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Changing Portrayals and Uses of Women Characters in African Literature

Like most literature around the world, African literature initially portrayed women poorly. Incomplete and inaccurate female characters littered early African works. This was largely due to the fact that African literature was first written by men, whose education was put first. Educated African men not only came from a patriarchal society but were educated by colonizers, who also came from a patriarchal society.

Women characters are used for different purposes over time in African literature. Within the novels *Things Fall Apart*, *God's Bits of Wood*, *Joys of Motherhood*, and *Nervous Conditions*, female characters change from content and invisible to demanding and visible on every level. The changing depictions of women in these novels and the advent of female African authors indicate an African society moving toward gender egalitarianism.

There are many reasons that the egalitarian idea of gender equality was brought to African literature. One was the changing European culture. As European cultures gradually changed their ideas of gender roles, so did educated Africans, because gender equality was *in part* another ideal forced upon colonized Africans.

The idea of an "African Dilemma" in which African women have to choose between being true to their traditional culture or embracing the colonizing Western culture and having equal rights (O'Brien 95-96) is an interesting one. It is important to note that gender equality was

also an ideal forced upon Western men by oppressed Western women. In every culture where there has been a feminist movement, intellectual arguments have sprung up to counter it. Given that African culture will never be traditional again because of colonization and that at least some European ideas are bound to be embraced, the “African Dilemma” could be seen as a ploy to make African women feel guilty about pursuing equality within the Westernized hybrid culture that now exists.

The literature shows us that women were not totally happy in the existing structure. Female African writers show us the tribulations of polygamy and mass motherhood. A quotation from Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* shows us this latent unhappiness when Tambu’s mother describes womanhood to Tambu: “When there are sacrifices to be made, you are the one who had to make them. And these things are not easy; you have to start learning them early, from a very early age. The easier the better so that it is easy later on. Easy! As if it is ever easy” (Dangarembga 16). While Tambu’s mother is resigned, she is not happy, representing the traditional woman in early Rhodesian society. Many female African writers represent traditional women in this way: resigned but unhappy. It is easy to see how a little outside influence, like education, could inspire women to take a stand, particularly through literature.

One of the earlier and well-known African novels, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, has been criticized for neglecting to represent women almost completely. Many women in the novel, like Okonkwo’s wives, are flat characters who are satisfied with oppressive structures like polygamy.

While critics are quick to condemn Achebe for being too male-focused, there could be many reasons for this lack of female representation. One is that we are seeing the culture and events largely from Okonkwo’s point of view, who could be said to have unenlightened gender

views by Ibo standards. For example, when he is sent to his mother's village, he cannot answer to his uncle why a common name and saying is "Mother is Supreme" (116). Uchendu, his uncle, replies, "A man belongs to his fatherland when things are good and life is sweet. But when there is sorrow and bitterness he finds refuge in his motherland. Your mother is there to protect you. She is buried there. And that is why we say mother is supreme" (116-117).

The portrayal of Okonkwo's daughter, Ezinma, is the only visible, rounded female character in *Things Fall Apart*. There is textual evidence to suggest that Achebe was showing the ridiculous nature of a strongly patriarchal society. Ezinma was intelligent enough to eventually run the family the way Okonkwo wanted. As Okonkwo says, "She has the right spirit" (57). Okonkwo is unable to think outside of his cultural paradigm. When Ezinma offers to carry Okonkwo's chair to the wrestling match, traditionally a boy's job, Okonkwo says "No, that is a boy's job" (38). Instead of finding a way to let Ezinma run the home, he only laments that, "She should have been a boy" (55).

Still, there was not much female representation in *Things Fall Apart*. It is important to realize that Achebe wrote this novel to justify his native culture to European audiences, who were patriarchal themselves. He simply may have been appealing to his audience. There is also the theory that early African authors, such as Achebe, were reacting against the idea that native cultures were weak or feminine. In O'Brien's article about the African Dilemma, she states, "Because the feminine was consistently used to characterize the black other, early responses by black authors to those representations tend to emphasize the masculinity of black cultures and black people" (98). Overall, with the exception of Ezinma, Achebe's female characters in *Things Fall Apart* were not well rounded or visible.

God's Bits of Wood by Sembene Ousmane did a better job at uncovering and representing the plight of women within traditional society. Ousmane shows us a spectrum of women ranging from traditional to modern and “the evolution of conscious new women” (Agho and Oseghale 608). The entire novel argues for combining the best elements of the colonizing and traditional cultures. One of the ‘good’ things about the colonizing culture is the flexibility of gender roles. Ousmane shows us female dissatisfaction with the current system, educated women, and the need for role flexibility to enact change.

Ousmane shows female dissatisfaction with polygamy, a traditional institution, through many of his female characters. The novel shows us how European ideas have influenced her ideas about marriage, “The people among whom she lived were polygamous, and it had not taken her long to realize that this kind of union had nothing to do with love- at least love as she imagined it” (57). However, there are other characters that show dissatisfaction with it from time to time. When Mame Sofi is advising N’Deye Touti about who to marry, she suggests Beaugosse over Bakayoko because, “For a young girl, a married man is like a warmed over dinner!” (48). Even Niakoro, the most traditional woman in the novel, shows disgust with her junior wife and her “vulgar laugh” (3). Penda, on the extreme, shows disgust with marriage in general: “As a young girl she had seemed to develop a hatred for men and had turned away everyone who had wanted to marry her” (138).

In addition to showing dissatisfaction with a traditional institution, polygamy, Ousmane also shows the importance of gender role flexibility. Without flexibility in gender roles, the strike would have either ended poorly or never ended at all. Both Penda, an important character in the novel, and the women’s march show how malleable gender roles can foster change.

Penda herself is an interesting character, breaking most traditional rules by refusing marriage and being sexually liberal. She first appears in the novel after she had, “returned home” after having “gone off with a man and stayed with him for several days” (138). Penda also has a cynicism toward men that is unusual. When Maimouna does not tell her who the father of the twins is, Penda responds, “I’ll find out for you!... All men are dogs!” (141). She also defends herself against sexual harassment, which is very progressive, when “one of the workmen had stupidly patted her on the behind, [and] she gave him a resounding smack. A woman slapping a man in public was something no one had seen before” (143). This is important because it shows that Penda owns her sexuality, because a woman who was simply promiscuous probably would not have reacted that way.

Penda is given responsibilities that other women are not. She is chosen to distribute food rations to the women and “Lahbib often congratulated himself on enlisting Penda’s help. She kept the women in line, and she forced even the men to respect her” (143). This suggests that Penda’s forceful personality was the reason she was given the job. It is as if, because she breaks the rules, she is allowed to have more important responsibilities.

Penda uses her new position as a trusted, responsible woman when she proposes the March of the Women. Bakayoko, the most progressive male character in the novel, convinces everyone to let her go. Penda remains in charge although there are male escorts. Lahbib says to her, “you will have to be sure that the man who come with you do not bother the women; and if you find that this march is too hard for the women, stop them and make them turn back” (188).

This March of the Women, organized by the most liberal woman in the novel, is the event that finally ends the strike. The march makes the press and gives the people hope about the strike. It motivates all of the African workers, even those who are not railroad workers, to fight for

equality in the workplace as “a general strike was called. It lasted for ten days, the time required before pressure from all sides forced the management of the railroad to resume discussions with the delegates of the strikers” (Ousmane 221).

While, *God's Bits of Wood* shows women having less traditional, crucial roles, it only challenges readers to think a little outside of the male dominated paradigm. For example, while Bakayoko utterly respected Penda, he still considered making her his second wife despite her disgust with it. He was still in favor of polygamy, which is inherently demeaning to women, despite his education. *God's Bits of Wood* shows the beginning of change, but might not make readers as passionate about gender equality as later novels written from a female perspective, such as *Joys of Motherhood* by Buchi Emecheta.

Joys of Motherhood skewers traditional gender roles and the fixed nature of native women's lives without disrespect toward traditional culture. According to O'Brien, Emecheta simultaneously valorizes “pre-contact rural African culture as authentic and ideal” and “contemporary urban colonial culture as liberating for women” (96). Her point is that each culture has something to offer and the right balance of each may be better for African women.

Emecheta shows us women with varying degrees of liberation that both devastates the reader and gives them hope. Interestingly, most of the women in the novel try to follow a traditional path, but fail, and thus end up having more freedom. Nnu Ego has the least amount of liberation of all the female characters portrayed, but is traditionally a ‘good’ woman. Since she is the main character and we see her story to the bitter end, we become disgusted with the idea of the traditional woman by the end of the novel.

An example of a somewhat liberated woman is Ona, Nnu Ego's mother. Ona refuses to marry Agbadi, Nnu Ego's father, because she is staying faithful to her father's wish that she not

marry. It was also common knowledge that Agbadi “married a few women in the traditional sense, but as he watched each of them sink into domesticity and motherhood he was soon bored and would go further afield for some other exciting, tall and proud female. This predilection of this extended to his mistresses as well” (10). It’s likely that Ona, who was “free to have men,” (12) did not want to marry Agbadi anyway because she would be discarded like the other women. Her father’s power gave her the freedom to remain his mistress even after giving birth to Nnu Ego. This is why Ona is only somewhat liberated: she needed her father’s backing to have the social mobility that she did.

Despite Ona’s liberation and strength, there is suggestion that she is not totally satisfied with this situation. When Agbadi calls her heartless after being wounded, Ona laments:

How else could she behave since she could not marry him? Because her father had no sons, she had been dedicated to the gods to produce children in his name, not that of any husband. Oh, *how torn she was between two men*: she had to be loyal toward her father as well as to her lover Agbadi. (18 italics mine).

This suggests that it is difficult for her to choose whether to acquiesce to her father or to Agbadi. Ona also expresses sorrow after Nnu Ego is born and she explains to Agbadi that she cannot live with him, “Since he [Ona’s father] has not taken a bride price from you, do you think it would be right for me to stay with you permanently? You know our custom does not permit it. I am still my father’s daughter,’ Ona *intoned sadly*” (26 italics mine). On her deathbed, Ona asks Agbadi to allow Nnu Ego to marry if she wants to and to “Allow her to be a woman” (28). It seems that Ona really wanted to marry Agbadi, but it simply was not possible.

The most liberated woman in the novel is Adaku. She initially tries and fails to live up to traditional standards. Her feelings of inadequacy are revealed to us after Nnu Ego is very rude to a friend of Adaku’s, but is barely punished by the men: “Adaku stood looking on and saw that she was completely ignored. They did not ask Nnu Ego to apologise to her...The message was

clear: she was only a lodger, her position in Nnaife Owulum's household had not been ratified" (167). Her position has not been "ratified" because she has no sons. Shortly after this, Adaku proclaims, "I am not prepared to stay here and be turned into a mad woman, just because I have no sons" (169). Adaku leaves to become a prostitute and eventually sends her own daughters to school. This contrasts greatly with Nnu Ego's life of poverty and struggling to even send Oshia, her oldest son, to school.

Interestingly, the more liberated women in the *Joys of Motherhood* really do want to be more traditional, at least initially. Ona wants to marry Agbadi and Adaku wants to have sons. However, Ona and Adaku end up living more satisfying lives than Nnu Ego, who is posthumously revered as being a good, traditional woman with many children.

The ironic concept of desiring to fulfill a role in an oppressive tradition in *Joys of Motherhood* contrasts with the passive argument made in *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangarembga: all women desire equality and choice, no matter how uneducated they are or how much they try to be 'good' traditional women.

Even the most traditional woman in the novel, Ma'Shingayi, Tambu's mother, shows discontentment. Her depressive attitude is presented clearly from the beginning of the novel. When Tambu asks her father for seed so that she can grow maize and sell it, he laughs at her. However, Tambu's mother says, "Listen to your child. She is asking for seed... Let her try. Let her see for herself that some things cannot be done," (17). It makes sense when we learn the conditions of her marriage later in the book. Ma'Shingayi's family was very poor, Tambu explains, but since Tambu's father got her pregnant before they were married, "[Tambu's] grandfather could not claim a very high bride price for his daughters and so my mother's marriage did not improve her family's condition very much. That was when my grandfather's

daughters gained a reputation for being loose women,” (128). It’s easy to see how a marriage under these conditions could be unhappy. When Lucia, Ma’Shingayi’s sister, attempts to convince her to make a decision about leaving her husband or having a Christian wedding, she responds with self-pity: “Lucia...why do you keep bothering me with this question? Does it matter what I want? Since when has it mattered what I want?” (155).

Maiguru, Tambu’s aunt and wife of Babamukuru, is another unhappy female character. This is especially interesting because Maiguru is as equally educated as Babamukuru, with a Master’s Degree in philosophy, but is unappreciated for it. In fact Tambu does not even know until it is mentioned casually by Babamukuru. When Maiguru tells her that she earned her degree at the same time as her husband, Tambu says, “I thought you went to look after Babamukuru...That’s all people ever say” (102). Maiguru claims to accept this lack of appreciation when she says, “no one even thinks about the things I gave up...But that’s how it goes, Sisi Tambu! And when you have a good man and lovely children, it makes it all worth while” (103). However, she eventually leaves Babamukuru because she is underappreciated, saying, “I am tired of being nothing in a home I am working myself sick to support” (174). Although she comes back after five days, she is changed, “She smiled more often and less mechanically, fussed over us less and was more willing and able to talk about sensible things...most of her baby talk had disappeared” (178)

Nyasha, Tambu’s worldly cousin, probably shows the strongest desire for equality out of all the female characters in the novel. She constantly rebels against her patriarchal father. She even develops an eating disorder, which is unusual for women in her culture. It shows her integration of European culture because she conforms to those standards. Since Nyasha is a European-like figure in this way, her eating disorder symbolizes what it often does in European

literature: dissatisfaction with womanhood, particularly the oppressed type of womanhood available to her in her culture.

The strongest example of women inevitably being drawn to equality, however, is Tambu herself. Tambu watches the women around her, mainly Nyasha and Maiguru, wondering why they are unhappy. However, there is a crucial turning point in her thinking patterns when Babamukuru makes her parents “actually” get married as Christians. It bothers her immensely, but she finds it impossible to speak her mind. She says, “I did not want to go to that wedding. A wedding that made a mockery of the people I belonged to and placed doubt on my legitimate existence in this world...I was not like Nyasha: I couldn’t simply go up to Babamukuru and tell him what I thought” (165).

Tambu struggles with cognitive dissonance because she always believed that she could stand up to Babamukuru if she needed to. She says, “I knew I had not taken a stand on many issues since coming to the mission, but all along I had been thinking that it was because there had been no reason to, that when the time came I would be able to do it” (166). This discomfort with her rebellious thoughts and difficulty expressing them follows her to the end of the novel, where she reveals that “Quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed” (208). We find out that, as an adult, Tambu rebels against the patriarchal structures around her.

Throughout the twentieth century, African authors have gradually painted pictures of stronger and well-rounded women. Ousmane showed us the beginning of role change in *God’s Bits of Wood*. Emecheta criticized tradition heavily in *Joys of Motherhood*. Dangarembga proposed that all women, no matter how ignorant, desire a better life through equality in *Nervous Conditions*. Over time, the portrayal of women in African literature has changed from an

invisible and content woman to a woman who desires equality and wants to be an integral part of her society.

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