

Alternative Vision of Gender in the New Literatures of Africa in English: An Appraisal of Bole Butake's Dramaturgy

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Abstract

This study has attempted to revisit gender issues presented in the New Literatures of Africa in English to investigate whether there is, indeed, an alternative vision of these issues. In spite of the great contributions of female writers in this literature, it has continued to be a male-dominated terrain. It is from this perspective that we decided to draw inspiration from Bole Butake's *Dramaturgy* to assess his contribution to this alternative vision of gender in modern Africa Literature. Bole Butake is a significant Cameroonian male dramatist who writes sensitively on issues that concern the African Women in general and the Cameroonian Women in particular. We have demonstrated in this work that in spite of Butake's enormous contributions to issues of gender, his female roles do not conform totally to what women themselves expect. The sociological and feminist theories have been utilised in this study to come out with the following findings: First, there seem to be an alternative vision of gender in the New Literatures of Africa in English. Second, we posit that a major preoccupation of the female-oriented works of art in this literature is the exploration of the various pains that their characters encounter as women. Third, that most of the artists, if not all, present women reacting because they have been subjected or exploited by their male counterparts. Our final contention in this essay is that in order for us to have a total and positive alternative vision of gender in Modern African Literature, the artists should not only present the type of female characters that they have but should also attempt to balance the depiction of the pain with the development of consciousness-raising and role-modeling which are definite aspects of black feminist aesthetics

Keywords: Alternative, Vision, Gender, Butake, Dramaturgy.

Introduction

The female character in African fiction hitherto, is a facile lack-lustre human being, the quiet member of a household, content only to bear children, unfulfilled if she does not, and handicapped if she bears only daughters. In the home, she is not part of the decision-making both as a daughter, wife and mother even when decisions affect her directly. Docility and complete subsumation of will is demanded and enacted from her. This traditional image of women as indeterminate human beings, dependent, gullible and voiceless, stuck especially, in the background of patrilineage which marked most African societies. (Helen Chukwuma 1990: 133)

This is the view with which these critics are in total agreement and would like to employ to evaluate new literatures in Africa in English in general and Bole Butake's *Dramaturgy* in particular to ascertain whether there is an alternative vision in the presentation of female characters in this literature. These researchers hope to demonstrate in this essay that in spite of the fact that Bole Butake is a male writer, he writes essentially on issues that concern women and presents them in vital roles in the society. But given the fact that female writers have already set a high mark in female portraiture in their works, Butake's role cannot be said to conform to what women themselves expect. He, nevertheless, this paper will hopefully demonstrate, empathizes with women and seems to be sensitizing them to stand up and make a difference in their lives. This is the sense in which an appraisal of his dramaturgy is relevant to the theme of this essay.

Conceptual Clarification

The term "gender" has transcended its grammatical meaning whereby nouns and pronouns are classified under masculine, feminine and neuter. Gender, which is also used synonymously with sex, goes beyond the physical characteristics of sex to include societal and cultural behavioural patterns of men and women. According to UNICEF (*Gender, Equality and Women's Empowerment*, 3), gender;

Is not used to describe the biological sexual characteristics by which we identify females and males but to encompass the socially defined roles, attitudes and values which communities and societies ascribe as appropriate for one sex or the other. (3)

In the same document, this organisation further contends that the term is a kind of shorthand and that it was first used in the phrase "the social relations of gender":

The social relations of gender seeks to make apparent and explain the global asymmetry which appears in male/female relations in terms of sex roles in power-sharing, decision-making, the division of labour, return to labour both within the household and in the society at large. The phrase directs our attention to all the attributes acquired in the process of socialisation: our self-group definition, our sense of appropriate roles, values and acceptable interaction in relationship between women and men.

(3)

From the foregoing submission, this paper posits, therefore, that gender is socially and culturally bound. Since most societies are male-dominated, the expectations of femininity and masculinity are, in the most cases, defined by the men. It is not surprising then that certain situations arise in which the woman, and even the man sometimes, does not deem it necessary to act according to the norms of society, giving rise to gender issues which are defined here as the questions and/or problems that arise as a result of the resistance to the prescriptions made on the interactions of men and women in society.

Gender issues have become very topical around the world today because the woman is moving away from roles which were once assigned to her, and to which she was very much restricted, to ones which were thought to be the preserve of her male counterpart, from voting to writing:

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, women had few legal rights. They could not vote, the universities and professions were closed to them. And if they married, they lost even the few rights they had – their property became their husband's properties, their children were their husband's properties and divorce was almost impossible (Alexander 1988: 18)

It is, however, worth noting that voting has never actually been the African woman's problem. Her gender awareness does not begin from disenfranchisement. The patriarchal nature of her society caused her other problems like little or no access to formal education and marginalization in state institutions. This is the concept of gender as used in this paper. This puts the female character always in a subservient position.

Changing Perception of Gender

The situation in the world today has changed tremendously as the woman is moving away from that position of subservience to one of prominence. A 1991 United Nations Publication states that:

Traditionally, male/female roles and male headed families are not longer the norm. as estimated one-third of households around the world are now headed by women. In the Caribbean, women constitute up to 50 percent of all heads of households and in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, the figure is 45 percent.

(10)

Apart from heading households, women in many countries are also known to have voting rights, to go to university and to join any profession of their choice. Many are also known to have gone into politics and a few have headed governments. Examples include Margaret Thatcher of Great Britain and Corazon Aquino of The Philippines. All this is proof of the fact that the woman is embracing activities that she was once thought incapable of doing. This evolution of the woman from those traditional and negative stereotyped roles to more positive and meaningful ones in which she actively asserts herself and her personality is recognized today.

In patriarchal set-ups, men have an upper hand over women. Their sexiest tendencies lead them to look at certain activities as inferior, hence suitable for women, and others as superior and suitable for men. The demarcation gives the men authority to effectively exercise dominance over women. Patriarchy therefore provides a context in which sexism becomes operational and serves as a basis for men to objectify women. Also, the idea of African women in male-dominated societies not talking in the presence of men unless they are given authorization to do so, gave rise to lowly images of the women in early African literature in particular. She was presented in roles which restricted her to bearing and rearing children, satisfying her husband sexually as well as physically taking care of him and his entire household. Such traditional roles appear in negritude literature and even in some post-independence works. This paper seeks to demonstrate that the foregoing tradition highlighted, is, however, gradually changing especially with the appearance of women writers and some male writers on the new literary scene.

African artists, particularly female writers, are reacting positively to an awareness drive on gender issues, highlighting women's experiences and views in their works. Some notable male writers who formerly relegated women's experiences to the background are now focusing their creative lenses on women, so much so that some of them are delineating female characters who are highlighted as achievers, women who dominate the action of their works in a more positive and constructive manner. Chinua Achebe, for instance, who has been called a phallic writer by some feminist critics, acknowledges in a 1987 interview in *Concord Magazine* the necessity of recreating meaningfully women's culture and world-view in this age of female awakening and female consciousness. This same year, the editor of *African Literature Today* discovered that the women's voice in African Literature had been completely subsumed, and their contribution to the development of new literatures of Africa blotted out. That is why this editor decided to come out with an issue (N^o. 15) exclusively devoted to women. Part of the editorial comment recognised this neglect when the editor wrote that:

African women writers as a number of articles in the collection points out, have been neglected in the largely male-authored journals, critical studies and critical anthologies; and secondly, that the last ten years or so have been a tremendous blossoming of highly accomplished works by African women writers and it would have been inexcusable to continue to ignore them. (1)

This is true as before this date, the subject of African literature was largely a male affair while women were predominantly objects that were marginal to the central themes. For instance, Chinua Achebe's world before *Anthills of the Savannah* was essentially a world of male heroism and female defeatism, male audacity and female timidity. Mary E. Modupo Kolawole posits that Achebe's preoccupation with male vision, struggle and predicament left the women in the periphery of events. No female cast matches the courageous stature of Okonkwo or Ezeulu until the emergence of Beatrice (2000: 15).

In spite of the fact that female African writers have made great strides in fictional writing, Shadrach A. Ambanasom posits that "African Literature, as it now stands, is still largely the business of male African writers whose works reflect male-dominated societies" (63). Ambanasom goes further to submit that:

With the notable exceptions of such works as Ousman Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood* (1962); Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross* (1982); Okot P'Bitek's *Song of Lawino* (1996); Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) ... in which women play prominent roles, African male writers seldom present women in roles limited to motherhood, marriage and related domestic concerns, while scenes for great events are the exclusive domains of the male characters. (Ambanasom 2003: 63)

To this list of writers, these critics include Elechi Amadi's *Estrangement* (1986). Amadi's vision of the role and position of women has undergone drastic changes in this novel. His portrayal of women as either docile, passive and helpless (as in the case of Ihuoma) or rebellious, eccentric and deviant (as in the case of Ahurole) in his first novel, *The Concubine*, is expunged in *Estrangement* where a more positive and forthright exploration of female reality and experience is posited. That seems to be the reason why Theodora A. Azeigbo in her "Reflecting the Times: Radicalism in Recent Female-Oriented Fiction in Nigeria" submits that:

... no Nigerian male author has proved more sympathetic to women than Amadi in his novel, and none has been more successful so far in portraying women with whom female readers would wish to identify. (1990: 145)

It is the contention of this paper that tradition in Africa today is undergoing changes and these changes are definitely affecting the society's definition of the role of women and their position. No segment of African society can capture this phenomenon more succinctly than the creative artists who have uncompromisingly illuminated these changes in the lives of the female characters in their works and explored how these changes sometimes intensify the conflicts within the women. A brief survey of the new literatures of Africa and Bole Butake's *Dramaturgy* in particular illustrates that some African writers, both male and female, in a sense, can be said to be very concerned with gender issues in their works that reveal some kind of alternative vision since they explore a kind of feminism that is revolutionary in its challenge to a system of domination that incorporates both patriarchal and sexist oppression. These writers, and Butake in particular, portray women variously as mothers, students, wives, lovers, victims of poverty and tyranny, exploiters and exploited, tempters and intellectuals. The readers of some of these writers like Flora Nwapa, Ifeoma Okoye, Buchi Emecheta, Tess A. Onwueme, Elechi Amadi, Chinua Achebe and Bole Butake are presented with accounts of women "Struggling and surviving" by any means, "scheming, planning, organizing, creating, responding to a society that would deny them a place, a voice value and at times even visibility" (Ezeigbo 1990: 145). It is in this context that we hope to appraise and situate the theatrical contribution of Cameroonian male playwright, Bole Butake in the empowerment of women in his plays.

The first generation of female writers; Flora Nwapa, Efua Sutherland, Ama Ata Aidoo, Zulu Sofola, Bessie Head, etc., started writing in the mid sixties. These writers did not receive any favourite criticism or meaningful attention from their male counterparts and literary critics in general. Like we have observed earlier, it was not until 1987 when *African Literature Today* came out with No. 15 exclusively devoted to women. It can now be said that within the New Literatures of Africa in English, the women writers have indeed arrived and taken their rightful position in African Literature, the greatest indicator of this generation of writers that are offshoots of the first set of writers. Buchi Emecheta, who indicated her stimulus in writing to Flora Nwapa, is joined by Ifeoma Okoye, Tess Onwueme and Zaynab Alkali. There are, indeed, the concerns of these writers that lay emphasis on the alternative vision of Gender in the New Literatures of Africa in English and, consequently, overturning earlier views of male writers acting as accepted mouthpiece of their women folk. The women at last have their voice and in recording their say, they have effected the much-needed wholeness to African Literature. Helen Chukwuma believes that:

The identification of male positive disposition to the cause of women is a healthy development for African Literature. Firstly, it underscores the validity of women's complaint of subjugation and negative exposure. Secondly, it compliments and advances literature from the continent. With such unison of voice, the real essence of African Literature is brought to the fore and appreciated.

(Chukwuma 1990: 113)

It is from some of the writings of novelists like Ayi Kwei Armah, Sembene Ousmane, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, Alex La Guma, Elechi Amadi and Chinua Achebe that Chukwuma draws her inspiration. In drama, Femi Osofisan's commitment in presenting women positively and in an alternative way is consistent and powerful. The memorable *Morontodon* offers a transformation of women from the traditional flighty, vainglorious, extravagant, idle and indulgent to the knowledgeable, serious, intelligent, hard-working, and committed female. In *Once Upon Four Robbers*, Osofisan again presents the powerful Alhaja while Ngugi and Micere Mugo in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, shows the revolutionary woman fighting alongside her man while continuing with the education formation and giving direction to the young, thus assuring a tomorrow.

It is therefore, from these theatrical contributions that these critics seek to situate Bole Butake's contribution to this drama of awakening and empowering women in particular and the deprived in general. As stated earlier, female writers contributed immensely in demonstrating that women have to be arbiters of their destiny, work hard towards their own emancipation from the shackle of intimidating norms and traditions. A few examples will be used to corroborate the foregoing submission. These writers explore the individual and collective problems of achievement, motivation and survival encountered by women in a predominantly male society. This is clearly illustrated in Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough* where women are more engulfed in a battle to survive and secure an independent life for themselves. Nwapa has this to say about them:

They are the new generation women contractors. Six were widows and the other four had left their husbands to start life again. They are all involved in the 'attack trade' during the war ... (Nwapa 1981: 51 – 52)

Nwapa goes further to present these women as economically independent. The women in Nwapa's *Women are Different* demonstrate a new awareness but one common denominator seen in them is that they have all at one time or the other fallen victim of gender victimization or exploitation. Debbie is raped; Agnes is a victim of child-marriage – married to a man old enough to be her father; and Rose is jilted by Mark after being exploited by him. They are, therefore, presented as characters who become assertive and aggressive only because of the brutalization or betrayal they experience. This is the same experience of Amaka in *One is Enough*. Flora Nwapa articulates this alternative vision of gender in an authorial comment in *Women are Different* by asserting that the new generation of women

Was telling the men that there are different ways of living one's life fully and fruitfully. They are saying that women have options. Their lives cannot be ruined by a bad marriage. They have a choice, a choice to set up a business of their own, a choice to marry and have children, a choice to marry and divorce their husbands. Marriage is not the only way. (Nwapa 1986: 19)

There seems to be a flaw in such a presentation as one would want to know why these women are challenging patriarchy only after they have encountered a raw deal from men. Theodora A. Ezeigbo is wondering why feminists are always seen first and foremost as victims of male subjugation. She proposes an alternative vision of gender to artists as follows:

It is time our writers began to imaginatively explore the new feminist temper in society today in order to realistically reflect the changes in society, especially the changes occurring in attitude to women, and the new consciousness permeating society today. Women are now very conscious of their humanity and the importance of their roles ... It is important that Nigerian novelists, especially the female novelists, interpret and integrate this new awareness ... by creating women whose survival does not thrive on prostitution or merely on confrontation with men. (Ezeigbo 1990: 148)

The early female novelists did not really seem to produce the kind of role-models for the female readership / very few readers would wish to emulate some of what Theodora A. Ezeigbo refers to as women who use sex primarily to get what they want from men, to become rich and in a short time (149). To her, more promising role-models are women like Debbie of *Destination Biafra*, and Rose and Doran of *Women are Different*.

Gender issues raised by Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Okoye, Alkali, and Sofola are the subsumption position of women in the marriage institution and the attendant problem. In African societies, childlessness is a pain which women find almost unbearable. Marriage is considered as the testing ground for the feminist woman.

The choice of marriage partner was considered solely as the prerogatives of the parents. There is no dialogue, no consultation. The female is owned and is expected to give full allegiance to parents. This is clearly shown in Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* (1975) and *The Bride Price* (1976).

Childlessness is a very serious marriage issue treated by African women writers. Rose suffers this in Nwapa's *Women are Different* and Amaka in *One is Enough*. In Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego suffers this in her first marriage. It is only the woman who is supposed to be guilty of sterility. It is in Ifeoma Okoye's *Behind the Clouds* that the novelist presents the other face of the coin. The light is, therefore, turned on Dozie, the husband, who admits his impotence.

Moral laxity which results in promiscuity and prostitution is a prevalent theme in the works of female African novelists in particular. There is hardly any discrimination in the choice of sex partners by not just the

female but also the male characters. We see this in *One is Enough* and *Women are Different* by Flora Nwapa. In earlier African novels, prostitution is always associated with women but in the feminist novels, there is a “reversal of roles”, as it was, and prostitution and promiscuity becomes recurrent motifs in the delineation of many female characters. We see this in Nwapa’s *Women are Different* and Elechi Amadi’s *Estrangement*. Nwapa and Amadi in their works seem to suggest that moral laxity is a societal failing which is not limited to women. Zaynab Alkali in *The Stillborn* (1984) in treating the theme of husband infidelity and abandonment shows it as a great challenge to female assertion and survival. Li utilized that period to advantage by adding academic laurels thereby making her a better more responsible and public-spirited person (Therese Njoku, qtd in Helen Chukwuma 2000:109).

In most of the female novelists’ works, they seem to be saying or preaching that marriage is, indeed desirable for a woman but she needs not suffer indignities, and if she is abandoned or thrown out in her marriage, it is not the end of the road for her. Helen Chukwuma in her article “The Face of Eve: Feminist Writing in African Literature” approves this view when she states that “The important factors in female enhancement are economic power and self-determination, and a family to fall back on” (110). Ama Ata Aidoo brings out this family prop in her latest novel *Changes* (1991) where Esi had her mother and grandmother to fall back on when love disaffected her.

In retrospect, the major preoccupation of female-oriented novelists in Africa is the exploration of the vicarious pains their characters encounter as women. The alternative vision of such presentation will be that the artist, while not ignoring the pain, should focus more on positive experience. In this way, the artist is expected to balance the depiction of pain with the development of consciousness or in order to empower the women.

The Alternative Vision: Bole Butake’s Dramaturgy.

This section of the paper attempts to situate the contribution of a Cameroonian male playwright in the empowerment of women through conscientisation in particular.

George Nyamndi posits that Bole Butake is widely acclaimed as one of Cameroon’s leading playwrights. According to him, the reason for this is to be sought both in the steadfastness with which Butake has maintained himself among his country’s frontline artists and in his talent which reveals itself in his plays (228). In her unpublished M.A. Thesis, Temeching Patricia N. Nkweteyim submits that he is an “influential playwright in Africa” (Abstract). On their part, Henry Kah Jick and Florence A. A. Tabe in their “A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Bole Butake’s *Lake God* and *The Survivors* contend that “Bole Butake is a prolific and comprehensive Cameroonian writer who cannot be approached from only one perspective” (2001: 168). To Shadrach A. Ambanasom in his *Education of the Deprived*, “The publication of Bole Butake’s *Lake God and Other Plays* (1999) ... confirms him as one of the two giants of the Anglophone Cameroon Literary theatre today” (2003: 63).

From the foregoing submissions, and mindful of the playwright’s creative output, we opine that an appraisal of his works relative to issues of gender would be a worthwhile academic venture. Although Butake has published the following works” *The Rape of Michelle* (1984), *Lake God* (1986), *The Survivors* (1989), *And Palm Wine Will Flow* (1990), *Shoes and Four Men in Arms* (1993), *Zintgraff and the Battle of Mankon* (1999) and *Family Saga* (2005), this paper is going to concentrate on three only. Consequently, the focus here will be on *Lake God*, *The Survivors*, and *And Palm Wine Will Flow*.

Theoretical Framework

The approach to be utilised in the exegesis of these works will be two-pronged – sociological and feminist. Not only will the relationship between the text and society be analysed but also the feminist literary approach. Feminism is a social theory that was developed as a result of women’s quest for equality with men. It aims at changing the place of women in society since women have all along been regarded as unequal to and less valued than men. According to Barbara Smith:

Feminism is the political theory and practice that struggles to free all women: women of colour, working-class women, poor women, disabled women, lesbians, old women – as well as western white economically privileged heterosexual women. (qtd in Bhavnani Kum-Kum)

On her part, Maggie Humm defines feminism as “a belief in sexual equality combined with a commitment to eradicate sexist domination and to transform society” (2).

It is important to observe that the feminist literary approach is related to Marxist Criticism because both approaches focus on the class division of society. The branch of feminism adopted in this essay is black feminism. This branch advocates total unity among all women and commitment to society as a whole.

Analysis of Texts

Lake God, Butake’s second play was influenced by the Lake Nyos gas disaster of August 21st, 1986 which claimed the lives of several people together with a large number of cattle and other animals. The play *Lake God*

(1986) is set in the Lake Nyos area, near Wum in the North-West Region of Cameroon. In his introduction to the play, Bole Butake writes:

Lake God was composed in great heat within this background ... It was not my intention to present the events as they occurred either on that fateful night or in the period preceding the catastrophe. Rather, in *Lake God*, I have attempted a reinterpretation of history for those caught in the drama of events. The Lake Nyos Strategy was only a launching pad for the exploration of the psyche of a community caught in the web of diverse religious and economic conflicts. (Butake 1986: iv)

The play focuses on a community whose Fon has refused to carry out certain traditional rites due to his conversion to Christianity. The failure to perform the rites leads to poor harvest which is worsened by the fact that cattle are destroying crops on the women's farmlands. The women then put pressure on their men by taking an oath neither to sleep with them nor feed them until the cattle rearers are sent away and the sacrifice to the lake god of fertility is performed. While this is going on, the angry god unleashes his fury on the land, leading to the death of all but five persons whose story is the subject of *The Survivors* (1989).

A sequel to *Lake God*, *The Survivors* examines the greed and caprices of government officials sent to disaster zones to take charge of survivors and relief aid from national and foreign donors. They misappropriate this relief material instead. Officer, for instance, piles up everything for himself and gives little or nothing to the five survivors, and this, only after Mboysi, a woman, has satisfied his sexual desires. This play reflects the situation that prevailed following the Lake Nyos gas disaster in 1986 where survivors were relocated somewhere away from the site of the disaster.

Published in 1990, *And Palm Wine Will Flow* is set in the period preceding multipartism; in Cameroon, a period when Cameroonians were demanding a national conference to take stock of the nation's political activities. The play tells the story of the power-drunk leader (the Fon) who has surrounded himself with praise-singers and stooges. He takes unpopular decisions which no one opposes. Shey Ngong, the Chief Priest of Nyombom, is the only one who openly challenges the Fon. With the help of the women's secret cult, headed by Kwengong and aided by the Kibaranko, the Fon is killed and the palace burnt down. The play ends with the people being called to assemble at the market-place at dawn "to decide on the destiny of this land" (54). This play parallels the Cameroonian situation. The society in *And Palm Wine Will Flow* is a microcosm of the Cameroonian society. The Fon is representative of the leader of the Cameroonian people, while his courtiers represent the high-ranking government officials and other CPDM (the ruling party) adherents, who did not want another party in Cameroon.

Commenting on female characterization, Butake explained to Onjeme:

In as much as women are concerned, I think that I have looked around in our modern society and I find that women have practically thrown in the towel into (...) the boxing ring and abandoned the fight ... There is so much that is going on in our society in terms of economic development, political awareness, and educational and social development ... and women have tended to accept to be left out ... As far as I am concerned, the men folk have been such a disappointment that I have completely lost faith in them. I am hoping that perhaps the women can now take the battle stick and may try to do something about straightening up the injustices that are reigning in our society. Perhaps that is one reason why I tend to give women a very specific or outstanding place in my works. (Interview 1992)

Thus, there is every indication that Butake believes that women are able to change the status quo by taking up leadership roles. They can say "no" to patriarchal, sexist and phallogocentric oppressions and upset the men's apple cart, thereby bringing in economic, political, educational and social awareness and development, which may lead to effective change in the society.

We therefore attempt to evaluate Butake's work under reference to ascertain the degree of his portrayal of women relative to his statement that "I intend to give women a very specific or outstanding place in my works".

The second conflict in *Lake God* is that between the women whose crops have been destroyed by Dewa's and the Fon's cows. The women arrest, bind and carry Dewa to the Fon for sanctions to be meted out to him; indeed, they want the Fon to expel him and the other cattle rearers. When the Fon ignores their request, they are enraged and determined to fight for their cause. The women decide to take a secret oath of sealed lips; to go on a sexual strike and also to starve their husbands until the latter brings pressure to bear on the Fon. The effect of the women is immediately felt by the men as demonstrated in the following conversation:

FISIY : That is a heavy story. It shows that the women are determined.
FORGWEI : What is to be done?
LAGHAM : Good question. What can we do to expel the cattle people and their cattle; especially as our Fon and our own people are also cattle owners? It is clear that until the cattle leave the land, no adult male is going to eat properly or sleep with a woman.

FORGWWE : Who gave such powers to the women? (30)

Bole Butake seems to be saying that power is never given but taken. Nobody has given the women this power but they now wield it over the men. The men then decide to step since they cannot continue to suffer while the Fon and the cattle rearers are enjoying themselves. They know that the best way to approach the Fon is to pass through Shey Tanto, the most influential member of 'Kwifon', the male secret cult with authority over the Fon.

When Father Leo addresses the congregation of women who come for morning doctrine, his discourse is replete with rhetorical questions. Henry K. Jick and Florence A. E. Tabe have submitted that "rhetorical questions are particularly common in persuasive and expressive discourse" (176). In spite of the expressive and persuasive nature of the priest's discourse, none of the women budges from the stand already taken and like Ambanasom contends, this is "an indication of the power of traditional values over Western Christian ones" (67). From this perspective, the role of the women or the picture painted of the women is that of one who can take very firm decision if a particular cause is to be addressed. Father Leo's discourse is important to highlight here:

Yensi, Kima and the other devils; Yes, they must be called by the name they deserve. Yensi, Kima and the other devils are taking you on a fast and easy ride on the big motor road to Lucifer's kingdom. (*pointing out women in the audience*). You were in the 'Fibuen, not so? And you too. And even you Sister Maria. You are not ashamed that you went to soil the Virgin Mother's name in Satan's play? You all were in the 'Fibuen, not so? Participating in Satan's play? You were all in the Fibuen, participating in Satan's play and eating of his food and taking oaths. All for what my children? Mere corn? Common corn? Have you forgotten so soon what the Lord Jesus said? Therefore, I tell you, do not worry about life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? (32)

The *Fibuen* in some societies in the North West Region, is a female sacred society. It is in this society that the women took their oath of sealed lips to starve their husbands in two ways: sex and food. The priest has failed in changing the position of the women. The men in the play have equally realised a change in the behaviour of the women and recount their confrontation with their wives: Lagham recounts ...

I was going to whip her thoroughly. But you know what happened? The other women, all my wives, three of them --- bought with my wealth ... They came and stood between us. And said in loud voices that Mom was right. You know me. I am used to punishing any of my wives when they disobey me. But what I saw today ... (37)

As submitted above, Lagham acknowledges that in the past, he used to punish any of his wives but now, what he saw was an indication of a new order, one which brings out the alternative vision that Butake seeks to highlight in his plays. The playwright seems to be out to educate the women to know their rights and the men to also listen attentively to their wives' problems and solve them.

The deadlock between the women and the Fon persists until the Lake God bursts out in anger through the deadly explosion of the lake which decimates all animal life, leaving only four human survivors. We contend like Shadrach A. Ambanasom that the conflict "from all indicators in the play, would most probably have favoured the powerful women" (67). It is from this perspective that we posit that Bole Butake in this play, proffers a lesson of empowerment of women in our society if we must change the status-quo; and consequently, an alternative vision of gender is presented even if only to a lesser extent.

In the next play, *The Survivors*, Butake also presents a positive view of the major female character, Mboysi. The male officer in this play subjects her to sexual abuse. When finally Mboysi discovers that all the "piles upon piles of cargo and cartons and sacks and all sorts of things" (28) are destined for them, the survivors, but officer is keeping them "for himself and his people" (29), and at the same time using her "for his selfish, animal desires" (29), she decides to have her revenge on him: "I will show officer that in spite of his gun and loud menaces, he is only a man, mortal" (79). On the suggestion of possible sexual favours, she is able to coax him into showing her how to fire a gun, which she uses to kill him. Upon his death, she does a victory dance and calls on the others to celebrate.

Man! Come and see what a woman can do. All of you, come along and celebrate the victory of women over officer. Come along all of you and celebrate your liberation. (37)

The survivors do celebrate because officer, who oppressed and wielded considerable power over them and had confined them to the same spot for over two weeks is now dead, thanks to the wily Mboysi who overcomes him. Mboysi, therefore takes advantage of the fact that she is officer's sex object to seduce and kill him and thus liberate her people. Her action will go a long way to bring about change in her community because Old One imparts the significance of Mboysi's act of murder and triumph to the children, future leaders of the community and exhorts them to follow her example: "Did you see the light in your mother's eyes? I want you to hold your heads high like her" (30). The victory dance of the survivors is however, short-lived as Mboysi is shot and killed in the process by another soldier, thereby interrogating the reality of the survivor's liberation.

Considering that Mboysi herself says, "But it looks like he is only a messenger of some other person or

people” (38), Officer can be looked at as symbolizing an order that misuses power. The fact that she is killed by Officer’s colleagues who immediately installs himself in Officer’s place indicates that the status-quo is maintained. The survivors are not liberated and will continue to be manipulated by those in power. Mboysi’s death could therefore be seen as Butake’s protest against individual action. Things might have been different if all the survivors fought as a group to overcome the system.

Butake’s advocacy of collective action is evident in most of his works, beginning with *Lake God*, where the women depend on farming for their well-being and that of their families and communities. Unfortunately, the cattle rearers in this community give them no respite as their cattle continuously destroy the crops on their farms. Yensi, one of the women whose crops are being destroyed, reveals that they have, from time-to-time, brought these cattle rearers before the Fon: “This is not the first time Dewa and other cattle rearers have been brought before the Fon” (16). The Fon does not seem to have done anything to solve the women’s problems because he too owns cattle. The men in the land cannot take any action because Kwifon, the male cult, and the second authority in the land after the Fon, and through which they can act, has been banished by the Fon. So, caught between a Fon who does not take the well-being of his subjects into account and husbands who have been rendered impotent and relegated to the background by the Fon, the women decide to let off the cloak of submission they have already worn and assert themselves by acting as a group. They immediately revive the *Fibuen*, the women’s secret cult which has not been heard for eight years, that is ever since the enthronement of the Fon, and decide to act through it. Kima, one of them, explains what happened:

So we put our heads together and said, if Dewa says the Fon has ... [detained or banished] the Kwifon, the *Fibuen* has been asleep all these years, it must come to our rescue. (17)

Acting through the *Fibuen* gives the women more courage to the extent that they are able to tell the Fon what nobody up till now has ever dared tell him:

Harvest is near. The Fon will lead the people in sacrifice to the lake god and consummate our love and kinship the royal bed with the Queen. And we will have more children and a good harvest. (20)

Failing to do this, the women are bent on sending away either the cattle owners or their cattle. They are determined not to sit on the margin any longer, but to get to the center of events and make their voices heard. They will no longer act as passive objects to be manipulated upon by men, but will become subjects, capable of initiating action.

The same method is used by the women in *And Palm Wine Will Flow* after they become fed up with their men for doing nothing to curb the excesses of the Fon’s power. They take advantage of their role as mothers to act in ways that are beneficial to the entire community. They decide to “take very drastic action against the desecrator of the gods and ancestors” (46) by sending Kwengong (Earth Goddess) with a potent pot to their Fon, after having performed the rites of the cult:

FON: (*looks curiously into the pot and then turns suddenly, holding his nose.*) Urine! Urine! Urine!
Urine! What is the meaning of this abomination?

KWENGONG: Not Urine Chila Kintasi.

But the savoury juice from
The vaginas of those upon whom
You wield power, Fon.
Drink! Oh Fon!

Drink the liquor from the vaginas
And feel the power of power!

FON: I will die first!

KWENGONG: Then you will die indeed, Chila Kintasi!

Your own mouth pronounced judgment.

Die and deliver the land from the
Abominations of drunkenness and gluttony!

(*The Fon begins to reel until he collapses*)

Die! Chila Kintasi, die!

And save the land from merry-making!

Die! Fon. So that we may think.

The people need your death to think!

Die! Die! Die! (47 – 8)

After killing the Fon, the women take over control of decision-making in the land. They decide that there will be no more Fons in the land:

KWENGONG: The people will rule through the council of elders led by Shey here. The day he takes the wrong decision, that same day, the people shall meet in the market place and put another at the head of the council of elders. (53)

Towards the end of the play, Shey Ngong declares:

From today, this bugle will stay here in the sacred grove, a living symbol of our enslavement by the Fon and his notables. Take the secret gong to the people and let it sound and vibrate through their very souls, a symbol of their liberation. (113)

We therefore submit here that the liberation of the people from the tyranny of the Fon has been achieved, thanks largely to the intervention of this group of elderly women whose nudity in the play is shown as their sole protection because no adult male in that traditional setting can stand the sight of the exposure of their nakedness without the risk of the loss of his manhood.

From the foregoing discussion, we are sympathetic to Shadrach A. Ambanasom's view and warmly accept his contention that Bole Butake's contribution to African theatre

Must be placed at the didactic level of educating and enlightening the African women about her own enormous socio-political potential ... Butake has shown how daring and creative women can be; how, when pushed to the wall, they can fight back their perceived enemy with imagination and tenacity and how they can draw on their natural charms for their own social advantage. (Ambanasom 2003: 72)

This submission corroborates the theme of this paper that there is some kind of alternative vision of gender in the new literatures of Africa in English.

Conclusion

In retrospect, this essay has attempted to demonstrate that there seem to be an alternative vision of gender in the new literatures of Africa in English. It is clear that a major preoccupation of the female orientation works of art in Africa is the exploration of the various pains that their characters encounter as women. Most, if not all, of the artists present women reacting because they have been subjected or exploited by their male counterparts. It is the contention of this paper that while these artists are presenting the pain gone through by female characters in their works, they should focus more on what Theodora A Ezeigbo refers to as 'positive experience' (155). That is, trying to balance the depiction of the pain with the development of consciousness-raising and role-modeling which are crucial aspects of black feminist aesthetics. We, therefore approve Ezeigbo's recommendation that a way out of this is

the portrayal of women who are placed in positions where they prove to be successful professionals and business women in, say, the field of medicine, law, education, industry, politics, ... not only as successfully holding down their jobs and occupations but also valiantly tackling emotional, social and economic problems in their private live. (Ezeigbi 1990: 155)

It is only in this way, that we posit that a complete alternative vision of gender in modern African Literature can be achieved, at least for the moment. However, we have demonstrated that Bole Butake's dramaturgy has contributed immensely in empowering women; socially, culturally, economically and politically. This therefore is considered as a positive step in changing the picture of women in the eyes of the society.

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