

Demons at the Crossroad: Evaluating Hybrid Patriarchies in Postcolonial Marriage Institutions in *So Long a Letter* and *Purple Hibiscus*

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Abstract

Hybridity in Post-Colonial literature connotes the creation of diverse forms within a cultural space as a consequence of the influence of the colonizer's culture on the indigenes. This paper examines the phenomenon of hybridity as it occurs within the multicultural patriarchies of Post-colonial societies from the feminist literary lens of two texts; Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* and Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. The theories of Feminism and postmodernism are employed to highlight the new directions of the discussions as the paper seeks to highlight the hydra-headed nature of patriarchal domination as portrayed in postcolonial literature. The study aims to contribute to the understanding of hybrid sub-divisions of patriarchal authority in Post-Colonial marriage institutions as represented in fiction.

Keywords: Hybridity, Patriarchy, Feminist, Post-colonial literature

Introduction

Hybridity occurs as cultural, political and linguistic mutation, producing the merging of forms and the creation of a 'third space' (Homi Bhaba). The concept is a feature of post-colonial discourse and is understood in a general sense to mean the overall evolution of indigenous culture arising from the contact with external cultures, as it obtains in, for instance colonized spaces; and the manifestation in the hybrid elements, evident in the use of language as a medium of expression of post-colonial narratives. It is essentially the metamorphosis of the acquired forms to produce regional adaptations of culture and ideology.

In this paper, we focus on the gender dynamics in the marriage institutions of acquired patriarchal and indigenous (traditional) societies as portrayed in Feminist literature. An examination of female trauma in the marriages of the main characters of Mariama Ba's *So Long A Letter* and Chimamanda Adichie's

Purple Hibiscus, whereby these protagonists are subject to diverse hegemonic oppressions, including those imposed by mythic institutions such as Christianity and Islam, reveal the bond of shared experience of women within the marital institution across national borders. This kinship in women's experience is observed in the sense of both authors being post-colonial subjects, from the same continental sub-region region and also as women writing about fellow women, and who have an intrinsic understanding of the pain of the two-pronged fork of tradition and religious bias.

It is an established fact that patriarchal societies have tended to undermine the social value of women through the deprivation of basic rights, and have subjected women to institutionalized exploitation within the marriage institution. This practice has created profiles of women as being submissive to meet the hegemonic prescription of feminine virtues while the same 'virtue' may be considered cowardly or inferior when possessed by their menfolk. This marginalization is often represented in post-colonial literature where the gendered direction manifests as the connivance between acquired and traditional marriage norms and their joint domination of the common subject, -the woman. It becomes necessary then, to identify the specific patriarchal norms at work in these contested gender space.

According to Anthonia Kalu,

Contemporary African life today is an offshoot traditional consciousness borne of the dynamism which is evident in the arts and culture. As a lifestyle that preceded colonial incursion it encouraged and indeed demanded a continuous search for innovative knowledge system for addressing emerging challenges and this approach engendered creativity in traditional lifestyle. However, the colonial experience led to the social dislocation from cultural identity by encouraging separation African traditional values (*marriage norms being one of these*). This led to the disarticulation of social, political and spiritual connections. (*Italics mine*)

Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1972), has lamented what he called the forced disengagement from familiar ways of knowing which was recorded in narrative form:

You know the popular story among our people – that the Mubia told the people to shut their eyes in prayer, and when later they

opened their eyes, the land was taken. And then, so the story goes, the Mubia told them not to worry about those worldly things which could be eaten by moth; and they sang: Thi ino ti yakwa ndi nwhitukiri (this world is not my home, I am only a pilgrim)(33).

It is ironic that the new narrative supported the disengagement of African peoples from their traditional land, culture and arts. African literature subsequently initiated the romance with the new colonial lifestyles which led to the evolution of contemporary African society. Naturally, the aesthetics that governed literary criticism became embedded in the overt expressions of the new, scriptocentric legacy.

The Religious/Traditional Dichotomy in Marriage Constructs

Sylvia Wairimu Kang'ara's *Beyond Bed and Bread: Making the African State Through Marriage Law Reform* makes an important observation about the nature of postcolonial marriage. Her work demonstrates the central role that marriages reforms played in the construction of colonial and post-colonial societies with reference to parts of British colonized sub-Saharan Africa. Her article analyses the central role that the invalidation of customary marriages played in colonial administration.

Judges invalidated large swaths of existing legal relations during the initial stage of encounter between common law and African customary laws and in a professed effort to align colonial practices with English morality, colonial administrations superimposed a classical legal scheme of thinking about the family and the market at a moment when most of the African economy depended upon a different household model. Instead of the separate spheres ideology that characterized family law of the classical legal tradition, African customary marriages were based on an economically active household—often composed of polygamous units engaging in economically important exchanges of property through marriage, such as the bride-price. Starting from an assumption that individual free will was the building block for any civilized legal system, colonial judges invalidated customary marriages as repugnant to English colonial morality. They looked hard, but did not seem to find any African subjects capable of becoming “individual holders of exclusive and absolute rights” in the classical legal tradition.

A major fracture in the social equilibrium of the traditional culture is the calculated exclusion of the woman from the educational system leading to her alienation from the social, cultural and political sphere. Exiled from the law-making process of decisions that would dictate her place in the new dispensation and hidden from the public light, her jaundiced view only reflects the mantra the man brings home. The texts *So Long a Letter* and *Purple Hibiscus* reveal that marriage in the post-colonial space was created within the gendered power hierarchies of the hybrid colonial and indigenous hegemonic masculinities, with the common purpose of subjugating the woman. The selected works draw attention to the plight of both the educated woman in *So Long A Letter* and the relatively unschooled in *Purple Hibiscus*, and both within the postcolonial environment.

We first examine Ba's *So Long a Letter* as an account of marriage experience issues in post-colonial, Islamic communities of West Africa. According to Ali, pg.179

Early Islamic scholars believe that Islam significantly improved the status of women in 7th century Arab societies, elevating their position relative to the pre-Islamic period believed to have featured an unprecedented level pervasive misogyny and female infanticide Interestingly, Ramatoulaye tries to defend the Islamic position on the treatment of women which her husband Mawdo has violated, but this is clearly a choice of a lesser evil since neither the traditional patriarchy nor the Islamic one endorses absolute equality for the genders, and any perceived equality is only a matter of difference in degrees of abuse. Elizabeth Fernea also endorses the fact that Islam in its original form supports gender equality for women and men but that the doctrine has been subjected to biased androcentric translations in Islamic scholarship over time. The aim of Muslim feminists therefore is to re-evaluate the translation of the Qur'an by women themselves (416)

The major theme of *So Long A Letter* is the emotional pain in marriage and the struggle for survival of the heroine, Ramatoulaye, after her husband's death. She endures the ultimate betrayal when her husband takes a young wife after thirty years of marriage and twelve children. The humiliation is worsened by the fact that the young bride is the friend Ramatoulaye's daughter. In the epistolary, the main character denounces her husband's action but then tries to prescribe Islamic

teaching under which the marriage is contracted as an ideal which Mawdo, her husband has negated. We find that in the absence of an alternative form of defense and succor, Ramatoulaye turns to Islamic provisions, not as an ideal but as the less abusive of the hegemonies, forgetting that even within this religious doctrine, the woman is still subjected to a degree of abuse. It is also evident that the education of the woman makes no significant difference in the social elevation or emancipation of the woman in the Senegalese society of *So Long A Letter* (pg) as is the case in many of the oppressive practices of patriarchal polygamy. This is why Ramatoulaye's education makes no difference in the society and so does not necessarily spare her any ill-treatment. The emotional struggle for survival of the heroine, Ramatoulaye, after her husband decides to take a second wife after thirty years of marriage and twelve children, is only one of the main themes of *So Long A Letter*. The novel, in the introduction of the 1989 Heinemann's African Writers Series edition is described as a perceptive testimony to the plight of those articulate women who live in a social milieu dominated by attitudes and values that deny them their proper place Pix.

Mariama Ba explores her themes in this novel through an epistolary exchange between the heroine, Ramatoulaye, and her best friend Aissatou. Some scholars are of the opinion that the subjugation of women in traditional African marriage institutions is a generalized experience. Similarly in *Purple Hibiscus*, we witness the agony of Beatrice as she endures the pain of living under the dictates of a traditional authority that stipulates ownership of a wife by her husband. It is a tradition which grants the man the right to beat his wife as a form of correction because the bride price paid by the man in Igbo culture symbolizes the total ownership of the woman by the husband. On the other hand, while Christianity condemns the traditional practices of the indigenous culture, such as marriage to more than one woman, it prescribes submission to a man's will in marriage and thus passively endorses marital abuse of women in Christian doctrine as is evident in the relationship between Eugenia and his long suffering wife, Beatrice. Hence, we see Eugene, Beatrice's abusive husband humiliating his wife before the white priest without any admonition while subjecting her to such a high degree of domestic abuse that leads to at least two abortions from his beating (pg34). To buttress the unequal position of the sexes, Ujowundu (1992) asserts that women are only seen and not heard in African society, and that this practice was not originally so in many African cultures. In the first instance, the statement categorizes all African cultures under one canopy on a racial terrain that boasts of thousands of distinctive, cultural philosophies and practices, featuring a few matriarchies. In the second place, according to Awe (1989), the subjugation of women in postcolonial societies is the result of Western influence on the traditional

patriarchies, which typically borrowed aspects of the Western custom which favoured the men on the traditional landscape. This produced a hybrid form of patriarchal marriage which is a fusion of Christian and traditional customs. Ujuwundu also asserts that women

live under the shadows of men from their maiden homes to their matrimonial homes hence, they are regarded as second class citizens. They are usually neglected as their opinions are never sought before decisions are taken even in matters that directly affect them. In marriage, proposals are made to their fathers, or other male members of the family in the event of the father's death. In fact, in the African society, which is under study here, women are seen as mere tools of necessity-housewives, child bearers, gratifiers of men's sexual passion; and worst of all, not consulted in the decision making processes in their communities. The women as wives are expected to be submissive, obedient, unquestioning and servile while any challenge to these attributes attracts social disfavour. (p.16)

Evidently, the clearly defined roles for women are passed on to the girl-child as she grows. As soon as she is able to do things for herself, she starts assuming the roles society has mapped out for her; learning cooking skills, caring for the home, helping with everything else the mother does, and preparing for womanhood and matrimony. These tasks are in no way inferior or easy but their gendered identity stamps the chores as feminine and therefore inferior.

Conclusion

Pre-colonial presentation of the married woman as wife and mother in many African cultures resonated with the concept of community and the female principle. It was a philosophy that valued the contribution of the economic contribution of women as traders whose skills not only sustained their families but also brought prosperity to their communities. The imposition of the colonial culture mandated that the woman's marital role be structured along Western thought and system of inequalities in place of the complementarities which existed within the traditional setting.

Consequently, postcolonial contemporary marriages are products of the fusion of Western and traditional concepts designed to favour the male sex. The gap in government policies that address the African woman's confinement to the domestic scene until the emergence of feminist agitation is directly traceable to their absence from the ongoing (re)creation and maintenance of societal vision.

It is the result of her muted existence and subsequent invisibility in Africa's search for mental freedom from the Colonial addiction. Although African writers did not exclude her from the emerging culture that impressed African experience for a largely external readership, her portrayal became problematic in the contemporary setting which devised rules for her participation in the new marital norms where she struggles against the joint subjugation of the contemporary hybrid. To further complicate the situation, the task of reasserting the African woman's presence was left to western educated African men who, themselves, were inadequately inscribed in the new dispensation. Burdened with the responsibility for self-reclamation and the risk of a lost homeland, a significant number of early writers overtly articulated the African male, thereby sealing the position of the woman beneath the glass ceiling.

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