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Women and the Drama of Social Reformation in African Fiction

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Keywords: *women, drama, social reformation, African fiction.*

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WOMEN ANDTHEDRAMAOFSOCIAL REFORMATIONINAFRICANFICTION

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Ibiene Evelyn Iboroma

Abstract- A remarkable feature of feminist criticism in postcolonial Africa is the representation of female characters in African fiction. Within this context, this paper explores women characters' attitude to oppression in marriage in selected African novels. The aim is to investigate the nature of their heroism. Chidi Maduka's concept of heroism and liberal feminism form the theoretical framework. The paper demonstrates that women characters are not monolithic in their attitude towards oppression in marriage. Those whose 'inner forces' compel the 'outer forces' to succumb are the heroines. The anti-heroines include those who remain in marriage and achieve self-definition, and those who acquiesce to the status quo. The dynamics of heroism highlighted in this paper shows that the African woman does not whole-heartedly accept the patriarchal denigration of her worth. The paper concludes that the novelists under study have used art to advocate for change in the society.

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I. Introduction

The representation of female characters in African fiction especially in male-authored works has generated a lot of criticism in postcolonial Africa. Gloria Chukukere for instance, argues that "male novelists, especially have either tended to play down the social significance of women in their writings or otherwise extolled only those traditionally accepted virtues that confine women within family hood" (79). Iniobong Uko posits that the woman is recreated as an "unthinking, uncritical and a helpless being" (83) walking behind her husband, who in Buchi Emecheta's words, "kneels down and drinks the dregs after husband" (qtd in Kumah 7). Amina Bashir avers that "the way male writers treat their female characters reflects the disdainful, indifferent, or cruel manner in which women have been held and are still being regarded in African …society" (66). However, in the wake of feminism, female writers such as Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Bâ and Aminata Sow Fall voice their opposition to the patriarchal flow of discourse and begin to push back the boundaries of sex-role stereotyping to carve a niche for themselves. Rose Acholonu confirms that "the advent of feminism…has meant new visions or concepts of realism, involving the creation of female characters who are fascinating in their variety, contrariness and complexity" (54). Godwin Uwah asserts that "female writing is replete with characters who have overcome or transcended their stations in life" (127). There are also male novelists like Ousmane Sembène, Henri Lopes, Ayi Kwei Armah and Ngugi wa Thiong'O who lend a hand in delineating a more balanced and plausible image of female characters in African literature. This paper explores the strategies female characters adopt in coping with pressures generated by the drama of social reformation in selected works of Anglophone and Francophone male and female novelists. The aim is to investigate the nature of their heroism. Chidi Maduka's concept of heroism in conjunction with liberal feminism provide the theoretical framework of this study.

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II. Theoretical Framework

Chukwuma argues that "when the term feminism is applied to literature, it stands for female assertion, an effort by women to claim proper treatment and places in society and the home not out of pity and consideration but by right" (44**).** There are many strands of feminism but the one chosen for this paper is liberal feminism. Liberal feminism according to Lucy Brookes "is an individualistic form, concentrating on women having the ability to maintain their equality through being responsible for their own actions and choices" (n.p). Put differently, liberal feminists fight against cultural homogeneity and encourage women to arrive at self-definition through making informed decisions and choices both at the private and public spheres of life.

Maduka delineates the intellectual as a hero-type in works dealing with the phenomenon of social change. He argues that the dynamics of the intellectual's heroism depends on the nature of the tension between the intellectual's "inner forces" and the "outer forces" which could take any form within the spectrum of non-conformity and conformity. Thus, an intellectual involved in the process of social change could be a conformist or a non-conformist, a hero, an anti-hero or a mixture of the two (Maduka 77-82). This study will adopt this framework to investigate the different forms of strategies employed by the woman in her struggle against patriarchal oppression in marriage. It would throw some light on whether the woman participating in the drama of social reformation is a heroine or an anti-heroine. This will be discussed under two main categories: non-conformity and conformity.

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III. Non-Conformity

Here, there is a radical confrontation between the woman's "inner forces", i.e. her feminist consciousness and the opposition from the "outer forces", i.e. patriarchy. Her "inner forces" succeed in compelling the "outer forces" to move at their own rate. She triumphs and becomes a heroine. Examples include Arinola and Enitan in Sefi Attah's *Everything Good Will Come*, Beatrice in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus,* Aissatou in Mariama Bâ's *Une si Longue Lettre* and Rama in Sembène Ousmane's *Xala.*

Arinola married Bandele Sunday Taiwo when she was working as a chartered secretary. Soon after their marriage, Sunday Taiwo stops her from working making her economically dependent on him. Meanwhile, he does not care much about her general wellbeing. Abandoned by Taiwo especially after the death of their only son coupled with his uncaring attitude, Arinola becomes disenchanted with marriage. Her inner forces propel her to get a divorce. Enitan, says this about her mother:

> my mother had given her reason for falling out with my father; a neglectful and uncaring attitude; withheld housekeeping allowance, on several occasions did not return home and gave no reasonable answer as to his whereabouts… influenced her child to disregard her…made wicked and false allegations about her sanity…colluded with family members to alienate her…caused her much embarrassment and unhappiness. (277).

Arinola, drawing from her experience advises her daughter, Enitan, not to "make sacrifices for a man. By the time you say, 'look what I've done for you. It's too late…men never remember" (173). Enitan marries Niyi against her parents' will. Though in love, Enitan refuses to assume the object status that patriarchy imposes on the woman. She muses: "…And the expectation of subordination bothered me most. How could I defer to a man whose naked buttocks I had seen? Touched/ obey him without choking on my humility, like a fish bone down my throat" (184). She does not also believe in giving respect to a man just because he is a biological male. She comments: "In my 29 years no man ever told me to show respect. No man ever needed to. I had seen how women respected men and ended up shouldering burdens…" (184). On domestic drudgery, she comments: "…too many women ended up treating domestic frustrations like mild cases of indigestion…It is an overload of duties, sometimes, self-imposed" (184). Accordingly, when her husband asks her to prepare food for his brothers, she tells him: "you have hands" (197). Niyi displeased, asks her to show him some respect. She retorts: "go to hell" (197). Again, when Niyi asks her to get some drinks for his brothers, she asks him: "… why can't you ever get them drinks for once? Why can't you go to the kitchen? What will happen if you go? Will a snake bite you?" (198). She also maintains this stance of defiance by refusing to be the cook her mother-in-law expects her to be.

Enitan is also an activist determined to fight all forms of institutionalized oppression of women in her milieu. She fights "to tear every notion they had about women…I would not let go until I am heard" (197). The husband tries to dissuade her from this course but she sticks to it. Seeing that marriage constitutes a threat to her zeal for self-definition, she opts out of it saying "I was lucky to have survived what I believe I wouldn't, the smell of my mother's death. I couldn't remain as I was before, otherwise my memory of her would be in vain, and my survival would certainly be pointless. Anyone who experienced such a trauma would understand …One life was gone and I could either mourn it or begin the next…this was the option I choose" (323). Enitan emerges a heroine surmounting the hurdles on her way to self-identity. Beatrice, wife of Eugene, is subjected to continual assaults by her husband. For instance, he slings her "over his shoulder like the jute sacks of rice his factory workers brought in bulk at the Seme border" (41) leading to the abortion of the baby she was carrying. However, despite Eugene's irrational acts of torture, Beatrice retains the posture of a good wife who must be silent and passive in the face of tyranny (Udumukwu 3). She adores Eugene especially "for not choosing to have more sons with another woman, of course, for not choosing to take a second wife" (28). So, she feels obliged to honour him in return by keeping mute in the face of death. Beatrice recounts to her children another act of violence against her by Eugene when she visits them in Nsukka: "you know that small table where we keep the family Bible, …? Your father broke it on my belly…My blood finished on the floor even before he took me to St. Agnes. My doctor said there was nothing he could do to save it…" (248). On hearing this, Ifeoma, Eugene's sister, advises Beatrice to quit the marriage, but she refuses saying "where would I go if I leave Eugene's house? Tell me, where would I go?" (225). Her attitude corroborates Ander Bergara, Josetxu Riviere & Ritxar Bacete's submission that "the gender based process of socialization… conspires to create a fabric of social expectations and images of what "ought to be' which is the reference system…" (22). However, in due course, Beatrice's inner forces compel her to act against her husband's tyrannical behaviour. With the aid of her cook, Sisi, she poisons Eugene to death. She confesses to the children: "I started putting the poison in his tea before I came to Nsukka. Sisi got it for me; her uncle is a powerful witch doctor" (294). In this way, Beatrice negotiates her freedom from oppression in marriage. Beatrice's violent action corroborates Mezu's argument that "women's voices even when vocally silent can yet make powerful statements through silent "action" (339).

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Aissatou marries Mawdo Bâ and both live happily until his mother, Tante Nabou, a princess, imposes a new wife on him not approving of Aissatou because she is a goldsmith's daughter. Consumed with caste pride, she decides to groom her niece, young Nabou, to be a befitting wife to her son. Mawdo falls prey to his mother's antics and marries young Nabou. Mother and son fail to take into cognizance Aissatou's feelings and dignity. The test for Aissatou at this juncture is whether to remain a good woman by playing the role of the first wife as sanctioned by patriarchy or to become a 'real' woman who speaks out in the face of tyranny (Udumuku 3). Her inner forces dominate positively the identity-construction dialogue and she turns her back on polygamy. She leaves as an explanation a letter which reads: "Je me dépouille de ton amour, de ton nom, vétue de seul habit valable de la dignité, je poursuis ma route" (50.) (I am stripping myself of your love, your name, clothed in the only valuable garment, my dignity, I go my way.) She leaves for the United States with her four sons. She secures a good job and lives a fulfilled life. In this way, "Aissatou burst the fence of subjugation and nihilism and turned her back to its oppression" (Chukwuma45).

Rama's fictional world is a Muslim one where polygamy is celebrated. But she is "une musulmane moderne" (3) (a modern Muslim) and is completely alienated from this culture. Speaking against her father's third marriage, she asserts: "jamais, je ne partegerai mon mari avec une autre femme. Plutôt divorcer" (25). (I will never share my husband with any woman. It's better to get a divorce.) Rama appears to be Sembène's mouth piece with regard to polygamy. For Sembène states in an interview: "Le jour où les femmes auront le courage de dire à leur mari, si tu prend une autre femme, je m'en vais alors, et alors seulement que la polygamie disparaître (qtd in Opara 89). (the day women would have the courage to tell their husbands, if you marry another wife, I would leave, it is only then that polygamy would be a thing of the past.) When her father invites her to the ceremony of his third marriage, she turns down the invitation telling him adroitly "je ne viens pas… Je suis contre ce mariage. Un polygame n'est jamais un homme franc" (27). (I will not come…I am against this marriage. A polygamist is never an honest man.) To Pathé, her fiancé, she states her position clearly: "Sache que je suis contre la polygamie" (77). (Know that I'm against polygamy.) Rama's inner forces aid her to effectively challenge the power structure that celebrates polygamy.

The inner forces of each of these characters: Arinola, Enitan, Beatrice, Aissatou and Rama compel them to triumph over the pressures of patriarchy that assail them. "They strike a synthesis between thought and action" (Maduka 75) in their journeys towards self-definition. They make choices and do not flinch from them the consequences notwithstanding. These are the heroines who reflect changes that are taking place in their different milieus, changes that dramatise the increasing feminist-consciousness of the African woman.

IV. Conformity

Here, there is no radical confrontation between the woman's "inner forces" and the "outer forces". The result can be two-fold:

I. The "inner forces" of the female may slow down to adjust themselves to the "outer forces". In playing the social reformer, the character chooses the path of compromise to enable her carry out the reform from within. Female characters that fall under this category are Mumbi in Ngugi wa Thiong'O's *A Grain of Wheat*, Li in Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* and Mam Fatou in Ousmane Sembène's *Xala.*

Mumbi dreams of a blissful marriage. Here are her words: "I longed to make my husband happy…" (120). After much competition between Gikonyo and Karanja for her love, Mumbi eventually chooses and marries Gikonyo. Not long after their marriage, Gikonyo is taken to the detention camp. Karanja tries to take advantage of this but she rebuffs his sexual overtures saying "I would wait for him, my husband, even if I was fated to rejoin him in the grave" (131). However, in the course of breaking the news of Gikonyo's homecoming to Mumbi, Karanja takes sexual advantage of her which results into pregnancy. Gikonyo eventually returns from the camp and he, like Elechi Amadi's Ibekwe in *Estrangement*, refuses to forgive his wife despite all her protracted attempts to win his forgiveness. Matters come to a head when one day Gikonyo maliciously pushes away Karanja's child. Mumbi explodes saying "... what sort of a man do you call yourself? Have you no manly courage to touch me? Why do you turn a coward's anger on a child... you think I am an orphan do you? You think the gates of my parents' hut would be shut against me if I left this tomb? (146). Gikonyo slaps her saying "I'll make you shut this mouth of a whore..." (146). She retorts: "you would have told me that before" (146). She strides out of her matrimonial home into her parents' house. Her parents urge her to go back to her husband but Mumbi's inner forces refuse to give in to the pressure. She says to them "I may be a woman but even the cowardly bitch fights back when cornered against a wall" (158). However, despite the estrangement, she nurses Gikonyo when he falls sick though not without apprehension. She says: "He thinks I am bribing him to take me back... but I will not go back to his house, not even if he kneels before me, she had resolved'' (201).

Gikonyo realises his folly eventually and suggests to Mumbi to come back home but she refuses saying "we need to talk, to open our hearts to one another, examine them and then together plan the future

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we want'' (213). Gikonyo recognises the change in his wife and "... knew at once that in future, he would reckon with her feelings, her thoughts, her desires, a new Mumbi" (213). Mumbi's self-assertiveness brings a concomitant change in her husband. He has become a new African man who is ready to cope with the ideals of the new African woman. Mumbi believes in marriage but is not willing to sell her self-worth. Okafor posits that the creation of Mumbi, "underscores Ngugi's view of the woman as a fully individualized person whose humanity and self-worth cannot be compromised" (137).

Li like Ngugi's Mumbi longs to be married. So when the occasion arises, her "world was full of wonderful and existing things…eager and ready to enjoy life to the fullness" (207). Unfortunately, her husband, Habu, abandons her shortly after the marriage. Li expects Habu to send for her but seeing that it is becoming a mirage, her inner forces make her to look at life from a different perspective. She wonders: "was she to spend the rest of her life waiting for a man like a dog waiting for a bone from his master's plate …?" (85). She decides to further her education and completes her studies in a teacher's college. But Li like Bâ's Ramatoulaye (*Une si longue lettre*) feels unfulfiled outside marriage. She "knew now that the bond that tied her to the father of her daughter was not ruptured" (104-105). So she resolves to give marriage a second chance. She forgives Habu and decides to search for him. Meanwhile, Habu has become lame as a result of a motor accident. Her sister tries to dissuade her from taking that step saying "Why, Li? The man is lame" (105). But Li resolved, answers: "…I will just hand him the crutches and side by side we will learn to walk" (105). Udumukwu submits that Li "finally recognizes her own potential, appreciates forgiveness and learns to rebuild" (211).

Mam Fatou is a woman who does not hide in her husband's shadow. She reverses the power structure in the family and becomes the one "qui enfourchait les pantalons" (15). (who wore the trousers.) Though from a Muslim background, Mam Fatou is "foncièrement contre la polygamie" (20) (is passionately against polygamy). She makes her husband come to terms with that. Thus, Babacar, though a Muslim, "…n'irait jamais pris une deuxième épouse'' (20). (would never have a second wife.) In this way, Mam Fatou negotiates her freedom from polygamy. Further, seeing through her daughter, N'Gone, a soothing solution to their poverty, she negotiates with Ya Bineta for a possible rich man as husband for N'Gone. She only informs her husband about her scheme and he "souservait à la décision de sa femme" (15). (submitted to the decision of his wife.) This seems to validate Chinweizu's assertion that "if the essence of power is ability to get what one wants, then women are far from powerlessness" (11). Mam Fatou's inner forces condition her to triumph over oppression in marriage.

Though Mumbi, Li and Mam Fatou operate within the patriarchal constructs, the inner forces of each of them cause them to dispel the myth of subordination associated with the African woman. They remain in marriage but strive for self-definition. Their attitude recalls Chukwuma's submission that "…women need to stand, pitch camp, and fight instead of just bolt away" (xvii). They are the rebellious conformists, the anti-heroines.

II. Unlike women characters in the first category under conformity, those in this group have no conflict between their "inner forces" and the "outer forces". Their "inner forces" are in harmony with the exigencies from the patriarchal social order. They are in Maduka's words, "the conformists through and through". Examples include Ugadiya in Ikonne's *Our Land*, Ma'Shingayi in TsiTsi Dangaremgba's *Nervous Conditions* and N' Deye Touti in Ousmane Sembène's *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu.*

Ikonne's Ugadiya is a victim of arranged marriage. Her father believes that "any man who was genuinely interested in his daughter 's future should marry her off as soon as she could recognize the difference between her and her brothers, if not sooner" (27). Accordingly, she is given as fourth wife to Okpanku at age 14. She raises no objection to it. Her only source of worry is her inability to conceive after her first son. She takes it "as her personal failure as a wife" (48). When Okpanku died, she is subjected to traditional ways of mourning a husband. She does not like it but does nothing about it so that she will not be termed a bad wife or be accused of killing her husband. She laments: "it was a terrible period…I was not allowed to comb my hair let alone to wash and plate it…And every morning at the first cockcrow, whether I felt like doing so or not, I had to weep in remembrance of my husband. That was the custom" (30). She is also subjected to levirate marriage after her husband's death as tradition demands. She is inherited as wife by Ezumezu, her husband's son, a much younger man to her. Her inner forces do not agitate against this either.

Ma' Shingayi, wife of Jeremiah, farms to provide for the family while Jeremiah wastes his life away drinking. Lucia, Ma' Shingayi's sister's remark is to the point: "this man, this Jeremiah… he has a roving eye and a lazy hand. This man who has given her nothing but misery since the age of fifteen" (147). Ma' Shingayi silently carries her burden of womanhood because silence is the virtue of a good wife. Her daughter, Tambu, says this of her: "my mother, lips pressed tight …would continue silently at her labours…" (7). When she is subjected to a belated wedding by Babamukuru, her husband's brother, Ma'Shingayi though she hates it, is tongue-tied. She ignores the stirring of her inner forces to reject the offer. Rather, she laments: "To wear

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a veil, at my age, to wear a veil! Just imagine – to wear a veil..." (184). Her repetition of the phrase "to wear a veil" shows the degree of her disproval but she remains passive even in this apparent violation of her privacy. Again, when Lucia tries to talk her into quitting the marriage or taking a stand on the wedding that is being imposed on her, she says with self-pity: "Lucia… why do you keep bothering me with this question? Does it matter what I want? Since when has it mattered what I want. So why should it matter now?... What I have endured for nineteen years I can endure for another nineteen, and nineteen more if need be" (153). Tambu remarks that "…for most of her life my mother's mind belonging first to her father and then to her husband, had not been hers to make up, she was finding it difficult to come to a decision" (153). Charles Sugnet avers that "Tambu's mother, trapped in the role of Jeremiah's wife…reaches a point of paralysis" (39). Accordingly, she makes no attempt at negotiating her self-worth. She rather resigns to the patriarchal oppression. Further, Ma'Shingayi naively plays the role of an agent of patriarchy. She tries to initiate Tambu into the burden of womanhood and advises her: "…these things are not easy, you have to start learning them early, from an early age. The earlier the better so that it is easy later on…What will help you my child, is to learn to carry your burdens with strength" (16). Katrin Berndt asserts that Ma'Shingayi "is a woman who sticks to the narrow space that was intended for her. She never questions her ways and actions but tries to live according to the Shona customs familiar to her" (94).

N' Deye Touti is an educated young woman with a Muslim background. Having been socialized into believing that an unmarried woman "is a miserable spinster left on the shelf" to use Flora Nwapa's words, (*One is Enough* 37), she proposes marriage to Bakayoko, a married man, saying "je voudrai devenir ta seconde femme…, comme je suis née mulsulmane, ma réligion m' y autorise" (343). (I would like to be your second wife…since I was born a Muslim, my religion permits that).She assures Bakayoko that she will not be jealous of his wife. This means that N'Deye Touti is aware of the plethora of problems associated with polygamy, yet she still wants to stick her neck into it for the obvious reasons, her desire to extricate herself from the stigma of spinsterhood. She derogates self and participates in her subordination. Indeed, N'Deye Touti as Opara asserts "lacks moral purpose" (343).

Ugadiya, Ma'Shingayi and N'Deye Touti being rooted in the values of the patriarchal order "are not polarized between thought and action" (Maduka 76). They choose to passively submit to the oppressive patriarchal structures.

III. Conclusion

All in all, this study reveals that it would be presumptuous to assert that female characters in African fiction are monolithic in their attitude towards patriarchal oppression in marriage. Arinola, Enitan, Beatrice, Aissatou, and Rama are heroines whose inner forces push the outer forces to give way on their way to self-definition. There is an interaction between the two categories in the spectrum of conformity. The first category consisting of Mumbi, Li and Mam Fatou do not fully disengage themselves from patriarchy. They choose the path of compromise in their participation in the drama of social reformation while the second category consisting of Ugadiya, Ma'Shingayi and N'Deye Touti acquiesce to the dictates of the patriarchal social order; hence their common classification as anti-heroines; though at different degrees.

It is evident from the foregoing that there are convergences in the handling of the theme of this study by the novelists under study. The heroines and the anti-heroines delineated are drawn from works of both male and female Anglophone and Francophone novelists. For instance, the heroines Attah's Arinola and Enitan, and Adichie's Beatrice are drawn from Anglophone female-authored works, while Bâ's Aissatou is an example from a Francophone female-authored work and, Sembène's Rama from a Francophone male-authored work. The large scope of this study cutting across gender, national and linguistic boundaries and also, cutting across rural and urban settings makes possible the assertion of this study that despite the African woman's apparent virtue of passivity and submission, she does not whole-heartedly accept the harsh patriarchal constructs of her society which work against her selfhood; hence her participation in the drama of social reformation. Times are changing and so the woman should not remain the constant factor. The novelists under study have used art to advocate for this change in the society.

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