

The Depiction of Women in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Soyinka's *The Jero Plays*

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ABSTRACT

There should not be any disparity between menfolk and womenfolk, except perhaps the physical distinguishing feature that men have certain features that mark them out as men and ditto for women. Same-sex marriage, single parenthood and all issues of women liberations are gaining ground because the society keeps alienating, subjugating, deemphasizing and limiting the womenfolk from serious undertakings expected and supposed of them. This study takes a critical gender analysis to emphasize the fact that howbeit, science, arts, social science, anthropology or any other given discourse has not discovered that men's brain are superior that that of the women or vice-versa. The two writers depicted women as portrayed in the society and these representations were analysed by seeking opinions of the society, both men and women through the research methods of survey questionnaire, face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions; the discussions dovetailed into modern discourses like single parenthood and same-sex marriages particularly among women; finding revealed that a new thinking ought to be quickly developed and advanced on accepting the fact that a woman is as good as a man, that nature endows both sexes alike and that mundane and illiterate opinions on women as inferior to men be discarded. The study also resolved that women should accede to the leadership-followership foundational principle as permitted in the society.

Keywords: Same-sex marriage, Single parenthood, Menfolk, Womenfolk and Gender.

INTRODUCTION

Jean-Jacque Rousseau, the 19th century French Philosopher was credited with one very popular saying, that: man was born free, but everywhere in chains. The 'man', Rousseau referred to means all human beings and not male nor female. He was talking about man, generally as a human being, the homo sapien and the taxonomical term that described human beings as:

having a highly developed brain, capable of abstract reasoning, language, introspection and problem solving. This mental capability, combined with an erect body carriage that frees the hands for manipulating objects, has allowed humans to make far greater use of tools than any other living species on Earth. Other higher-level thought processes of humans, such as self-awareness, rationality, and sapience, are considered to be defining features of what constitutes a "person". (Wikipedia.org)

The above assertion underscores the abilities of mankind to organize himself far more appropriately than other creatures and not essentially gender-biased or by mere physical stature. No matter the gender of any man, all men or human beings are capable of organizing certain symbols to represent codes for communication (meaningfully and sustainably), for meaningful self-expression (even though, communication often breaks down leading to conflicts and disagreements), exchange of ideas and organization. Notable amongst these enablement's and activities is the ability to use language, which has no delineation in skill as used by either men or women.

Consciousness of gender issues began to emerge when inferiority and superiority complexes were coming to the fore amongst the humans and particularly targeted against the womenfolk. Certain initiatives and leadership responsibilities began to generate arguments of appropriateness on who should lead and bear them between a man and a woman. These lines of thinking negate the original position of man as homo, the Latin word for man or an earthly being and not necessarily a man, or a boy nor a woman or a girl. Anthropologists, the scholars who are responsible for the study of humanity, not only see human beings as creatures noted for their desire to understand and influence their environment; but also capable of seeking to explain and manipulate phenomena through science, philosophy, mythology and religion , just to mention a few(Wikipedia.org).

From the foregoing man's capability to advance technologies and capacity to organize its environments are quantum, yet scientists claim man has not fully utilized the enormity of natural and supernatural endowments invested in them, regardless of their disparities either men or women , regardless of their heights, sizes or race or colour.

FEMINISM

Feminism is a collection of movements aimed at defining, establishing and defending equal political and economic social rights of all women (Wikipedia). It also involves both intellectual and political movement that seeks justice for women and end of sexism in all forms (Stanford. Edu). These two definitions just to mention a few describe agitations for women rights not only by women but concerned individuals seeking better placement of civil rights and equal opportunities both for the girl-child and the entire women folk.

Feminism became an activity at about the late 19th century and early 20th century with an agitation over the rights of the women to vote and to be voted for. This marks the era historically regarded as the First Wave or First Phase of Feminism. The rights of women were trampled upon to the extent that they could not vote and could not be voted for. This First Phase helped restored the rights of the women and women got franchised. Feminism activities began to gain ground and it evolved into another phase known as the Second Wave. This period saw to the ideas and actions associated with the women's liberation movement which campaigned for legal and social equality for women in the 1960's, while the Third Wave that came up in the 1990's saw to the continuation of, and reaction to the perceived failures of, second wave feminism of the 1960s. Today, however, agitation of women's rights or Feminism continues to take the centre stage as the place of importance of the females in the society can not be left unnoticed. This study looks at the literary opinions of two celebrated Nigerian writers as depicted in their fictional works. Professors Soyinka and Achebe are not feminists and have never seemed to posit themselves as one but their works TFA and TJP showcased some challenges for Research and Development in our contemporary world.

Feminism has criss-crossed several areas of interests from health rights, education rights, gender and sexuality rights, and have developed into major activisms aimed at appropriating the exact positions of women and their rights.

Some highlighted issues on perception of Women in the two texts

Various issues both of them highlighted in their works concerning feminism are:

- Though the society relegates women as second class citizens, yet they take up administrative roles like Agbala, the earth priestess.

- Women are often seen as sex toys. In TFA, page 15-17, women are regarded as ‘a job in hand a metaphor for a new young bride.
- Some crops are less graded and referred to as women’s crops. These crops are cocoyams, beans and cassava, while yams are referred to as men’s crops. Meanwhile, these same yam fields are helped cultivated with the help of these women. (page 16)
- Any unsuccessful or unfulfilled men are regarded as women.
- A corn-cob with only a few scattered grains was likened to ‘eze agadi nwayi’, meaning –the scattered teeth of an old woman (pg.25).
- Wife bashing or wife beating is seen as a form of suppressing anger (TFA-pg. 27 and TJP-pg.32)
- The desire to conquer and subdue is also likened to desire for women as seen in TFA page 30.
- In TFA, the girl child should not see herself in the same mould with the boy-child. Ezinma was quickly reminded that she could not help carry the wooden stool for her father; the duty is strictly for the boys.
- Also, a man must rule his wife and children with some sense of violence. TFA, page 37.

The above stated points would be further discussed and the contemporary issues about women would be juxtaposed with the pre-independent era. This is given the fact that the two books, TFA, a prose-fiction and TJP, a play-fiction both set at about different times, TFA is set before the advent of the colonialists while TJP set shortly after the independence.

A lot of female or feminist writers have claimed that TFA is about a man. The man, Okonkwo was crafted by Achebe as a tragic hero who could not stomach being under the colonial rule and the best way to disagree with the colonialist is to commit suicide after failing to organise a civil protest or war. TFA also described failed men as women; men in Igbo land, the setting of TFA who had no chieftaincy title are regarded as *Agbala*, a metaphor for a woman, since no woman could take a title then in Igbo land. A description of men in TFA is that of wicked, barbaric and inhuman, even though at about the time of the setting of TFA, every man was supposed to be like that, for example, any man that could stand the look of blood, or a man of action or a man of war is a man. In Achebe’s words, Okonkwo in Umuofia’s latest war, ‘He was the first to bring home a human head. That was his fifth head; and he was not an old man yet. On great occasions such as the funeral of a village celebrity he drank his palm-wine from his first human head’.

The description above typifies the way the society perceived men, someone drinking from a skull of a fellow human being. Bravery is seen in a man when he could behead a fellow human being, all in the name of tradition, as was seen in the traditional sacrifice of Ikemefuna, spearheaded by someone the poor boy, Ikemefuna called a father. Meanwhile, Ikemefuna was a victim of an attempt at defending the rights of a woman, Ezeugo, the wife of Ogbuefi Udo, which was murdered by Ikemefuna’s father. Even though, there was a provision for protecting women’s rights at the time of TFA, yet the way to go about it was barbaric. Feminism should focus anything against undue patriarchy and sexism, as depicted by Okonkwo, a typical patriarch and

sexist, who though had three wives, yet regarded women as a tool to toy with and ruled with an iron heavy hand.

Depiction of Women in The Jero Plays (TJP)

Soyinka in the opening of the play, *Trials of Brother Jero*, revealed to us how women are used to attract members and to 'prejudice the councillors who came to divide the beach' (pg 9). Women are also arranged 'to shake their bosoms in spiritual ecstasy' in order to gain occupation of beach sides for worship. This goes on to show that women are used as mere tools of oppression to take an advantage of. Some still use women for such today and sadly some women see themselves as tools that could be manipulated such self aggrandisement.

Women were also depicted as sources of trouble. Prophet Jero, the main protagonist regards women as a nemesis. He sees women as his own weakness. Jero in his own words sees women as –Daughters of Discord, which could bring ruins on one's head. Jero prefers to remain single as a panacea to running a scandalous ministry! Such is the societal attitude of keeping trouble away if you have nothing to do with women. It quickly reminds one of the old saying-no woman, no cry. Women are also depicted as trouble-makers, just the way Amope was made to make trouble with her husband and when she was making an effort to make Jero paid her, her money being owed her, Amope was cast to be a trouble maker even while agitating and fighting to be paid money owed her.

However, the women seem to rehash what the society thinks of them as we also see Amope and the unnamed woman trader in pages 16-17, having an unnecessary altercation. There was no basis for such outbursts yet both of them could not make a peaceful bargaining and this is part of the ways women are perceived as mere trouble makers.

Besides using women as baits to attract worshippers, a typical example of sexual feminism, women are also used to score some cheap selfish points. Jero deliberately forbade Chume, a member of his church, to beat his wife, so that the man (Chume) would still be coming to the church and when the prophet wanted to get rid of the man, he encouraged him to beat the poor woman, so that his debt would be forgiven.

Women are portrayed as tools and baits. In political parlance, women are used to gain some weights and not necessarily because they are seen as equal to men. When women are nominated for political reasons, like the Deputy Governorship positions, they are just strategically placed to remind the society that women are around the corner, otherwise why has no woman emerged as a governor of a state in Nigeria?

Later on in the second play, Jero's *Metaphorsis*, we see how women are only celebrated to score some selfish points. Rebecca, in the second play was sweet tongued to resign from her government work as a Secretary to pick up a job in the church. Here, women are portrayed as no deep thinkers about career development and future.

RESEARCH METHODS AND FINDINGS

This research was carried out within a Nigerian University campus and the immediate off-campus environment. The subjects outside the University environments were

strictly non-elitists. Various questions on women rights perceptions were fielded. The University workers, both teaching and non-teaching responded to questionnaire surveys, while the people living outside the environment were interviewed and engaged in Focus Group Discussions.

Majority of the elites upheld the fact that there is no difference between the boy-child and the girl-child. Indeed all respondents (the elites) claimed they would treat all students or their children equally and would never be biased by any gender considerations. From house-hold chores to other undertakings in the society, the elites maintained that there is no difference between the abilities, endowments and skills of boys versus girls or, men versus women.

The Focus Group Discussion with the non-elites of the immediate neighbourhood of the University Campus maintained women or girls are not equally endowed as the men or boys. While the elites agreed that Feminism has taken a somewhat positive effects on the society by agitating for equal rights for both men and the women, their non-formally educated co-citizens however believed that Feminist agitations gave rise to same-sex marriages, divorce, high rate of intolerance between couples and other societal ills like the modern spate of single parenthood and outright refusal to get married.

Majority of the non elites kept referring to the Biblical injunction that referred to the females as weaker vessels. With this description, they believed women should never compete with men and that such positions like taking lead in governmental positions should be extremely reserved for men. They upheld that the women have a lot of responsibilities making the home front like household chores. It is very interesting to note that issues like same-sex marriage, single parenthood, divorce and outright preference to stay unmarried by some men or women are reportedly caused by Feminism as claimed by some respondents in this study. This assertion is another researchable topic.

Feminism in Literature

Buchi Emecheta helped us to see that women are very intelligent and could help play significant economic roles in augmenting the family income. Nnu Ego in *Joys of Motherhood* really showcased the beauty of motherhood more than her mother who was brought up traditionally to assume the position of a man out of selfish interests nursed by her father. However, Nnu Ego quickly discovered that unlike in the village where the men worked harder and self-independent enough to cater for their home, it was not so in the Lagos City, where ‘men have turned to machines’.

We also saw women as freedom fighters as depicted by Mrs. Meers, who was not in agreement with her husband for calling Nnaife, a baboon. Oral tradition earlier placed colonial master’s wives as chauvinistic and oppressive as their husbands, but rather Mrs. Meers was different here.

However, Emecheta, an emerging feminist writer set to undo what men have been writing about women also seem to take some sides and not really balancing the imbalances, real Feminism should do. However, something striking was noticed in *Joys of Motherhood*, Agbadi, the titled father of Nnu Ego, was not much different from men of his own time in their chauvinistic attitude, yet he meant well for his only daughter, Nnu Ego and would want her to ‘have a man who would cherish her’. But

sadly, Nnu Ego was never really well complemented by her husbands. The first husband, Amatokwu got tired of her because of barrenness, as the society believed that a barren woman is not a woman, even though it takes a union between a man and a woman to make a baby. She was beaten mercilessly and had to return to her father who led her to her second husband, which was arranged for her, a husband she never met or saw not to talk of loving or cherishing!

Okonkwo in TFA keeps regretting that his daughter would have been a man. This is because everything about Ezinnma, the said daughter reflects manliness and this is one of the holes Feminists scholars began to pick in the iconoclastic classical novel, TFA. However, Achebe later portrayed Ezinnma as a child Okonkwo needed as a close confidant during the time Okonkwo was banished to his mother's village, Mbata. The intelligence of Ezinnma as a counsellor, confidant and care-taker was prominently displayed and this shows that Achebe as a writer is not a male chauvinist and does not see anything wrong in a woman as he clearly demonstrated in a much later work- *Anthills of the Savannah*.

However, literary works by women and other Feminists, though not women, but agitators of women rights have helped a great deal retell the stories about women and have helped removed biases that women are different from men.

It was found out that much more discourses should be organized particularly among the uneducated people that there is no difference in skills, techniques, intelligence and general comportment between men and women. Majority of both elites and non- elites would rather prefer they have male children alongside female children. Some that are constrained by religion, particularly Christians who are not supposed to have second wives, claimed they would be very bitter if their wives could not give them male children. It was also alleged that certain tribes in Nigeria would rather ensure male-children are supported in all endeavours from having sound formal education and getting a good upstart in business. These tribes also felt that women could also help procure much revenue in dowries, when they are ripe for marriage. This assertion also seems chauvinistic and selfish, as it portrays women again as mere commodities.

All issues adjudged as disadvantaged human rights postures to women are getting resolved as a woman has emerged a Prime Minister of the United Kingdom in the later 1980s in the person of Honourable Margaret Thatcher. However, since that epochal record in political history, no woman had ever made such a feat again in the United Kingdom. Even in the United States of America (USA), the closest to the exalted Presidency of the USA any woman had aspired to was the efforts of Mrs. Hilary Clinton in the last 2005 elections, when she ran in the primaries against Senator Hilary Clinton, the only woman that had dared the exclusive patriarchy position; it could even be admitted that Mrs. Clinton was so daring because she had been a first Lady in the USA and had a husband who gave her support.

Even in the military, women have not been so daring in the contemporary world. Except for the legendary Amazons of the Old Dahomey in the present day Republic of Benin; and exploits of Queen Amina of Zaria; now in the North Central of Nigeria.,

Queen Amina on her own was a military leader that commanded men who were soldiers and not fellow women. The women soldiers of Colonel Muamar Gadafi are no longer as popular as they were when the army was first organized in the 1980s.

CONCLUSION

With the kind of narration techniques adopted by Achebe and Soyinka about women in their two works of TFA and TJP, one could see that women are often employed as baits or tools to achieve an end; and this should not have been particularly in our contemporary world.

Recent studies in Feminism have shown that the society still regards women as an underdog and second-class citizens which ought not to be so, bearing in mind that men and women are like jointly demanded commodities. For the society to procreate their kinds, we need the women to help facilitate this and this is why the protagonists of same-sex marriage should be reminded that they have no basis to exist, basically because they still need a man and a woman to produce children. On-going studies in Feminism should help expose to the body of knowledge and frontiers of knowledge that men and women are deliberately created by nature to foster unity and not to claim superiority over any sex.

Achebe has demonstrated this by making Ezinma to do what Okonkwo felt only men could do and ditto for Soyinka, by portraying Rebecca as a modern-day administrator that men relied upon to make things happen.

In conclusion, Research and Development is not biased by sex, it should not be specially celebrated when suddenly a woman excelled in a given assignment that men hitherto had failed, rather such women should be brought to the notice of the society that women are as endowed as men. Just as a man fighting a woman looks out of place, reducing the theories of Feminism to inferiority complexes should be out of place, rather, Feminism theories in our contemporary world in the 21st century, should be making women play same roles as men play or rather ensure that at each setting gender balancing is set in place not for Feminism sake, but for realism sake that women are not essentially different from men except that women after all possess mammary glands, an ideal facility men do not have and should not aspire to have.

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