



A Critical Survey of Selected Texts on the Growth of Feminism in Nigeria

Fwangyil Gloria Ada

Department of English, Faculty of Arts, University of Jos, Nigeria
glofwangs1@yahoo.com
+2348037711088

ABSTRACT

Africa has her own peculiar beliefs, norms and traditions which are entirely different from western culture. This is reflected in the brand of feminism practised in Nigeria. The Feminist Movement started subtly and unconsciously in Nigeria in 1929 during the Aba women's riot. Over the years, remarkable growth has been recorded which is evident in the noticeable presence of women in all spheres of life in Nigeria. This paper looks at some of these challenges and remarkable successes right from 1960 to the present day society as encapsulated in fictional works. The peculiar aspects of African feminism that make it entirely different from what is practised in the western world are analysed. Feminists in Africa recognise the fact that there are core values and beliefs that cannot be adulterated by westernisation. Women in Nigeria practise a brand of feminism that regards the men folk as complementary partners in progress, and not competitors. Indeed, the communalistic nature of African societies may frown at certain aspects of western individualism that permit radical feminism; for this may spell societal disintegration. Selected texts of Flora Nwapa, Zaynab Alkali and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's works are used as case studies. These writers represent three phases of the growth of feminism in Nigeria in the given chronological order. The literary contributions of other female writers within the three given phases of this study are equally noted.

INTRODUCTION

Feminism in Nigeria is a western construct which has come to stay. However, women in the pre-independence era made laudable achievements in the quest for women's liberation and emancipation within the nation's patriarchal society. The Women's War of 1929, also known as the Aba Women's Riot, marked the subtle beginning of the Feminist Movement in Nigeria. These market women in South Eastern Nigeria protested vehemently against the imposition of taxes by Warrant Chiefs who were seen as stooges in the hands of the colonial masters. This direct and fearless opposition to the imposed law forced the colonial masters to drop the taxes. A decade later, the

Survey of Selected Texts on Feminism in Nigeria

Abeokuta market women also protested against the imposition of taxes which they considered unfair and alien. This bold move led to the formation of the Abeokuta Women's Union by the educator and feminist, Mrs Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti. She led the anti-tax protest which eventually resulted in the abdication of the Alake of Abeokuta. These important acts of resistance in Nigerian history which were protests against colonial injustice were championed solely by women and eventually led to the movement for independence which the men championed. Other notable female activists in the quest for female liberation and emancipation in Nigeria in the pre-independence and post-independence era included Madam Margaret Ekpo and Oyinkan Abayomi

The Women's Suffrage Movement, which later became known as the Feminist Movement in the United States sought to get the voting rights for women. Cultural differences and the peculiarities of the forms of subjugation of women in different societies have led to the pruning of feminism in Africa. This aimed at adapting it to the relevant needs of African women and to ensure that they do not receive it as a mere transfer of terminology or perception. The Feminist Movement was received in Nigeria because of the universality of women's oppression. In view of this, Chikwenye Ogunyemi coined the term: 'African Womanism' which is a modification of Alice Walker's 'Womanism'. This, according to her, becomes essential because:

...As for us we cannot take the African American situation and its own peculiarities and impose it on Africa, particularly as Africa is so big and culturally diverse. When I was thinking about womanism I was thinking about those areas which are relevant and diverse for Africans, but which blacks in America cannot deal with- issues like extreme poverty and in-law problems, such as older women oppressing younger women, women oppressing their co-wives or men oppressing their wives. Religious fundamentalism is another such African problem that is not really relevant to African Americans...These are problems that have, to my mind, to be covered from an African womanist perspective. So I thought it was necessary to develop a theory to accommodate these differences (cited in Arndt:2002).

Although Ojoade calls it 'borrowed training and thoughts' (28), it has been able to address the challenges and issues that pertain to Nigerian women and has achieved positive results.

Feminism in Africa has met stiff resistance and criticism from the menfolk. Ojoade in his article on Mariama Ba says; "femininity is the virtue of traditionalists; feminism is the veneer of the progressive striving to become man" (84). Such a view may account for the strong denial of some female writers, whose works are clearly feminist in approach, that they are feminist advocates. Notable writers like Buchi Emechata, Flora Nwapa, Zainab Alkali, Bessie Head and Mariama Ba, have always denied being feminists. Rather, they prefer to refer to themselves as Womanists. Buchi Emecheta refers to herself as a feminist with a small 'f'. The reason for this denial stems from the fear of ostracisation, ridicule and the erroneous view held by some men about feminists. Feminism, to this group of people, is

associated with lesbianism, sexual promiscuity, drunkenness, smoking, women who refuse to bear children, and so on. As such, it is usually advised to dissociate from such women. Feminism in Nigeria is accused of being “an elitist movement, and that feminist ideas appeal only to city women of the intellectual class” (Arndt 328).

Despite these criticisms, the Feminist Movement in Nigeria has made visible and tremendous achievements. The society is sensitized on the evils of harmful traditional practices and on the need to ameliorate the plight of the oppressed African woman. People are getting more aware of the dangers of Female Genital Mutilation (also known as clitoridectomy), polygamy with regard to Sexually Transmitted Diseases, the concept of child-bride and its resultant effect of VVF, children and women trafficking for prostitution in foreign countries, sexual abuse and exploitation both within and outside marriage, oppressive traditional rites that widows are forced to go through after the demise of their husbands, amongst others. In Northern Nigeria, women have argued that they can be good Muslim wives and mothers even as they pursue professional training. Feminists today have fostered a greater awareness of the connections between gender and the political economy of the state by openly discussing the links between the public and private experiences of African women. They have challenged the reluctance to talk about gender conflicts, and they have prompted women to collectively address political actions that affect their lives.

Nigerian Female Writers: Preoccupation and Challenges

The initial dearth of female writers in Africa was not unrelated to the policies adopted by the colonial masters with regard to educational opportunities for women. Colonialism afforded men the opportunity to be educated, which is key to any meaningful literary development. While men were attending to the colonial masters and getting exposed to western lifestyle and education, women were at the home front caring for their children and husbands, and engrossed in demanding domestic chores. Tsitsi Dangarembga in *Nervous Conditions* (1988) describes the situation this way:

twenty-four stomachs to fill three times a day, twenty-four bodies to which water has to be fetched from Nyamorira daily. Twenty-four people's laundry to wash as often as possible ... Now this was women's work (133).

Moreover, women had no time for leisure which is important for mental activity and artistic creativity. Towards the end of colonialism, illiteracy was gradually accepted as the normal thing for women, while education and writing was regarded as the sole preserve of the men. In addition., the preconceived notions about women that they are ‘second class’ humans who are expected to play subordinate roles to men saw to it that women were denied access to education. When women were eventually given little access

Survey of Selected Texts on Feminism in Nigeria

to education, they were restricted to what maybe termed “feminine education” like nursing, teaching, which only emphasized their femininity and quite consuming. This type of education consisted mainly of teaching obedience and submission to male authority. Adebayo, in her article, ‘Feminism in Francophone African Literature: From Liberalism to Militancy’ agrees that cultural myths as well as the Christian and Islamic religions emphasize the main roles of women as maternity and domesticity... the good woman is the good wife and the good mother of a horde of children for whom she slaves for all her life (227).

Early male writers like Chinua Achebe and Cyprian Ekwensi, were preoccupied with ‘writing back’ at the Europeans in order to correct the preconceived and negative notions about Africa and Africans by portraying the serene traditional African setting with its well established democratic set up. After the attainment of independence, they became preoccupied with social, economic, political issues and post-colonial disillusionment, but created no room for personal and domestic issues which concern women. In these novels, female characters are usually portrayed as playing subservient roles. They are usually given stereotypical roles whose attributes include passivity, instability, piety, irrationality and materiality. In other words, the woman’s role revolves around marriage and procreation. Ogundipe-Leslie asserts that much of the male writings “concerns itself with the eroticism of the African woman to the extent that it can be argued that many male writers conceive of women only as phallic receptacles” (6). The early works by foremost female writers were initially given little or no critical attention and they also faced the problem of sexism in the publishing field. They were often ostracized and subjected to male ridicule and aggression. Ama Ata Aidoo relays her experiences as a woman writer and university lecturer:

As an academic today, I wonder how I can maintain a vibrant intellect condemned as I am to ostracism only because I refuse to consider marriage as the only way to live. (Even in the university environment) no one expects a woman to perform well in any other areas apart from cooking, sewing, and other so-called traditional feminine activities ... Once in a while ... I catch myself wondering whether I would have found the courage to write when I was too young to know what was good for me. Most certainly, my trials as a woman writer are heavier and much more painful than any I have to go through as a university teacher (69-71).

Female writers are preoccupied with correcting preconceived notions and misconceptions about the woman, womanhood and her problems. I choose to call it “women writing back” just as the male writers also did. Independence, abdication of domestic responsibilities, divorce, individualism, self-fulfillment in and outside marriage, exploration of patriarchal oppression and female struggle for freedom are issues usually treated by female writers. Western notions of individualism and success without dependence on men are common in female novels. Amaka, in Flora Nwapa’s *One is Enough* (1981) refuses to be tied down by marriage and

prefers her economic and individual independence. She tells Mclaid about her quest for individualism in these words:

I don't want to be a wife ... a mistress, yes, with a lover, yes of course, but not a wife. There is something in that word that does not suit me. As a wife, I am never free. I am a shadow of myself. As a wife, I am almost impotent. I am in prison, unable to advance in body or soul. Something gets hold of me as a wife and destroys me. When I rid myself of Obiora, things started working for me. I don't want to go back to my 'wifely' days. No, I am through with husbands. I said farewell to husbands the first day I came to Lagos (132.).

The autobiographical novel is a common literary sub-genre among female writers. This avenue is used to reveal the oppression and discrimination women face daily in phallogentric societies. They are subjected to violence and abuse in the hands of their fathers and husbands. Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* (1981) is one of the autobiographical novels that portrays the true experiences of women in a 'man's world'. Although Emecheta is accused of exaggerating the conditions of women, Helen Chukwuma says that "Buchi looked and portrayed life as she saw it, as she lived it and as she saw others live it at the place and time. It is no exaggeration, it is the truth" (11). In the given content of the novel, the docile, quiet, submissive, cowardly and irrational woman is replaced by a strong, hardworking, resourceful, determined, courageous and resilient woman who is ready to assert herself in this patriarchal society. In situations where the oppression is unbearable and daunting, women unite and bond to form a formidable team.

Feminist writings in Nigeria started with the publication of Flora Nwapa's debut novel, *Efuru*, in 1966. It depicts the peculiar challenges of women in the traditional African society using the Igbo land in Eastern Nigerian as its setting. The second generation writers which include Buchi Emecheta, Zainab Alkali, Ifeoma Okoye, amongst others, are concerned with the type of oppression women undergo in post-independence Nigeria. The attraction to city life and the difficulty in effectively combining the traditional roles of a wife and mother and competing favourably with their male counterparts at school and in the work place are some of their thematic concerns. Adah, in Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* (1981) struggles to live up to her responsibilities as a mother to five children in a foreign land, studying, and also keeping her job in order to cater for the needs of children. Despite the physical and emotional abuse she endures from her husband, Francis, she triumphs at the end. Chimamanda Adichie and Sefi Atta represent the third historical phase and also depict a new crop of female writers with unique difficulties that face the African woman in a modern society. They reveal, through their works, that the oppression of women is still prevalent in the contemporary society because the patriarchal control of women is deeply rooted in the fabrics of different African culture.

Survey of Selected Texts on Feminism in Nigeria

Despite the difference in the historical phases of women's writing in Nigeria, common feature of these novelists' artistry is women's quest for liberation, the quest for economic independence, challenges of infertility and motherhood, educational pursuit, unwholesome cultural practices, debunking of stereotypical tropes, recognition of complementary role of women in African cultures and female self-assertion. These concerns are discussed below as exemplified in the texts.

The quest for economic independence has been a major thematic concern in the works of Nigerian female novelists. Nwapa, in most of her novels like *Efuru* (1966) and *One is Enough* (1981), sees economic power as a route to economic liberation for women. The eponymous heroine Efuru, in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) exemplifies this assertion. Set in the Oguta area of Igbo land, Efuru is a hardworking and resourceful woman who struggles against all the obstacles in her matrimonial home to become a successful business woman. It is believed that financial independence is one of the surest means of breaking the shackles of male oppression as the woman strives for equality in the society. Zainab Alkali's *The Stillborn* (1984) portrays Li, a young dreamer, whose dream of living a life of luxury with a handsome and successful husband in the city are not achieved. In the face of total neglect and psychological abuse from Habu, her husband, Li refuses to wallow in self pity, shame and defeat, and goes to school to qualify as a Grade II teacher. Through her determination and resilience, she becomes economically independent and makes meaningful contribution to the welfare of her immediate family and community. Awa, her elder sister, tells her during the burial of their grandfather that "You are the man of the house now" (*The Stillborn* 101) because of her ability to shoulder the responsibilities of the entire family on the basis of her financial strength.

Worthy of note in female writings is the assertion that economic liberty can be attained through education. Although Efuru succeeds despite her lack of exposure to western education, Li, on the other hand, strives to get educated because it is a pathway to liberation from the chains of patriarchy. In African cultures and traditions, a woman proves her chastity and femininity by giving birth to children as soon as she is married. In the event that she is unable to bear children, she is made an object of ridicule, scorn and disgrace in the society even from fellow women. Ketu Katrak opines that "as a female child grows from girlhood to womanhood to motherhood, she is controlled and owned by her father, her husband, then her sons. Her biology defines her womanhood; only as a mother is she culturally believed to be a human being" (163). Nwapa debunks this myth by portraying a happy and fulfilled woman in spite of her inability to bear children after losing her first child. Despite Efuru's excellence in other spheres of life, she is abandoned by two husbands and exposed to psychological torture and humiliation from in-laws and villagers due to her problem of infertility. Efuru eventually returns to her father's house and devotes herself to serving humanity. Yemi Mojola has affirmed that "This is the message of *Efuru*: motherhood is not only the path to happiness and contentment. A woman can lead a life of fulfilment

through selfless service to others” (23). Faku, in Alkali’s *The Stillborn* is worried because she has only one child for Garba, whereas her co-wife has nine children. Faku’s limitation stems from the fact that Garba abandons her to fate after luring her with hopes of a happy and successful life in the city. She becomes “Famished in body, and no doubt famished in soul” (76). Rather than succumbing to the abuse and resigning herself to fate, she decides to train as a social welfare worker in order to get the fulfillment she needs.

Female assertiveness is another predominant theme in Nigerian feminists’ novels. In the selected works for this study, the female characters assert themselves and prove their mettle regardless of the oppression and obstacles set before them. In Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* (2004), Ifeoma, Eugene’s sister, is bold, hardworking, economically independent, strong and assertive. Although her late husband’s family members put her under pressure for different reasons, she is not perturbed. She refuses to succumb to male intimidation and threats from in-laws. She is also bold enough to tell Eugene the truth about his unfair treatment of their father, Pa Nnukwu. She takes over the role of Eugene in taking care of their father despite her lean resources. After Pa Nnukwu’s demise, Eugene refuses to organize a befitting burial for him because he was a traditionalist. Ifeoma single-handedly ensures that their father is honourably buried despite being a woman in a predominantly patriarchal Igbo society. She asserts herself to prove that a woman can also assume certain responsibilities when men abdicate theirs. Ifeoma caters for the needs of her children after her husband’s demise without relying on anybody to assist her. Beatrice in *Purple Hibiscus*, who seems to feel insecure outside Eugene’s home and hides behind her husband’s identity, resolves to carve a niche for herself by breaking from that position. After an initial demonstration of weakness and docility, ‘she did not lower her voice to a whisper...she did not sneak Jaja’s food to his room, wrapped in cloth so it would appear that she had simply brought his laundry in’ (*Purple Hibiscus* 257). She decides to be bold and assert herself as the mother and wife in the home.

Li and Faku in *The Stillborn* suffer humiliation and ill-treatment in the hands of their husbands. Despite the degradation and frustration experienced in their marital homes, they decide to stand up to the challenge by making meaning out of their shattered illusions. Li refuses to accept the advances from male suitors, especially Alhaji Bature, when Habu abandons her in the village for four years. Rather, she asserts herself by studying in the Advanced Teachers College, thereby according herself the singular honour of being the first woman in her village to earn the qualification of a Grade II teacher. She singlehandedly rebuilds her father’s dilapidated compound and shoulders other responsibilities in the family without the help of a man. Efurū also asserts herself in an area that is believed to be the sole preserve of the men; that is, business prowess. Through sheer dint of hard work and good business acumen, she succeeds and is able to make meaningful contribution to her

Survey of Selected Texts on Feminism in Nigeria

society. In the given contexts of the above female attainments in fictional works, it can be safely stated that these,

Characters adopt a positivistic view in crisis, and do not just fold their arms in self-pity. Rather, they think, plan, execute and concretize. Through this maze of self-assertion, the female individualism and personality shows, she appears in another light, as a person capable of taking effecting decisions (Chukwuma: 4).

In spite of the preconceived notion that feminists are wayward, irresponsible and disgruntled women who are seeking undue attention in a phallogratic society, these writers have proved in their works that women are not vengeance seekers due to the various forms subjugation they face in the society; rather, they are complementary partners with the men towards the development of the society. This notion is exemplified in Li who decides to give Habu the necessary support he needs after a motor accident leaves him with crushed legs. Instead of using his disability and helplessness as a avenue to vent her anger and vengeance as a result of the humiliation he earlier subjected her to while in the city, she accepts the fact that true fulfillment in life can only be attained by lending a helping hand to anyone in dire need, including the oppressors. Li sees it as an opportunity to complement him. This theme is also re-echoed in *Efuru*. Efuru, the protagonist, recognizes the fact that she has a role to play in the development of her society despite the ridicule and abandonment she has undergone. Through her selfless service to humanity, she makes meaningful contribution to the advancement of her community. Badejo in his article “African Feminism: Mythical and Social Power of Women of African Descent” asserts that African feminism embraces femininity, beauty, power, serenity, inner harmony, and a complex matrix of power. It is always poised and centered in womanness. It demonstrates that power and femininity are intertwined rather than antithetical. African femininity complements African masculinity, and defends both with the ferocity of the lioness while simultaneously seeking male defense of both as critical, demonstrable, and mutually obligatory. African feminism is active and essential to the social, political, economic, cultural, and evolutionary aspects of the human order (94).

Unwholesome cultural practices that inhibit the development and self-actualisation of women in patriarchal societies is another issue addressed by female novelists. Women, in some societies in Nigeria, after the death of their husbands are subjected to life threatening mourning rituals in order to prove their innocence. Some of the women are forced to stay in the same room with the dead husband and also drink the water used in washing the corpse. The belongings of the bereaved family are confiscated by the extended family members of the deceased husband thereby dispossessing surviving members of the family of their rightful inheritance. Ifeoma, in Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*, refuses to succumb to pressures from her in-laws who want her to prove her innocence after the death of her husband. She is not bothered by the accusation because she knows that she cannot “orchestrate an accident in which a trailer rams into you husbands

car”(*Purple Hibiscus*: 74). Her late husband’s relations also assume that she is hiding the money left behind by Ifediora, her deceased husband. Ifeoma is not perturbed by these pressures from her in-laws because she is educated, fearless, and strong-willed who knows her rights.

Successes

Female novelists have over the years, succeeded in replacing the docile, inferior, timid, passive, subservient and weak rural woman who depends on male domination for survival with the assertive, dominant, individualistic, independent, intelligent, resilient, resourceful, self-actualising and successful female characters. They have also succeeded in portraying female characters that have destinies of their own. The stereotypical roles assigned to women in novels written by men which include prostitutes, sex symbols, ‘dumb’ housewives, and women who have accepted their inferiority to the menfolk have also been changed. Nwapa, in her excellent portraiture of the successful, industrious, fulfilled and happy woman who finds strength in thriving business and religious faith in spite of barrenness has successfully debunked the notion that infertile women are worthless to the development of the society. Unlike the negative portrayal that successful businesswomen are without good morals, Nwapa portrays a successful businesswoman who remains respectable in her society and keeps her dignity. Okafor agrees that these female writers are aware of these ill-conceived notions, which they try to challenge, fracture and destroy by creating popular, more positive images and portraiture discarding the old images which have surrounded and defined them. They now project assertive protagonists that provide role models for readers. They construct a new assertive femininity, endowing it with positive power, which undermine conventional images of women (27).

The female characters in the selected texts refuse to be passive observers in the world of men. The patriarchal norms and traditions that inhibit the individual development of women characters are challenged and gradually erased. Eustace Palmer also asserts that “The picture of the cheerful contented female complacently accepting her lot is replaced by that of a woman who is powerfully aware of the unfairness of the system and who longs to be fulfilled in herself, to be a full woman and not somebody’s appendage” (39). These landmark achievements are made possible because these writers have taken the pen, a non-violent weapon, to rewrite womanhood.

In conclusion, it is necessary to look at the duties of the female writer as specified by Ogundipe-Leslie in her article, “The Female Writer and Her Commitment.” The first among the three commitments of the female writer is commitment “to her art and seeking to do justice to it at the highest levels of expertise”(10). She should be committed to her vision, whatever it is. In other words, she has to be willing to stand or fall for that vision. The female writer’s second commitment is to her womanhood. According to Ogundipe,

Survey of Selected Texts on Feminism in Nigeria

“it would mean delineating the experience of women as women, telling what it is to be a woman and destroying male stereotypes of women (10-11). The third commitment, she says, should be to her Third World. This means, “being politically conscious, offering readers perspectives on and perceptions of colonialism, imperialism and neocolonialism as they affect and shape our lives and historical destinies.” The female writers’ commitment to the duties enumerated by Ogun-dipe-Leslie above will eventually yield victory for them on the literary scene.

WORKS CITED

- Adebayo, Aduke (2000). *Feminism in Francophone African Literature: From Liberalism to Militancy*. Introduction to Francophone African Literature. Eds. Oke Olusola and Ojoade Sam. Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited: 275-298.
- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi (2004). *Purple Hibiscus*. Lagos: Kachifo Limited Farafina.
- Alkali, Zainab (1984). *The Stillborn*. (Drumbeat) Longman.
- Arndt, Susan (1998). *African Women’s Literature: Orature and Intertextuality*. Bayreuth: Bayreuth University Press.
- Badejo, Diedre (1998). African Feminism: Mythical and Social Power of Women of African Descent. *Research in African Literatures* 29(2): 94-111.
- Chukwuma, Helen (1889). ‘Positivism and the Female Crisis: The Novels of Buchi Emecheta. Eds. Otukunefor, Henrietta and Nwodo, Obiageli. *Nigerian Female Writers: A Critical Perspective*. Lagos: Malthouse Press Limited: 2-18.
- Dangerembga, Tsitsi (1988). *Nervous Conditions*. Seattle: Seal Press.
- Emecheta, Buchi (1981). *Second Class Citizen*. London: Fontana/Collins, 1981.
- Katrak, Ketu. H (1987). Womanhood and Motherhood: Variations on a Theme in Selected Novels of Buchi Emecheta. *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 21(1): 159-170.
- Mojola, Yemi (1989). The Works of Flora Nwapa’ Eds. Otukunefor, Henrietta and Nwodo, Obiageli. *Nigerian Female Writers: A Critical Perspective*. Lagos: Malthouse Press Limited: 19-29.
- Nwapa, Flora (1966). *Efuru*. London: Heinemann.
- _____(1981). *One is Enough*. Enugu: Tana Press.
- Ogun-dipe-Leslie, M (1987). *Female Writer and Her Commitment’ in Women in African Literature*. London: James Currey Publishers.
- Ojoade, Femi (1982). Still a Victim? Mariama Ba’s *Une si Longue Letrre’*. *African Literature Today* 12: 71-87.
- Okafor, C.G. (1997). *Rewriting Poupular Myths of Female Subordination: selected Plays of Adimora-Ezeigbo & May Nwoye in Writing African Woman*, London: Zed Books Ltd.

Fwangyil Gloria Ada

Palmer, Eustace. "The Feminine Point of View in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*." *Africa Literature Today* 13. Ed. Eldred Durosimi Jones. New York: Holmes and Meier, 1983.