

THE EMERGENCE OF WOMEN IN AFRICAN LITERATURE: THE FRANCOPHONE EXPERIENCE.

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ABSTRACT

It has become quite natural to see that when critics talk about African literature, they are most likely talking about literature written by African men. It is not that they set out to exclude or relegate African women writers, it is that it is “so natural” according to a certain critic to neglect to mention African female writers. This paper is written with the intention of tracing the history of women writing in African literature, to point out some of the challenges faced by African women writers and to give some recommendations that we feel may improve the lot of African women writers. The advent of African women writers varies depending on their language zone – Anglophone, Francophone, Lusophone. We will, in this paper however focus on African women writers in the francophone region while not neglecting their Anglophone colleagues.

Keywords: Women, African literature, Francophone

1.0 INTRODUCTION

African literature has come a long way from the pre-colonial times to the post-colonial era. In all of this time however, there seems to have been a disconnect between the male African writers and their female counterparts. The African literary space has been mostly dominated by male writers who have made their mark in addressing several societal issues. With their writings, male African writers engaged the society, colonialists and the ruling political elites on germane issues that affected the society. It however took a while for the African literary sphere to start experiencing the input of female writers. This paper aims to look at how female francophone writers entered the African literary sphere and to examine and to examine some of their predominant themes in writing.

African literature was until the advent of the colonialists largely unwritten. It was expressed in songs, poems, dance and other forms of oral expressions. The text or script was passed down generation to generation via the old to the young. It was not rare to find families whose living was generally derived from the text that was handed down to the new generation. At thus pre-colonial stage, the aged were the revered walking libraries of the history, culture and ways of the people. This mode of literature, was employed not just for pleasure, but also for more serious matters such as speaking against social vices or politically vicious men, encouraging and boosting the morale of warriors for battle and even as a means of surrender to a stronger kingdom. This form of literature is what Luzolo Mbemba calls the true African literature.

The advent of the colonialists through slave trade and then religion introduced an attempt to document the literature of the African content in writing. Across the continent, westerners – English, French, and Portuguese - wrote about the African continent and for the African continent, albeit from their own point of view. Scholars have come to agree that literary texts in this era cannot be said to truly depict Africa. A number of literatures produced in this era were largely propaganda by colonialists in order to encourage the continued occupation of Africa.

Toward the end of the colonial era, a new wave of writings begin with Africans who had been traditionally taught but now had the privilege to travel overseas for white “formal” education. According to Luzolo Mbemba, this period was made possible by the inspiration of what has been termed “l’Eveil Africain” (Africa awakening). Writers in this era, the likes of Leopold Sedar Senghor, Ferdinand Oyono, Ousmane Sembene, Mongo Beti etc, pushed the Negritude movement for an Africa by Africans and an African literature written by Africans. It is however worthy of note that not much is spoken of African women writers who were involved in this struggle for African consciousness. In fact, in virtually all the stories of the negritude that has been told, almost no mention is made of the women who in one

way or the other influenced, both intellectually and in practical terms. Sarah Dunstan in her article *The Women of Negritude* points out that authors such as Sharpley-Whiting, Brent Hayes Edwards and Jennifer Anne Boittin have written about the role of black women in “crafting and catalyzing the movement”. Whatever influence women had in this era, was not sufficiently documented or has been quite conveniently relegated to the background. This is due largely to the fact that the western educational system relegated the African woman to the background. Scholarship was encouraged for the African male, but not so for the African female.

Contemporary African literature has seen in some way a better involvement by women in the literary space. Although, there is still a lot of space for the African women writer.

2.0 EMERGENCE OF WOMEN IN AFRICAN LITERATURE

Although certain critics according to Kolawole (1997) would have us believe that the African woman is no artist has over the years merely parroted communal oral pieces created by her male counterpart, the African oral literature celebrated the African woman as she played her part in society. The pre-colonial African woman was of no mean spirit, she was counted among the best griots, the best musicians, sometimes even among the fiercest warriors as seen in the case of the Amazons of Dahomey. According to Grace Ogot(1976), the pre-colonial African woman knew her rights and roles in pre colonial African society. She was consulted on matters of importance such as on war, medicine, land matters and politics. She did not make any public pronouncements, leaving that to the man, but her opinion was nonetheless taking into consideration before any decision- major or minor- was made. According to Kolawole (1997), “Women use oral literature and exclusive female genres to condemn social problems, immorality, unfaithfulness and idleness- and to make demands” (pg 94-95

With the advent of western education however, a gap was created between the woman and the man, as the African boy was allowed to be the first to taste western education. The earliest record of an African female writing is dated 1967 with Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru* from Anglophone Nigeria. Although there had been black women writers such as the Antillean sisters Paulette and Jane Nardal who held “salon-style meetings” in the late 1920s and 1930s in support of the negritude movement, there were no African women who could have been said to have been actively involved in the African literary scene. The Nardal’s salon produced *La Revue du Monde Noir*, a bilingual magazine lending its voice to the negritude movement that was in swing in those days. Although initially disregarded, scholars now admit that the work of these women was instrumental in influencing the negritude movement. For the African women however, there was no recorded impact felt until 1967 when Flora Nwapa published her first novel *Efuru*, The publication of Flora Nwapa’s novel *Efuru*, became the springboard for other women writers in Africa to get involved through their writings.

Prior to the publication of *Efuru*, the African story had largely been told from the perspective of the African male. It was necessary that at some point, the African woman would become involved in telling the African story from the woman’s perspective. The emergence of women in African literature began to draw the attention of both African men and the international community to the plight of the African woman and girl. Unlike their Anglophone colleagues, francophone women did not appear on the African literary scene until the publication of Mariama Bâ’s novel *So Long a Letter* in 1981.

Although there seems to be more women lending their voice to the African narrative, there is still a wide gap between the attention paid to African women writers and their male counterparts. Aidoo (1988) is of the opinion that it is more likely to find constructive criticism of male African writers than it is to find of female African writers. This position cuts across all of Africa including francophone Africa. Can we say there are no female francophone African writers? No. the challenge however is that there has been little or no interest in what female writers have to say. Aidoo(1988) while quoting Lloyd Brown says: “African women writers are: the voices unheard, rarely discussed, and seldom accorded the space in their repetitive anthologies and predictably male oriented studies in the field”.

3.0 PREDOMINANT THEMES OF AFRICAN WOMEN WRITERS

Nwapa(1998) notes that it is not that the African woman has not been portrayed in African literature, it is that the portrait presented is often that that suits the writer, who in this case is a man. More often than not, the male African writer paints the picture of the woman he would like to see and cannot grasp the reality of the African woman as it is.

This is often seen in the predominant themes of male and female African writers. In Sembene Ousmane's *Les Bouts de Bois de Dieu*, women are portrayed as strong and active in the political scene. They are instrumental to the success of the railway workers' strike. Ahmadou Kourouma in his work *Allah N'est pas Oblige*, portrays the woman as a mother and a supportive wife. He tries to address the injustice faced by the woman in her home, but quickly moves on to other matters that are safer to discuss.

African women writers have taken it upon themselves to write the African narrative from a woman's perspectives. The literatures of African women writers portray the struggles of the African women, her challenges, her weaknesses, the oppositions she faces and virtually every thing that concerns her.

The major themes of African women writers revolve around the family, the corporate world and politics as it relates to women. In Mariama Ba's novel *Une si longue Lettre* (So Long a Letter) the story revolves around two women: Ramatoulaye and Aissatou. Both are confronted with situations where they are being forced to bow to patriarchal authority. While Ramatoulaye seems to accept her fate and make the best out of her situation, Aissatou refuses to be restricted by her husband's authority, thereby taking her destiny in her hands.

Although written decades after Mariama Ba's *Une si Longue Lettre*, Fatou Keita's *Rebelle* portrays the hypocrisy of patriarchal authority while chronicling the life of a young girl Malimouna. Keita writes about the realities of female genital mutilation, and the price of "rebelling" against societal expectations and norms by young African women.

Aminata Sow Fall's *Jujubier du Patriache* describes the complexities of an African family and how the African woman must navigate the waters carefully if the ship of her home would not capsize. She writes " ...l'équilibre de notre monde repose sur les épaules de la femme, du marabout et du griot..." (Aminata Sow Fall, 1998, pp148-149) (...the balance of our world rests on the shoulders of the woman, the marabout and the griot.)

4.0 CONCLUSION

There is still need for more African women writers both in French and English languages. It is recommended that women writers should not be deterred by the seeming non interest in the works of female African writers. As women, we can begin to change the narrative as we take the works of other women and carry out a critique of their works. In the words of Aminata Sow Fall:

...quand j'écris, je n'oppose pas à l'homme, j'écris non pas parce que je suis une femme mais parce que je suis une citoyenne. Je n'écris pas pour montrer aux hommes que les femmes sont aussi capables qu'eux. Nous sommes tous dans la même société et elle a ses nombreuses questions qui se posent. Qu'une femme écrive sur ces problèmes me paraît tout naturel.

(When I write, I do not oppose men. I write, not because I am a woman but because I am a citizen. I do not write to show men that women are as capable as they are. We all live in the same society with its numerous questions. That a woman writes on these problems only seems natural).

We must as African women engage ourselves in meaningful and constructive criticism of women writers across Africa, so that we can create awareness about the various issues raised by these writers that affect each of us. In the words of Aduke Grace Adebayo(2009): "We are involved because whether we like it or not, each one of us is involved with a female person as your mother, your daughter, your sister or your wife"

As we begin to show interest in the works of women writers in Africa, it is believed that there will be marked improvement in the participation of other women in telling their stories. There will also be an increased tempo in the interest of governments in Africa to the plight of the woman and the girl child.

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