

The Woman's Health, Child Birth, Social Encumbrances: A Clog to Efficiency to Western Education

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Abstract

The issue of childbirth remains a significant challenge to women in most African countries where culture and patriarchy dominate the women's freedom, reasoning and desire to grow educationally. To a large extent, this has hindered some women's advancement in their educational pursuits. This paper aims to showcase such situations and categorically state that, despite all these challenges, the woman who wishes to advance educationally still did. The paper adopts the African feminist theory, otherwise known as womanism. The theory recognizes the African man or husband as the head, but, reminds them that the woman is an individual with a positive duality and, who must be recognized in society, respected as partners in progress. It is a qualitative research as information is obtained from textbooks, journals, observations, and interactions, among other sources. Findings revealed that the modern African woman who wishes to forge ahead educationally still did, despite her challenges and hurdles to achieving such a feat. The paper concludes that women are achievers, given the numerous roles they play in society. The paper recommends that archaic traditions go into extinction, and men who practice them in these modern times should change.

Keywords: women, health, childbirth, education, efficiency, patriarchy, society, Africa

INTRODUCTION

The African woman has come a long way in her quest for self-actualization and independence, away from the shackles of culture and tradition that had hindered her progress for ages. The African woman's personality means different things to different people depending on the angle or approach. In some cases, the woman is her own enemy as she sometimes refuses to key into the contemporary world but chooses to remain in the archaic culture that has caged her for several decades.

There are several ideas about women in the African society. In some settings, a woman is a male appendage. It means that she cannot exist without a male figure. To that effect, this has constituted a holistic picture of the African woman to date. In some traditional societies, married women are highly esteemed; such societies regard them as responsible persons. Their responsibilities include fetching water, cooking, and doing other household chores. They live for their husbands and children as well as other family relations. On the other hand, unmarried woman in this society is despised and regarded as irresponsible; no wonder some traditional-minded parents push and force their innocent daughters of marriageable age into a relationship or marriage unsolicited and some, in the process, meet untimely deaths. At the same time, some went mental/developed all manner of sicknesses that had rendered them unproductive and vulnerable to themselves and the society at large.

Childbirth and child rearing have remained a significant challenge to women in most African societies; culture, tradition and patriarchy have not helped either. While some have outgrown this clog, some have remained on the web. Some African women have sacrificed western Education on the altar of culture, tradition and domestic issues. To these categories of women, progress in western

Education is far from being a reality, and they do not mind. *Tell It to Women*, a play by Tess Onwueme, reveals this.

Who is the African Woman?

The African woman in the context of this paper is a female. Her culture and tradition have denied several rights she is naturally entitled to. It has been proven overtime through the works of African writers, both males and females.

The Woman's Health

The woman's health (referred to here) has to do with her experiences during and after pregnancy. Some African environments are so harsh on the woman that the woman, out of fear, has caged herself and sacrificed her strength and ego to satisfy the insatiable culture. Nnu-Ego is an instance of this, a female character and mother in Buchi Emecheta's novel *Joys of Motherhood*. This character never experienced the joys of motherhood despite her struggles to meet each family member's needs, including that of her spouse.

The woman's level of exposure has a lot to play in her understanding of her health conditions, even when the doctors explain to her. Some traditional-minded women have sacrificed their health due to a lack of exposure to western Education to satisfy the insatiable culture and tradition even when they feel unwell. For instance, a woman gives birth and has no assistance at home. She still takes care of the new born baby, caters for the older children, her husband, and other relations living with the family despite her not fully recovering from childbirth pains and stress. At other times, she may have been advised by her doctor to take an entire rest upon discharge from the hospital or skip some years before having another baby due to some medical challenges observed during delivery, but, at most times, advice by medical experts is ignore. They carry on and endanger their lives with more excruciating task.

Childbirth

Childbirth has become a significant factor that has hindered the African woman from being free from cultural demands. Most African women strive to have children by all means; so they do many things to achieve this goal. Some get into forced marriages because being husbandless, to them, is a misnomer. They see themselves as unfulfilled in life. Some have lost their lives in trying to satisfy this tradition of: "I must have a child or children" despite medical warnings. And some have been emotionally traumatised as revealed in some works of African female writers like, Ama Ata Idoo, Efua Sutherland, Zulu Sofola, Tess Onwueme among others.

Theoretical Framework

This work adopts the Feminist Theory. Feminist theory is that which campaigns for equal rights of women with men in all spheres of life. In the words of Lisa Turtle (1986), "Feminism is an "advocacy of women's rights based on a belief in the equality of the sexes and its use. The word refers to everyone who is aware of and seeking to end women's subjugation in any way for any reason (104)". Also, Helen Chukuma (2003), defines feminism as a political doctrine advocating for equal rights and treatment of women as of men (44)". Another scholar, Anthonia Umoren (2002), defines feminism as a "world wide cultural activity poised for the liberation of women from the bottle-neck of tradition with a view to imploring on their subordinate status in the society (3)". Judith Bardwick notes that feminism is "an implicit rejection of the lifestyle created by strongly coercive norms that define and restrict what women are and can do" (5). It confronts sexism and the constraints imposed on women in the name of culture and seeks to reconstruct the female psyche and empower her to function maximally as a free human person. Beginning with the works of women abolitionists and first-generation feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin, Elizabeth Stanton, Lucretia Mott, among others, and second-generation feminists such as De Beauvoir, Betty Friedan, Millet, Germain Greer, Luice Irigary, Elaine Showalter, Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixious; the agenda has been to break the yoke of sexism in the lives of women.

Indeed, Alice Walker calls African feminism "womanism," a concept she expounds in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. Chikwenye Ogunyemi explains it in detail:

Womanism is black-centred; it is accommodationist. It believes in the freedom and independence of women like feminism. It wants meaningful union between black women and black men and black children and will see to it that men begin to change from their sexist stand (63).

So African feminism is not just "a struggle to end sexist oppression" or "a struggle to defend the rights of women" (23), as Bell Hooks says; instead, it places both within a cultural context. Feminism defends the dignity of women without completely ignoring the cultural reality of each society. This is the point that Chukwuma is making when she speaks against the disorderliness and extremism, which she associates with "misguided, frustrated and disgruntled women." (*Feminism...* ix). However, then, it seeks to enhance women's abilities in every sphere of human endeavour. In doing this, Ogundipe-Leslie comments that the female writer corrects the "false images of the women in Africa." In doing this, she adds, "she (the woman writer) must know the reality of the African woman, must know the truth about African women and womanhood" (8). The truth is that African women are burden bearers, so the negative impacts of tradition dehumanize African womanhood.

Chukwuma is specific about African feminism and how it operates when she states: "African feminism is accommodationist not exclusive and negativistic. Men remain a vital part of the women's lives" (*Feminism ...* xvi). Feminist literature emancipates women, makes them conscious of the societal institutions that bind them, and sensitizes them to strive for self-discovery, self-realization and self-fulfilment. Feminism looks at issues from the female point of view. According to IniobongUko, feminism emphasizes that: "Sex role socialization is not the only duty that a woman can offer to society" (18). It has been attested to by the numerous contributions of women to human development.

Feminism in Africa and the Western world have common ground - task of challenging the myth of women's inferiority to men by confronting the discriminatory social attitudes that subjugate women in society. Both desire the equality of the sexes and oppose sexism, male discrimination and the social exploitation of women. This is the point Ini Uko makes when she attests that "whether it is in Europe, America, Africa or the Diaspora, the issue of women's inferiority to men is fundamental" (9). The feminist theory is relevant to this study because it critiques men's writings and traditional views of women and extends to the sociological, even the formalistic and psychoanalytic approaches to criticism.

Because of the above, some of these suppressions of expressions of even the best impulses of women played out in the thematic thrust of works by female writers in the literary space. This voice was aided and abated by the woman's exposure to Education. In the words of Worugji, Gloria Eme (2019, 354), "Education, therefore, is believed to be the bedrock to the enlightenment of the female Gender in that it is fundamental to the emancipation of the female and the entire community from unhealthy patriarchal norms and culture.

The African Mother as Educationist

Worugji (2023) explains that the child's first Education begins at home and with the mother as the first teacher. She must groom the child to know the basic principles of life. She ensures and endures the huddles in getting this done for the child at all costs; hence she is an *Ndanda* meaning "an ant". This view becomes significant when considering Diedre Badejo's remark that "women are the first teachers of the children". Badejo says, "Kwame Nkrumah said it well, you train a man, you train an individual, but if you train a woman, you have trained a nation" (385).

Chioma Opara (2004), in affirmation of Badejo's statement, throws more light on what Education does to the female recipient when she alludes, "female education is programmed towards ... economic empowerment, ... strictly contrasted with poverty and deprivations" (118). This further means that being a mother in the African environment is an enormous task, laden with tirelessness, selflessness, industry, and much more, time. African mother is a burden bearer who carries many loads, not minding their weight on her. She ensures that the family is not lacking at any time irrespective of the challenges faced in achieving that. This fact about African mother is not overemphasized. Motherhood, in the African sense, and especially in the African environment, is laden with burdens, her husband's and children's burdens, and family burdens/relations' burdens, among others.

This paper draws instances of these from some literary works by African authors. For instance, *The Activist* by Ojaide takes a swipe into the socio-political and economic activities in the rich oil region, "which celebrates young academia and freedom fighters who combine courage and intellect to advance popular resistance against exploitation by the federal government and its foreign collaborator" (Darah, 2010). These freedom fighters like Pere, Omagbemi, the area boys are like the Mau Mau in Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat*.

Ojaide further probes into gender and health concerns which have continued to destroy communities in the Niger Delta. The police, army and naval marines unleash terror on the people instead of protecting them.

Nevertheless, exploring the woman's age-long plight, in two plays (*The Broken Calabash* (1986) and *The Reign of Wazobia* (1988)), Tess Onwueme engages womanism under African feminism in her theoretical exploitation of women's issues. She imbued and endowed her heroines with solid character traits hitherto dwarfed by the pen of the male writers in the literature.

Also, Christianity gives liberation to women when it declares that (there is no male nor female with God, Gal: 3:28). God made Adam. Onwueme lends her voice in her plays with other women writers to redefine the position of women from docility to active, fear to brave, ignorance to knowledge, assertive, loving, and negative to positive agents of change in all spheres of life.

As pointed out earlier, marriage is one of the traditional obligations the African society expects from all women of marriageable age. And another male author would state that an unmarried woman in some parts of Africa is regarded as a wayward person who trivializes the traditionally accepted ethical codes of marriage, just as Amadi uses the character Ahurole in *The Concubine* to project that the woman has no right to choose a marriage partner like Ojebeta in Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave girl*, Adah in *Second Class Citizen* and Ebla in Farah's *From A Crooked Rib*. Ahurole is imposed on Ekwueme in order not to fault the traditional law. She is used to satisfying her custom. Some African men marry for the sake of care and attention; this is why Amadi, in his advice to Ekwueme in *The Concubine*, states: you need "A mature woman, soothing and loving, a woman ... like your mother" (138). Flora Nwapa presents a similar situation in *Efuru* and *Idu*. However, she creates more engaging female characters with adequate skill and personal ingenuity to survive social exploitation and retain their balance.

Elechi Amadi in *The Concubine* presents Okachi, Ihuoma's mother, as a mother figure. She is used to demonstrate that the image of the African woman is anchored on the male presence when she advises Ihuoma, "Still you need a man to look after you" (*The Concubine*, 40). This suggests the sexist and patriarchal values that the woman cannot exist as an individual; she is meaningfully recognized in this society due to her relationship with a man. All these show that spinsterhood is an offence and deviant behaviour in most African societies, especially Igbo land, an ethnic group in Nigeria.

Naana Banyiwá Horne's view in Emelia Oko (2004), "Men writers tend to play the sexuality of their female characters over, creating the impression that women have no identity outside their roles. Their women are primarily concerning male protagonists and in secondary roles" (120). In *The Great Ponds*, The cases of Chisa and Oda confirm this over-simplification. As Emelia Oko reveals, "the very reason for this oversimplification of the female is that men cannot experience what Simone de Beauvoir describes as a whole genetic and cultural complex of being a woman" (67); Oda and Chisa's predicament in the war speaks for itself.

Oda loses her pregnancy in the process of her being raped - she does not dwell on the psychological aspect of her experience; instead, her worry is male-biased, as revealed by the passage: "... Oda broke down...shuddered and wept. Olumba held her close. What of ... of ...Olumba stammered gazing at his wife's belly. Dead. Male or female? Male. The woman wept again" (182). As the passage reveals, Oda sheds tears bitterly because she has lost a male child, although her personal feelings is not separated from the loss. This image is typical of the African woman, which some has held unto tenaciously irrespective of its adverse effects on them. Christie Achebe confronts this in her work on "Woman's Role in Nigerian Society" (4).

Chisa, EzDiali's daughter, a virgin - does not weep for the pain and emotional destabilization she encountered in the process of being sexually abused; she weeps for disappointing Ikechi, her spouse, as if it was her fault to lose her pregnancy with a male child. The passage reveals:

Chei! Chei! and she wept violently. Chisa cried as if she would never stop. ... I did my best, she whispered in agony; believe me, I did my best. I slapped him, bit him, and threatened to commit suicide. I even told him I was a leper. However, he forsook his three wives and repeatedly came after me (185).

The woman, in this sense, becomes man's need meter. The pains the woman encounters in making the man happy or meeting him at the point of his need is not considered. The incidence of influenza attacks on the community in Amadi's *The Great Ponds* further reveals this image of the woman. Everybody, including Nyoma Olumba's wife, was too ill to do domestic work. Nevertheless, seeing Olumba in this confusion, she managed to the kitchen "... washed the pot and scoured the dirty mortar. Olumba, let her. He knew these things were beyond him ... the prospect of cooking scared him" (161). Nyoma took the risk to ensure the family fed despite her deteriorating health. This is why some African writers state that each society has what are appropriate female roles, which constitute the cultural theory about Gender.

Given the above, African motherhood is adorned with pains and scars. It is more bitter because the fathers contribute to these scars and pains. It is what Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo condemns thus "It is a yoke to be a woman because the woman is the burden bearer who must do two-thirds of the chores" (7). This is in summary, the position of the traditional African woman in a traditional setting.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, the work revealed that the modern African woman who wishes to forge ahead educationally still did, despite her challenges and hurdles to achieving such a feat. The paper recommends that archaic traditions and the men who practice them in these modern times should grow beyond tradition and progress in their minds, reasoning and action because society is growing and not static, and so are humans, especially women who are a majority. Women are the species that add colouration to the progress and beauty of any society; take away their presence, and you find dullness, chaos, and a lack of visible progress.

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