

Positive Portrayal of Women in African Prose: A cursory Look at Sembène Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* and Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes*.

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Abstract.

African novelists have long been seen as biased in their portrayal of female characters. This practice is condemned by many feminist writers as perpetuating male dominance and subjugating against women. However, Sembène Ousmane and Ama Ata Aidoo gave a different account of women characters in their works by assigning them positive roles. This paper asserts that the action of these two Anglophone and Francophone writers marks a shift from the status quo and is indicative of their stance as committed feminist writers. The paper further establishes that their stance offers the needed pretext to make a case for social and economic advancement of women in the two works. Finally, the paper concludes that characterization of women in these works by the two novelists helps to create an awareness of the power of the female species as an equal force in national development.

Key words: Feminism, Marxism, domination, positive portrayal, liberation, progress.

Résumé.

Les romanciers noirs ont été critiqués depuis longtemps pour l'image péjorative qu'ils donnent aux personnages féminins dans leurs romans. Cette pratique est dénoncée par beaucoup des écrivains féministes comme soulignant la domination masculine et subjuguant la femme. Pourtant, Sembène Ousmane et Ama Ata Aidoo sont deux romanciers qui ont donné une image positive aux femmes dans leurs œuvres. Cet article affirme que l'action des deux écrivains, l'un anglophone, l'autre francophone marque un changement du statut quo et signale leur prise de position comme des écrivains engagés. De plus, cet article établit que la position des deux écrivains présente le prétexte tant souhaité pour se prononcer sur l'émancipation sociale et économique des femmes dans leurs textes. Enfin, l'étude conclut que la caractérisation des femmes dans les deux romans aide à conscientiser la société sur la force de la femme comme partenaire dans le développement national.

Mots clés : Féminisme, Marxisme, domination, portrait positif, libération, progrès.

Introduction

Women have long been portrayed in negative and derogatory terms over the years in many African literary texts, especially those written by men, (Sheila Ruth, 1998:104). Ruth argues that as victims of male chauvinism, women are seen as docile, unintelligent, illiterate folks whose voices must not be heard in the assembly of men. In contemporary African literature, two outstanding feminist advocates who through their works have brought their perspectives to bear on the plight of women in Africa are Sembène Ousmane and Ama Ata Aidoo. Contrary to the age-old practice in many African cultures where women were destined to play second fiddle to men (as exemplified by the works of Aidoo, 1997, Sembene, 1966, Sembene, 1973, Badian, 1960), hence their being perpetually relegated to the background, these two authors in our view, went out of their way to recast a new image for the African woman. They sought to demystify a popular saying among different African traditions that "A woman has no mouth and must bear her pain and suffering silently" (Egejura et. al., 1997).

In *God's bits of wood* (1960) and *Changes-A love story* (1993) Sembène and Aidoo respectively departed from the norm of negative portrayal of women by empowering their female characters through their works. The singular efforts of these two novelists come handy as one examines the positive portrayal of women in the African novel. Their choice of characters contributed immensely to giving impetus to the emancipation of women in traditional African societies.

The Nigerian Nobel prize laureate, Chinua Achebe, just like Ousmane and Aidoo rejects the subjugation of the feminine species, a phenomenon that is common place among the many hitherto African male writers. In an interview granted to Anna Rutherford after the publication of *Anthills of the Savannah*, he declared:

We have been ambivalent; we have been deceitful even, about the role of the woman. We have [...] said all kinds of grandiloquent things about womanhood, but in our practical life the place of the woman has not been adequate [...]. We have created all kinds of myths to support the suppression

of women, and [...] the time has come to put an end to that. [...] woman herself will be in the forefront in designing what her new role is going to be, with the humble co-operation of men. (Rutherford, 1993: 3-4).

This admission of fact by no mean a critic such as Achebe underscored the need to give women their rightful place in society.

In spite of their Anglophone and francophone backgrounds as well as their gender differences, our two novelists have in various ways touched on issues central to the condition of the African woman. They seem to be part of what might be referred to as a “movement” that seeks to redress the gender injustice or transform oppressive gender relations. Their writings reflect the plight of the African woman trapped in the claws of traditions. However, these restrictions are meant to be fought against through the choice of their female characters who set out to prove a point that given the chance they can stand up to the task of nation building. So, in their own small ways, they set forth not as rivals but as partners ready to bring to bear their unique skills as home builders, peace makers, entrepreneurs (enterprising women) whose only concern is the quest for harmony and peace at home and above all social justice. In this way, the writers sought to minimize if not destroy completely the negative image given to women by seeking to restore the true value or innate capabilities of these dominated species. Theirs is a call to liberation from the yolk of prejudice and disdain so as to bring about hope and progress in their respective societies.

Sembène and Aidoo’s writings have basically being influenced by both ideological and environmental considerations. These include family, education, political and working life. Their female characters are imbued with more strength and a sense of purpose, traits which distinguish them from their male counterparts. Even in her first work, *Dilemma of a ghost*, Aidoo already sets out these core values in her female characters as confirmed by Nicholson (1983: 84).

Aidoo’s major concerns are undoubtedly issues that define the place and status of women in Ghanaian society. The theme of cultural conflict, then is subsumed under the more focal issues of the place, role and status of Eulalie, Ato’s Black-American wife in her new society. Without straining to make the mother figure into a super woman, or idealize her, Aidoo nonetheless shows that the African mother is the support and strength underlying the family.

Obviously, Aidoo’s commitment to the cause of the feminine gender is clear as argued by Nicholson among others. On his part, Sembène (1962) demonstrated his passion for the course of women when he openly declared through Noubé, one of his female characters in *Voltaïque*: “Pourquoi acceptons-nous d’être le jouet des hommes ?” (61)¹. Sembène is no doubt at a loss as to why the larger part of society should paradoxically be subjugated, indeed be condemned to the wishes and dictates of the powerful minority. Noubé is therefore Sembène personified, i.e., a voice against injustice.

Sembène and Aidoo obviously epitomize social change; they desire a re-awakening of conscience to appreciate what women really are and what they can do. In other words, they believe society can only develop if women are given their rightful place in male dominated society.

What this paper seeks to show with the choice of these two novelists is posited on the assertion by Maud Ellman (1984) about Aidoo stating that she cleared a space in her writings to make women who have been consistently displaced, misplaced and blacked out in male authored writings to be placed and recognized. It is with this same literary lens that we seek to examine also the commitment of Sembène who creates a space for voices of the marginalized to be heard in a polygamous Muslim society (Murphy, 2000).

It is common knowledge that all over the world, women critics have been dissatisfied with the representation of women by male writers in works of art. This is partly due to the fact that “men have controlled the conceptual arena and have determined social values as well as the structure of institutions” Sheila Ruth (1998:104). The female character in the works of the Negritude writers was the symbol of the Earth, the community and of Africa as in Senghor’s ‘I will pronounce your name’ (*A collection of West African Poetry*, p.). Additionally, the portrayal of the female character in post-colonial literature by men cannot be exalted. Many female characters even protagonists are often painted as ancillary to their male counterparts. In many ways they are used to explain the male protagonist’s achievements in social life. Siendou Konate (2006) condemns this seemingly new form of domination. He writes:

While the African writer wrote to destroy the civilized or savage, colonizer or colonized hierarchy, some male writers have tended to build another one: male/female or subject/object. (2006:3)

What the above assertion means is that male authored writings seem to think that female characters do not deserve any meaningful place in their works. These writings rather sought to perpetuate the subjugation of

¹Why do we [women] accept to be the object of control in the hands of men?

women since culturally, they are thought to be inferior to men. It is in the light of this that some women writers in Africa such as Mariama Bâ, Ama Ata Aidoo, Marie Ndiaye, Calyxthe Beyala and indeed some men such as Sembène Ousmane, Seydou Badian and Ayi-Kwei Armah have learned to use their writings to correct this social imbalance. They want to make the voices of women heard by projecting them to limelight. These writers are on a mission to put the African literary house in order after disruptive influences by many male authors against the other - declares Kofi Owusu, 1999, in his article 'Canons Under siege'). These feminist writers are of the view that generally, men writers have been biased in their representation of women in their writings hence they seek to change this.

To understand fully the writings of these feminist writers in terms of their representation of women and their worldview, it is important to place their beliefs in their historical and cultural context(s). Culturally, many African societies which are extensively patriarchal in nature see the woman's role as a homemaker and child bearer. This means that traditionally the woman's major roles are limited to marriage and child bearing. This is further compounded by the advent of the two major foreign religions into Africa, that is, Christianity and Islam, (Bampoh-Addo, 2010). Just like traditional Africa, these two religions equally perpetuated the subjugation of women assigning them roles which can best be described in Marxist analogy as denominators as opposed to numerators or better still an oppressed class as against the oppressor. This is the situation that Sembène and Aidoo sought to change through the creation of female characters ready to make their voices heard or be counted among men.

Theoretical framework.

This paper has feminism as its main theoretical base but references would be made to Marxism because of the latter's stance against all forms of domination. This is because feminist ideology which preoccupies itself with the liberation of womenfolk from the yoke of masculine domination shares certain common traits with Marxism because of the premium it places on the principle of plus value and alienation. From a Marxist perspective therefore, women as an oppressed class can be seen as seeking to expropriate their stolen value and thereby emancipate themselves from politico-cultural and socio-economic alienation.

Feminism as a literary movement has grown to embrace many articulations. Indeed, Schulman (1982) captures this quite aptly when she argues: "there are several varieties of feminism and that feminism is not a monolith, there are many different, even at times contradictory positions which may spring from feminists' motives." These many perspectives underscore the fact that feminism cuts across racial or sociocultural divides; it is a global phenomenon. What is central to all these many branches of feminism however is the quest for emancipation and equality of the sexes and the pursuit of more equitable gender relationships.

We would wish, at this point, to quickly distinguish between western feminism and African feminist movement. Western feminists refuse to be mothers (radical feminists) because motherhood, the bearing and raising of children, is an obstacle to the fulfillment of feminists' aspirations. Woolf (1919) and later Beauvoir (1949) both called for women's voices to be heard by revolting against false cultural notions about gender which sought to make women inferior to men. In the *Second sex* published in 1949, de Beauvoir calls on women to break patriarchal construct of women by men by fighting to be 'significant' in society. For Millet (1969), women must revolt against the power centre of culture which is male dominated by breaking down existing structures that tend to see women as passive, meek and weak. In brief, Western feminism then is combative, revolt oriented and hence calls for a destruction of the status quo.

In West Africa, feminism and feminist criticism began in the 1960s with the study of writings of women. The literature emphasized the social and political roles of women in society. It will become more pronounced in the 1990s as more women with a liberated voice called for a restructuring of the social order, giving space to women's concerns while emphasizing the positive role that women can play in nation building. African feminism differs greatly from western radical feminism, in that its primary goal is to serve as a voice for the voiceless in a culture where the woman is seen as the 'insignificant one.' For Ogudinpe, feminism has to do with motherhood; she thus asks women to claim it as strength. Women must make their voices heard because they have a lot to say, notes Mariama Bâ (1981). This position is opposed to radical feminists' view on motherhood.

In concluding this discussion on the theoretical base for this paper, we want to refer to Meena (1992) who thinks that feminism in the African context should entail creating spaces for women to participate in the management of their societies. This involves empowering them through access to resources such as health, education and housing. (*Gender Studies*, 1992:15). To a large extent, Esi Sekyi, a character in *Changes* has the power of education and housing and attempts to control her body and health. Feminism then is a positive movement that signals a refusal of oppression in the home and the larger society.

Marxism on the other hand is seen as both a political movement and an ideology grounded in the social dynamics of struggle for power, struggle for equity and justice and struggle against domination in as much as that struggle aims at social reconstruction and development. This is why Eagleton (1976), in his preface to *Marxism and literary criticism*, describes Marxism as the: "scientific theory of human societies and of the practice of transforming them" (p. vii). What that means, rather more concretely, is that the narrative Marxism

has to deliver is the story of the struggles of men and women to free themselves from certain forms of exploitation and oppression.

Indeed, Marx and Engels (1992:3) put it more bluntly when they declared that “the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. [...], in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstruction of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.” In Marxist analogy therefore, every relationship is reduced to social antagonism, a revolt against the exercise of illegitimate power as a result of social consciousness with a view to bringing about change, social justice and progress. From the literary point of view, Marxism has to do with a commitment to social justice, a purgation of society so as bring about social progress.

In the light of the above, Marxism shares a lot in common with feminism because both seek the overthrow of dictatorship and the emancipation of the oppressed or the marginalized. These deprived groups must take their destiny into their own hands and reclaim their rightful place in society. Sembène and Aidoo’s commitment stem from this strong ideological viewpoint; this indeed explains their stance against all forms of domination, a condition they decry in the traditional African setting where socioeconomic and political relationships among the sexes set up women against their male counterparts. A critical study of the two novels under review will illustrate their commitment.

Feminist manifestations in *Changes* and *God’s bits of wood*.

It is important to note that the two works are set in two different milieux; that is to say, Aidoo’s *Changes* is set in an Anglophone environment while Sembène’s work comes from a Francophone background. Yet, these two share common traits as they both emanate from a patriarchal society where the status of women are inextricably linked to cultural, political and economic issues. Again, Sembène’s work in particular goes a step further to portray a polygamous Muslim setting, a situation which brings out the exploitative nature of the male-female relationship in his work. It is from this ideological dungeon that the writer would cry loud for society to take a second look at the role of the feminine gender.

In *God’s bits of wood*, Sembène’s female characters are so crafted as to convey his vision of an egalitarian socialist society where women would be seen as partners and not as slaves to men. No wonder, these women are ever ready to step into the shoes of their men folk when the going gets tough. As the writer humorously puts it ‘it is the women who wear the trousers in the homes.’ Mame Sofi, one of the housewives, confirms in a conversation: “avant, ils étaient tout fiers de nous nourrir, maintenant c’est nous, les femmes qui les nourrissons. » (Ousmane, 1960:87)². The housewives in the novel transform themselves into breadwinners as the strike wears on and the men had nowhere to turn for support. A case in point is the episode of the courageous housewife who resolves to feed her family in place of her jobless husband. The narrator declares:

Un matin, une femme se leva, elle serra fortement son pagne autour de sa taille et dit:

- *Aujourd’hui, je vous apporterai à manger.*

*Et les hommes comprirent que ce temps, s’il enfantait d’autres hommes, enfantait aussi d’autres femmes.*³

The above illustrates the industrious nature of a traditional African woman. She sacrifices her personal comfort and even self dignity for the family’s survival. She is selfless and full of motherly care. She is not ashamed to go begging just to feed the family. This act of bravado is worth noting because it underscores the resilience and tenacity of an otherwise unlettered housewife. These qualities of a hitherto unsung hero in the home are those the writer seeks to extol through the episode cited above. The recognition, albeit late by the men folk in *Gods bits of wood* of their wives’ unique role in preserving the family brings to the fore the urgent need for society to rethink its handling of women with a view to giving them their proper place in society. For Sembène therefore, the strike provides the wake up call to women emancipation: “...cette grève est une école” (Sembène, 1960:140)⁴

In *Changes*, Aidoo presents women who are militant and in a sense very rebellious. For example, Esi Sekyi, the heroine, is portrayed as being militant in her decisions and actions. This is seen in the relationship between her and Oko; when the latter forcibly had sex with the former, Esi does not only describe it as rape but also takes steps to seek redress on her own by divorcing Oko and declaring him unwanted in her residence. (Aidoo, 1993: 11). Typically, what right has a married woman to control her body as to determine when she will have sex with the husband? This can only be described as a breakdown of a hitherto barrier to women’s freedom to make choices. And indeed to the best of Esi’s knowledge, there is no indigenous word to express marital rape in “Akan, Igbo, Yoruba, Wolof, Temme, Kikuyu, Ki-Shona, Zulu, Xhosa, or any other African language” (ibidem).

² Formerly, they were all proud of feeding us, now its we, the women who are feeding them.

³ One morning, a woman got up, she wrapped her cloth firmly around her waist and said:

- Today, I would bring you food to eat

And the men understood that these days when one gives birth to some males, one must give birth to females too.

⁴ This strike is a school, Gbw, p. 140

One can only come to the conclusion that in terms of the control of the female body, Aidoo has portrayed Esi in positive terms.

A major rebellious trait of western feminists advocates is the rejection of motherhood. Interestingly, in *Changes* all the women accept it. However, they do so because they create their own path of motherhood. For example, Esi wants to be a mother but one that has some independence in controlling her body and also in determining the number of children to have. Anything short of this is enslavement. Commenting on the character of Esi, Ruth (1998:513) declares that Esi hates to be considered an 'alluring mistress' instead of an "affectionate wife and rational mother." For Opokuyaa, her four children are not stumbling blocks to her wish of being a professional nurse. After all, she is able to leave them alone while she went to work only to return home to surmount the challenge of her wifely and motherly duties. *Changes* therefore as a novel calls for new articulations of wifehood, childbearing and motherhood. This falls in tune with what Oyewumi (2000:1096) says: "Mother is the preferred and cherished self-identity of many African women." Aidoo, indeed, appreciates and approves motherhood as an important path to social status and personal achievement. For Aidoo, acceptance of motherhood creates a positive image of the woman.

In the same vein, in *God's bits of wood*, not only does Ramatoulaye epitomizes motherhood but heroism as well. Though unlettered, she is enlightened, wise and courageous. Just like the female characters in *Changes*, she devotes herself totally to the preservation of the family. Having realized during the strike that she has a herculean task of feeding twenty mouths, she rose to the challenge by declaring: "Quand on sait que la vie et le courage des autres dépendent de votre courage, déclare-t-elle, on n'a plus le droit d'avoir peur... Même si on a très peur ! » Ousmane, 1960:117).⁵ Her actions underscored the fact that when the going gets tough the women then assumes the responsibility of men. They literary wear the trousers in the home.

Another consideration in the positive portrayal of women in this article, has to do with women or feminist consciousness. Consciousness is an awareness that helps an individual to become a brand new person. It offers new alternatives. This is manifested not only in Esi, Opokuyaa and Fusena in *Changes* but also in Ramatoulaye in *God's bits of wood*. It is this consciousness on the part of Esi which prompts her to accuse her husband of sexual harassment. Ordinarily, Esi would consider her husband's action as normal. But when Aidoo presents Esi in the light we find in the novel, it becomes obvious the latter has become a brand new person different from the traditional African woman that we find in several other works of art. It is this same consciousness that helps Opokuyaa to accept her new role as working mother and her wifely status. In the case of Ramatoulaye, she single handedly slaughtered a ram in compensation for the animal having devoured the rice meant for the family meal. When she was confronted by the colonial police, she refused to be intimidated by those uniformed men. Not even the gimmicks of her influential brother could force her to kow tow to the demands of the authorities by handing over the meat. The newly gained consciousness led to this display of unequalled courage and bravery. The singular effort of this character confirms the assertion by Murphy (2000) about the creation of women in Sembène's works:

women may possess certain maternal traits that distinguish them from men, says Sembène (a concept with which many feminist would not necessarily agree), but this does not prevent them from taking decisive and even aggressive social actions. Taking the tenderness and loving of a mother as a given, Sembène often proceeds to put his mother figures into situations where these feelings are forced to express themselves through explicitly social or political action"(p.134).

Sembène also plays to the advantage of his female characters the African communal spirit or sense of solidarity. He uses the strike to reawaken Africans to certain cherished values such as the strength of unity that modern society seem to downplay. The housewives whose husbands were sacked as a result of the railway strike decided against all odds to march in protest from Thiès to Dakar to present a petition to the governor. Penda, one of the female advocates declared:

Pour nous, cette grève, c'est la possibilité d'une vie meilleure. Hier, nous riions ensemble, aujourd'hui nous pleurons avec nos enfants devant nos marmites où rien ne bouillonne. Nous nous devons de garder la tête haute et ne pas céder. (p.288).⁶

Through this collective action, the writer seeks to say that the women succeeded because they were united; united as a group and united as partners behind their husbands. The representation of female leaders like

⁵ When one is conscious of the fact that the life and survival of others depend on you, you can't afford to be afraid even if you are afraid." (S. Ousmane, 1960:117).

⁶ For us, this strike is for the possibility of a better life. Yesterday, we were laughing together; today, we are all weeping with our children in front of our pots where nothing is boiling. We owe it a duty to keep our heads high and not give up" (S. Ousmane, 1960:288).

Ramatoulaye and Penda aims at exposing the fact that woman are not just vulnerable or weak; indeed, they can be worthy partners in the struggle for social advancement. Through the character of Lahbib, the writer noted solemnly, that the return of the female protesters was characterized by a great change from resignation to control. Society must therefore realize that women cannot be left out in the decision making process. Indeed, they are equal partners.

Conclusion.

Sembène Ousmane and Ama Ata Aidoo have amply displayed their confidence in female power and industry. They are therefore at a loss as to why they should still continue to play second fiddle to men. It is time society took a radical look at the role it assigns to these unrecognized pillars in the society. They believe women have rightfully paid their dues to society; it is therefore unjust to turn a blind eye to their contributions or worse still to try to limit their capabilities. By their natural God-given talents, they are more than worthy partners.

Through *God's bits of wood*, Sembène then rises to the cause of women by crying out loud against gender inequality by creating heroines out of mere housewives. He thus calls to question the cultural practices that made women subservient to men by showing that they are equal to the task of nation building. For Aidoo, her focus was to prove that women are capable of competing favorably with men. Through education and economic empowerment, they can fit into male dominated roles even with greater success.

Sembène in *God's bits of wood* made recourse to collectivism, an aspect of marxist ideology to advance his feminist advocacy; he insists, women must be saved as a group or a class and not as individuals. This falls in line with an African proverb which goes like 'One tree cannot make a forest.' Collective action or unity of purpose is the sure way to win the fight against discrimination. This explains why a woman like N'Dèye Touti, though educated, is ridiculed in the novel. She is portrayed as egoistic, since the western education she acquired does not lead to the benefit of fellow women or the whole society; she is thus alienated from the struggle. For Aidoo, she puts more emphasis on the individual. Her creation of characters like Esi Sekyi and Pokuyaa therefore epitomizes liberation.

What stands out clear through this study is the fact that Aidoo and Sembène have amply demonstrated the urgent need for Africa to speak against the negative portrayal of women. They used female characters to change the status quo by presenting these women not just as mere victims but people with capabilities who can stand on their feet. Through this, they sought to educate society to change its attitude towards women issues for the betterment of all. The visibility and prominence given to the female characters in the works discussed above attest to the positive portraiture of women.

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