RECLAIMING VOICES AND REIMAGINING WOMANHOOD: THE POSTCOLONIAL AFRICAN FEMINIST NOVEL

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Abstract
This paper examines the issues and challenges articulated in the postcolonial African feminist novel, with a focus on the recovery of marginalized female voices and the reconfiguration of womanhood within a culturally rooted framework. Situating African women's writing within the broader context of postcolonial discourse, the study explores how writers such as Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta challenge both colonial domination and patriarchal structures. Through a close analysis of texts like Efuru, Idu, Second Class Citizen, *and* The Joys of Motherhood, *the paper interrogates dominant stereotypes surrounding African women, particularly those related to motherhood, economic dependency, and social identity.T he study highlights key thematic concerns including motherhood as both a site of oppression and empowerment, economic independence as central to self-definition, and the role of oral tradition in preserving cultural memory. It further examines the processes of self-actualisation and female solidarity that enable women to resist imposed identities and assert agency. By engaging with theoretical frameworks such as womanism and Black feminist thought, the paper argues that African feminist discourse transcends gender binaries and envisions a humanist, community-oriented social order. Ultimately, the postcolonial African feminist novel emerges as a powerful site of resistance and transformation, offering an alternative epistemology that expands the scope of global feminist studies.*

Keywords: *Postcolonialism, Feminism, Womanism, Motherhood, Identity,Orality, Solidarity, Patriarchy, Empowerment, Self-Actualisation*

Introduction: Postcolonial Context and African Literature

Postcolonial studies focus on the direct effects and aftermath of colonization. In its literal sense, the term 'postcolonial' refers to that which has been preceded by colonisation. It forms a powerful intellectual and critical movement which renews the perception and understanding of modern history, cultural studies, literary criticism and political economy. In a very general sense, Postcolonialism is the study of the interactions between European nations and the societies they colonized in the modern period. The European empire swayed ever more than eighty-five percent of the rest of the globe by the time of the First World War, having consolidated its impact over several countries. The disintegration of the European empire after the Second World War has led to widespread interest in postcolonial studies. 'Postcolonial' seems to describe the second half of the twentieth century as a period in the aftermath of the heyday of colonialism.

For the Africans, the forceful elimination of resistance, the imposition of alien rules and the parasitic utilization of natural resources including manpower were understood as a legitimate 'civilizing process'. Hereto, African literature expresses the struggle of a country that has survived the exploitation of colonialism and capitalism as well as the devastation of civil war and authoritarianism. The need for freedom from racial oppression, the human dignity of black people, the right of Africa to belong to Africans formed the essential themes of the Postcolonial African Studies.

Emergence of African Women's Voices

Unfortunately, African literature has largely been understood as literature by African men and the voices of women writers have remained unheard. In the fifties, the woman writer found herself isolated and stranded in a male dominated literary tradition, forcing her to be apologetic about her presence. But due to the pioneering efforts of accomplished writers like Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta and Bessie Head in the past thirty years, she finds herself in a burgeoning crowd of African sisters in a visible and effective voice of protest against colonial and post-colonial servitude. Women write themselves anew responding as postcolonial subjects to the 'entrapping cycle' specified by Susheila Nasta: "In countries with a history of colonialism, women's quest for emancipation, self-identity and fulfilment can be seen to represent a traitorous act, a betrayal not simply of traditional codes of practice and belief but of the wider struggle for liberation and nationalism" (Newell 1997:2). The cries of protest from the Postcolonial women writers expose and unleash a vigorous attack on a society wrapped in a history of colonialism and patriarchy.

African Feminism and Womanism

The Postcolonial feminist novel in Africa affirms the place of Black women, not merely as brutalized

victims, but as creative artists who have constantly fought not only the racism of the dominant culture, but also the sexism of their own men (Wilentz 1992:118). Unlike Western feminism which rests on individualistic ideology, African feminism posits a communal and humanistic ideology and has offered one major challenge to the allegedly hegemonic ideas of white women writers by criticizing them for being racist and overly concerned with white, middle class women's issues.

African feminism is not an enterprise that merely protests against gender inequities, it looks beyond it to the creation of a more humane and just social order where the rights of every man, woman and child are secured. That is why it is more appropriate to use Alice Walker's all-encompassing term 'Womanist'—womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. A womanist is not a separatist like a feminist but is "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female". Alice Walker's notion of "womanism," articulated in In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens, celebrates the creative and cultural legacy of Black women, foregrounding survival, wholeness and intergenerational continuity.

Concepts such as womanism, motherism and femalism have been adopted to construct a woman's history in which women write themselves anew while simultaneously avoiding absorption into western feminist discourse. As Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi conceptualizes, womanism foregrounds a culturally rooted feminist consciousness that integrates race, gender and community, distinguishing African feminist discourse from its Western counterparts.

Literature as Resistance and Rewriting of Identity

The African woman feels duty bound to correct misconceptions about women and as an African writer to erase the misconceptions and rewrite the stereotypes propagated by the European writer about Africa. Mariama Ba asserts the 'special task' of the woman writer, "As women we must work for our own future, we must overthrow the status quo which harms us and we must no longer submit to it. Like men, we must use literature as a non-violent but effective weapon. We no longer accept the nostalgic praise to the African Mother who in his anxiety, a man confuses with Mother Africa" (Schipper 1987:46–47). Molara Ogundipe-Leslie emphasizes the need for African women to "re-create" themselves within socio-cultural frameworks that acknowledge both oppression and agency.

Motherhood: Myth, Burden and Reality

Emecheta's novel *Joys of Motherhood* is an interrogation of the glorified stereotype of Mother Africa. She explodes the myth of motherhood. It is ironical that as a woman without children she is a failed woman and even as a blessed woman with a series of children, she is torn apart and enslaved in the cramped city conditions of colonial Lagos where she has to satisfy the needs of her seven children. But her reward is a lament on the word 'motherhood'. Her story is a moral for all those mothers who waste their lives in scrapping, starving and saving for their children who abandon them when they need them most:

"…one night, Nnu Ego lay down by the roadside thinking that she had arrived home. She died quietly there, with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her. She had never really made many friends so busy had she been building up her joys as a mother." (Emecheta 1979:224)

Stereotypes and Reconstruction of African Womanhood

Cumulatively, the works of the women writers of the postcolonial genre create the New African woman who seeks to express herself to be seen, to be heard in her own image rather than fit into the stereotypical images which have been fundamental to her oppression. The African feminist novel presents a holistic image of African womanhood by refuting stereotypes of the 'work-ox', 'mammies', 'matriarchs', 'Jezebels' or the ever present 'welfare mothers' which have denigrated the African-American women and have been vital in sustaining a system of interlocking race, gender and class oppression.

Education, Marriage and Gendered Struggles

Adah, the protagonist of Buchi Emecheta's novel *The Second Class Citizen* is trapped in a hopeless marriage with five children. The novel characterizes Adah as having the initiative and determination to get what she wants—the Western education denied to her. She fends for her shiftless husband who is studying in London and saves money to join him but her dreams turn sour and she undergoes a process of psychic decolonization in London while Francis informs that she was "a second class citizen. So you can't discriminate against your own people because we are all second class" (1979:24). She finally gets the courage to throw off the yoke of second-class citizen, to embark on a journey of self-actualization.

Self-Realization and Resistance

After leaving her irresponsible husband for whom she was "a second class human, to be slept with at any time, to make sure she washed his clothes and got his meals ready at the right time. There was no

need to have any healthy conversation with his wife because she might start getting ideas" (181), she has moments of loneliness and despair for "she cared for Francis, she wanted him to make good, she hated to disappoint him" (46) but eventually, she comes out triumphant because of her strong willpower and the belief that "there was a man upstairs who cared for what happened to everybody including her self and her children. She knew that there was a man called Jesus" (143).

Reclaiming Feminine Identity

Efuru in Nwapa's novel of the same name becomes a worshipper of the feminist Goddess, Uhamiri who is childless in defiance to the pain caused by the infidelity of her two husbands and the tension of polygamous households to achieve the exalted status of a community mother. Efuru and Adah are just a few examples of the desire to valorise feminine experience. They refuse to be voiceless, rightless objects to be passed from hand to hand.

Oral Tradition and Cultural Memory

The core issues highlighted by these women writers are oral literary tradition and the ancestor figure; Motherhood communal mothering; Economic independence; Self-definition; Female Bildungsroman and Womanism and Humanism. African women writers claim that they are inspired by their ancestors to unveil the values, oral wisdom and traditions of those who have gone before into a written language to be preserved for the future generations. By the use of oral folklore and values in their texts, they create a direct contact between the ancestor and the audience. Nwapa's novel *Efuru* reveals her debt to the orature of her culture, women's place in that culture and the importance of women's role in passing on cultural values to future generations. Through her novel, *Efuru*, Nwapa embodies the "culture and spirit of her tribe" and passes on the life of her culture. When Efuru narrates her dream to her father he laughs softly and says:

"…your dream is good. The woman of the lake, our Uhamiri has chosen you as one of her worshippers…your mother had similar dreams." (Nwapa 1966:182)

Yet the blessing is also a curse for her as the deity Uhamiri can grant women wealth but "can she give me children? She cannot give me children because she has no children herself" (207–8). Although she is unable to pass on her goodness to a daughter, she plays the role of a woman worshipper to interpret the deity Uhamiri to her fellow community members and also as a communal mother to the children around her. Through her association with Uhamiri she prospers as a trader and brings wealth and beauty to the community who think that "the woman of the lake is her mother" (8).

Just as Efuru's fidelity to her husbands and to marriage has been passed down through her female predecessors, her consanguinity to Uhamiri is also a part of this heritage from her mother (Wilentz 1992:16).

"Bita asili utumwa"—As the Swahili proverb tells us, to be denied heritage is to be denied freedom. The Nigerian novelist Buchi Emecheta defines generational continuity as "Mothers handing down the future to their daughters" and remarks that she learned story telling skills from her grandmother and other community women in moonlight sessions when she was young. The Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo is profoundly aware of the legacy of the orature which they received from their mothers and stresses women's role in passing on oral traditions. They address the formerly unvoiced members of the community—the wife, the barren woman, the young child, the mother, the grandmother:

"We are a people. A people don't throw their geniuses away. And if they are thrown away, it is our duty as artists and witnesses to collect them again for the sake of our children and if necessary bone by bone" (Wilentz 1992: xxxiii).

These women authors are determined to uncover their heritage and create an atmosphere of liberation negating racism or sexism.

Motherhood: Cultural Expectation and Reality

In the indigenous African context, mothering is integral to a woman's identity; in fact, motherhood defines womanhood and barrenness is a curse. Many women writers like Buchi Emecheta, Ifeoma Okoye and Flora Nwapa highlight the pains and pangs of women who desire children. The primary function of an African marriage is to raise a family. Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* is painfully aware of her inability to conform to society in this respect and Nwapa reiterates:

"It was a curse not to have children. Her people didn't take it as one of the numerous accidents of nature. It was regarded as a failure." (1966:207)

Motherhood and Survival

Buchi Emecheta has widely explored the theme of motherhood which is not merely confined to motherhood but the emergent mothers are seen as bread earners for their children surviving in the most ghetto-like conditions. They are pragmatic and practical and they struggle with the double yoke of marriage and motherhood. Adah in *Second Class Citizen* was treated as if she was immortal. She had to be there, bearing his children, working for him, taking his beating, listening to his sermons (1979:116). Adah and Nnu Ego, the protagonists in *Second Class Citizen* and *Joys of Motherhood* fight

against all odds to sustain their lives in order to fend for their children. Nnu Ego fought against all odds to equip her children with a sound education so that "those same children might rub their shoulders one day with the great men of Nigeria" (1979:202) as she believed that the "joy of being a mother was the joy of giving all to your children."

Maternal Agency and Identity Formation

Mothers in Black women's fiction are strong and devoted but they rarely indulge in extravagant displays of maternal affection. In the most adverse circumstances, motherhood serves as a beacon of hope for most African women. When Francis denies his marriage in court to Adah and does not mind if his children are sent for adoption, Adah proudly asserts her motherhood: "The children are mine and that is enough. I shall never let them down as long as I am alive" (1979:191). Her children serve as catalysts in restructuring the distorted personality of the mother and help her to redefine herself. In Nwapa's *Efuru*, the protagonist's pregnancy followed by the birth of a daughter fosters in her a feeling of completeness and power. Collins (1991:136–137) articulates this feeling in the words of an anonymous mother:

"To me having a baby is the only time I am really alive. I know I can make something do something, no matter what color my skin is and what names people call me…You can see the little one grow and get larger and start doing things, and you feel there must be some hope, some chance that things will get better, because there it is, right before you a real, live growing baby…The baby is a good sign, or at least some sign. If we didn't have that, what would be the difference from death."

Communal Mothering and Female Networks

Closely related to natural mothering is the concept of other mothers—who assist the biological mothers in the nurturing of children and also foster-mothers—who relieve the African mothers of the stress of childcare and household responsibilities. It was a way of diffusing the child's primary relationship to a large number of people in the community and discouraging egoistic individualism. Motherhood, above all, is an empowering experience for African mothers and they teach their daughters the skills of independence and self-reliance so that they are able to protect themselves.

"I ain't good lookin' and ain't got waist long hair,
I say I ain't good lookin' and ain't got waist long hair.
But my mama gave me something that'll take me anywhere."
(Collins, 1991:126)

Black mothers mould their daughters into whole and self-actualizing persons and teach them the skills that will take them anywhere. Adah's dignified acceptance of her broken marriage does not make her abuse Francis; all the same, she is determined that her daughters "will marry because they love and respect their men, not because they are looking for a home…" (1979:133).

The African woman articulates herself in relation to other Black women in a sisterhood. As mothers, daughters, sisters and friends to one another, these women affirm one another. The mother-daughter relationship is fundamental in the quest for self-actualization because Black mothers empower their daughters by passing on everyday knowledge, essential for survival. As sisters and friends, women affirm one another's humanity, specialness and the right to exist, "When I am with other black women I always laugh. I think our humor comes from a shared recognition of who we all are in the world" (Collins, 97). The relationship between Efuru and Ajanpu in Flora Nwapa's novel *Efuru* illustrates how female bonding enables African women to create and articulate an Afrocentric feminine space. Ajanpu is very harsh with Gilbert when he accuses Efuru of adultery, "Our ancestors will punish you. Our Uhamiri will drown you in the lake…Efuru, the daughter of Nwashike Ogene, the good is an adulterous woman…my peoples, I am afraid, Eneberi, who are you? Who is your father? What have you got to be proud of?" (1966:275). She is a loyal friend and an ideal community elder who with her sane guidance forges an important link between the old and the new in the community.

Economic Independence and Self-Actualisation

The African women writers emphasise economic independence as being crucial to a woman's quest for self-definition. Women who have gained access to western education take up professions like teaching, nursing and clerical work; retail trade in farm produce, prepared foods or craft work is the most common economic activity for women. Unlike the Victorian icon of the 'Angel in the House' epitomising home comforts and passive dependence, the African housewife is the Angel of the community epitomising bustling activity, stamina, resilience and independent spirit. She routinely combines childcare with economic activity.

Flora Nwapa's heroines, Efuru and Idu effortlessly combine their domestic duties with a sharp eye for business deals: "…a woman who does not know how to trade…is a senseless woman. She is not a woman at all" (1970:29). Nwapa reiterates through her protagonist Idu, how financial independence makes a woman confident and strong but

dependency on others cripples her. Under Idu's guidance her sister-in-law, Ogbenyanu learns to stand up for herself and provide for her family by working on a vegetable farm. Idu praises her, "Ogbenyanu is a strong woman. Early morning after giving her children food she goes to fetch firewood with her eldest son. Throughout the day they fetch firewood" (1970:205). Both Adah and Nnu Ego strive to be economically independent so as to give a decent upbringing to their children and give them a home where they could love and prosper.

Under slavery, African women became economically exploited units of labour and were treated as "mules of the world". Unlike African political economies, where women's labour benefitted their lineage group and the children, under slavery neither men nor women got to keep what they produced (Collins, 50). But in spite of the shackles of slavery, the African women did not perceive work as the problem but it was rather the exploitation inherent in the work they performed. "It is a poor dog that won't wag its own tail" was commonly said among the enslaved Africans as they felt that whites were lazy and did not value work as much as the Africans.

The issue of the journey from oppression and victimization to a free mind—towards self-definition offers a powerful challenge to the externally defined controlling images of African women. They challenge, fracture and rewrite the stereotypes and myths that have defined them. The quest for self-definition is an exploration of the private, hidden consciousness of the black women, which becomes the space in which she seeks a voice. In Nwapa's *Idu*, Idu's choice of death over motherhood is a vindication of her personal feelings. She refuses to marry her husband's brother after his death, "Adiewere, my husband, wait for me after you have crossed the stream…we shall continue our lives there" (1970:210). Idu's choice is an affirmation of self-definition over communal pressure. She affirms her love and commitment to her husband by following him to the land of the dead. Adah in Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* fulfils her creativity as a writer by writing the manuscript of a book called *Brideprice*; it was her brainchild, "I felt so fulfilled when I finished it as if I had just made another baby" (1979:182).

Afrocentric Feminist Consciousness and Growth

The Afrocentric feminists evoke an expanding consciousness amongst subjugated women all over the planet. As writers, they are not involved in a rat race to denigrate men but they posit an androgynous society where they are treated as equal partners in the game of life. Hence, these writers have undertaken a personal journey into their rich heritage and have emerged with a new kind of self awareness. They are proud of being black and female and are committed to the regeneration of Africa. The female bildungsroman—the motif of growth remains paramount in their works. Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* in the Igboland, Buchi Emecheta's Debbie in *The Joys of Motherhood* or Adah in London, all portray a journey of initiation to mature womanhood, from victimization to consciousness. By struggling and persisting in the journey for a self-defined Afrocentric feminist consciousness empowers African women to bring about a change. "By persisting in the journey toward self-definition we are changed, and this change empowers us. Perhaps this is why so many African American women have managed to persist and make a way out of no way. Perhaps they knew the power of self-definition" (Collins 1991:113).

Womanism, Humanism and Social Transformation

The major challenge of the Postcolonial Afrocentric feminist discourse is its vision of human solidarity and communal harmony. "Black Feminism is a process of self-conscious struggle that empowers men and women to actualize a humanist vision of community" (Collins 1991:44). The African women writers assert that it is only in terms of humanism that society can redeem itself and envisage the feminism of Black women as a part of the wider struggle for human dignity and empowerment. They do not see feminism as a struggle to end male chauvinism but want to eradicate the ideology of domination on various levels—sex, race, class etc. That is why Alice Walker coined the word 'womanist' to represent the specific nature of the womanist of colour who is committed to the survival and wholeness of an entire people.

For her,the world is a garden with every colour of flower represented in it. Womanism emphasises the value of women as they are; it believes they are already as valuable as men and counters the systematic devaluation of women under patriarchy. That is the reason why Nwapa's Efuru, Emecheta's Adah and Nnu Ego or even Morrison's Eva Peace revel in their biologic role as mothers. These women are not whining, grovelling creatures who lament their misfortune in being women but emerge as victors in a wonderful display of responsible and empowered womanhood. The validity of Black womanism lies in its ability to speak on behalf of and about all human beings and their responsibility in constructing a new social order. The major

challenge of these writers of the postcolonial genre has been to work towards social transformations that aim at building societies which empower men and women to actualize a humanist vision of community. Pauli Murray, a Black feminist lawyer suggests that "…Only a broad movement for human rights can prevent the Black Revolution from becoming isolated and can insure ultimate success" (Collins 38).

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