woman with no children. Taking the children from me is like taking away the life I have always known, the life I am used to.t(9)

Bessie Head's character Margaret in Maru comes through as a symbol of persecution by her community mostly because of prejudice, and tribal injustices. The society's internal contradictions and differences reveal themselves in the woman's loneliness.

The woman image of whore/prostitute is one of the stereotypes and has been presented to either show how decadent urban city life can be or reflect in an image of a suffering character who has to pay for her evil. But on the whole the image of the whore contributes to a general perception of "how deep at woman's life can descend". Maria Apondi Okong'o in her story g1 Sisterl My Agony presents us with a setting where two women, Nina and Evita, yell at each other whilst referring to each other as "bitch":

"Damn your noise, you bitch!", Nina yelled, "some folks are trying to sleep"

"Bitch yourself", Evita yelled back. "Time you moved your ugly fat self out of there anyway!"

Yet, instead of merely portraying the prostitutes as one-dimensional sex-objects, selling their bodies for mere money-hunger, Maria Apondi Okong'o creates a context which exposes the social and political dimension of prostitution as a means of income in a society in which women belong to the most exploited group.

Evita briefly explains to Father Jerome why she does not have time to go to church:

"Father Jerome, you're wasting your time here. I got enough struggle just trying to live day to day. That food for the spirit you keep talking about is no good to an empty belly. I got to eat, pay rent. Are you trying to tell me if I took God up on it, He'd rain manna down heaven?

The clergyman had shaken his head sorrowfully, "You talk like a child of Satan, (...)".

At the end of the novel when Evita is run down by a car the enquiring policeman exclaims in disdain, "Another whore less". (p.216 Whispering Land)

The romanticization of motherhood might be flattering and desirable but it often masks the reality of motherhood. The truth about its hardships are rarely exposed not only in the African societies but also in Western societies. Motherhood has been presented as an act to express feminine fulfillment which represents something beautiful and joyful, but this is just one aspect of motherhood. There is also another side to the experience which is rarely spoken of. Any meaning outside the accepted norm of joyful motherhood is concealed and relegated to belonging to "those unfortunate, barren women" who should be treated with sympathy and understanding. (6) Portraying woman only as the potential mother-figure is a practice of marginalizing woman as human being irrespective of her biological capabilities. v

There are authors both male and female who have presented womanhood and motherhood within the context of the larger societal problems. Chinua Achebe's mother in *Things Fall Apart* is given the image of mother as supreme. Achebe brings into focus the question of motherhood and femininity and nurturing as opposed to fatherhood, masculinity and aggression. The main character in the novel Okonkwo commits an accidental murder during the festival, this act is described as a "female crime" the equivalent to manslaughter. He is then banished to his motherland as punishment for the crime. His uncle Uchendu explains to Okonkwo why he has to go to his mother's land and not his father's:

It's true that a child belongs to its father. But when the father beats his child it seeks sympathy in its mother's hut. A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you. She is buried there. And that is why we say that Mother is Supreme. (7) In *Things Fall Apart* Achebe seems to suggest that for survival and transcendence including safe passage into the future one must learn to write and harmonize both female and male qualities, respect and combine them fully into an ideal / harmonious existence.

Buchi Emecheta, Flora Mwapa, Bessie Head have presented the African woman in a manner that expresses her sense of self in relation to tradition. The conflicts manifested by their characters are an indication of how deep social structures have created social values and conventions to suit the males. They also make a conscious, deliberate attempt through their fiction to draw women away from those practices that perpetuate their inferior status quo. The character Efuru (Flora Mwapa's) and Nnu Ego (Buchi Emecheta) are located in a distinct female world. For them motherhood has to depict its pains. Efuru battles against tradition and its societal demands on her. But, throughout the novel she is confronted with the reality that both her marriages collapse because she is childless. She is looked upon as a "male woman" since she cannot reproduce and thereby does not fit into the traditional mould of child-bearer and rearer. At the end of the novel she ends up in her father's compound and sighs:

Karren Visser's character Magriet in the story He Needs Milk is a tragic picture of a woman who is demanded to render services to all around her; She has to take care of the baby in the cot but also continuously make sure that Frans gets his milk. "She gives him his milk But he can never get enough. She always brings him more when he asks for it"..When Frans bites Magriet's nipple and she bleeds, she is silent, she says nothing, all she does is to dab the wound with cotton wool dipped in antiseptic". (p.21) Staffrider Vol.9, N01, 1990. She is mute, and a slave to Frans' needs. Frans chose Magriet to marry and provided her with a destiny. The situation dominated her. She is submissive and behaves powerless. (Woman as Outsider, iane-inventing Womanhood, p.66).

Part of the ideology that has dominated African literature has been that which relegates the woman a passive role. She is -acted upon and her submissiveness is taken as natural. Karen Visser's Magriet in He Needs Milk is to provide and please those around her. When Frans bites her nipple there is not even a squirm from her.

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Readers of literature are products of a patriarchal society and their opinion, their judgement has been effectively influenced and manipulated to sympathize with those characters that work against the female shrew, the whore and the non-conformist. A few female authors have emerged who are beginning to challenge some of the stereotypical reflections of female characters. They are gradually investigating the mechanisms of how women should liberate themselves from the male structured world into an acceptable human world. It is a choice women have made amidst resistance from those who enjoy the privileges of inequality. Lloyd Brown states that women are engaged in

"striving to achieve a fulfilling sense of themselves as distinct human personalities while remaining loyal to all the encompassing community around them.V(10)

Any change of reflection and attitude towards a positive depiction of African female images depends on how much the socio-cultural transformation develops vis-a-vis changes in society. This aspect will, if the change is meaningful also influence the activity of reading and re-direct the reader's sense of judgement; Identification with characters in a text have so far been largely designed to suit the inequalities prevailing in society.

Mariama B3, the Senegalese writer in her two novels *So long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song* portrays characters that are determined to make specific choices and take responsibility for their actions. After all choice carries in it the element of responsibility. Mariama BS illustrates very clearly in *So Long a Letter* the fact that women do have a consciousness of the opinions open to them and they are willing in certain circumstances to make choices that ultimately fulfill them and make their lives wholesome. When Maurdo gives in to his mother's insistent pressures to abandon his wife Aissatou and marry Tante Nabou. Aissatou chose to live with her four sons and this she does with great dignity:

Others bend their heads and, in silence, accept a destiny that oppresses them... You want to draw a line between heartfelt love and physical love... If you can procreate without loving, merely to satisfy the pride of your declining mother, then I find you despicable... I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only worthy garment, I go my way. , , CMMD k kLK "

The element of choice is not automatic at E%% Ian the couragE'Shhi%g% to fight society to the enddgbmethnes' '. BWe 'Efuru ach Hag one of those characters making a statement about choice, change4&&_k and challenge of some of the culturally oppressive practices in l I society. She had challenged her society over a number of issues QKF but when the same community demands her to kneel to her husband during the marriage ritual, she does that.

She was given the glass by her husband and when she was about to drink, the people shouted: "Kneel down, kneel down, you are a woman". Efuru quickly knelt down and drank... (12)

This does not close the Chapter, the struggle to reconstruct and encode new meanings to a woman's life continues. Women writers and women in general are attempting to see the world with their own eyes through their own perspectives and consciousness. At the same time the reader is asked to re-interpret the works by women and decode the hidden behind the surface meaning. There should be flexibility and imagination when one handles women's texts, because "besides their work, so much has that work been influenced by conditions which have nothing whatsoever to do with art". (13)

Writing has been a man's domain and the socio-cultural conditions related to most African societies have accorded privileges to men and denied women the opportunity to fully explore the literary terrain. These writers remain Confronted by repeated moments of disruption, distraction, uncondusive conditions for creation, lack of space and the absence of

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peace. The few women writers we have have pitched voices of protest against the false depictions of African women characters. Some are writing, and become writers in spite of the hardships that confronts them. There are male writers who have contributed greatly in promoting a positive image of the African woman character, those who envisage female emancipation without terror also convinced that the liberation of Africa is directly connected to the liberation of women. Sembene, Ousmane, Ngugi was Thiongo, Mongo Beti, Henri Lopes, Ahmadou I. Kourouma, and others. Bkd' Uchmzut UStu; CLWL (LL4uALLL t .kwb Lu n? (K chu x24 LLS C L(& xLVKEQJL V53 XI x0 (lag w h t J5 2 xxx 3 G xXtv; vngxke QR. eQ:Fm&\$gyvx LAA\$A 22 C.tx3okxtva , 6&sz LQN Xxud. LC'CxWX ,Qxcwx W C. :3(H .qug s m V&- Cx of%w . -'(_Vx . M t'WY'XCJle av, X X. a k e x . k) ; QXQX WK. 3:2 (m 6.2K, K &9 ?.&,&,& K&U; EC, L_Dkfxcyue twp && h L M XL .

NOTES:

- (1) Ngambika p.2
- (2) Staffrider, Vol. 7, No. 2, 1988, p.71
- (3) Staffrider, ibid, p.74
- (4) Feminist Criticism and Social Change, p. xxix
- (5) .Ngambika, p. 7-8
- (6) Man-Made Language, p.58.
- (7) Ngambika, p.122.
- (8) ibid., p.280.
- (9) ibid., p.222.
- (10) ibid., p.255.
- (11) ibid., p.50.
- (12) ibid., p.23 - Efuru
- (13) Virginia Woolf,
Dale Spindex p. 61.

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