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## THEMATIC DIMENSIONS IN AFRICAN FEMINIST LITERATURES

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### ABSTRACT

African feminist literature has been on the increase over the years and is still going on. Its Themes and subject matters are many and varied. The African feminist authors use different dimensions and currents in their literary preoccupations to drive home their points and aspirations. These divergent views and thoughts are as a result of different socio-political, cultural and religious milieus to which they belong. This is what this article sets out to actualize. The work is divided into three points namely the introduction, the body and conclusion. In the introduction we tried to give a general view about the topic and in the body we talked about the different thematic perspectives of African feminist writers with a brief summary discussion on three texts used as examples of some of different perspectives while in the conclusion we gave a brief summary of the work.

### INTRODUCTION

Feminism started as a political and socio-economic movement in the 1950s-1970s by a group of women who lend their voices to calls for a change in the political and administration of modern African societies. Their aim was to see that women are given their freedom to exercise their franchise: the right to vote and be voted for or even be appointed into official position in order to participate and serve their father lands. Prominent among these women were Mrs. Fumielayo Kuti, Magarette Ekpo and Winnie Mandela to mention but a few on the other hand, in recent times, feminism shifted its course from the political field to the literary domain. And here it assumes different and varied forms and perspectives. Moreover, the African women writers in their careers, went a bit further to expose their thoughts, ideas and feelings through the use and development of various subjects and themes to establish their

positions. The concrete orientation and execution of criticism in African feminist texts varies widely, writes SUSAN ARNDT. In her work she distinguishes; three main currents of African feminist literature: reformist, transformative and radical.

*'I shall not protest if you call me a feminist', stresses the Ghanaian woman writer Ama Ata Aidoo, and she continues,*

*But I am not a feminist because I write about women. Are men writer male chauvinist pigs just because they write about men? Or is a writer an African nationalist just by writing about Africa? Or a revolutionary for writing about poor oppressed humanity? Obviously not . . . no writer male or female, is a feminist just by writing about women. (Aidoo 1982).*

Taking a closer look at the foregoing one can say that Aidoo's statement touches on a sore point. The word or label feminist is often used, but the notions associated with it tend to differ greatly. This most frequently leads to difficulties in placing oneself or a literary texts in context. Flora Nwapa is a good example of this. In 1984 the Nigerian woman writer expressed indignation at the fact that just because she wrote about women, she was constantly 'accused' of being a feminist. However, the truth was she wanted nothing to do with feminism because of its anti-men stance. At most she said, she could identify with Alice Walker's womanism (Flora Nwapa in Perry, 1984) Nwapa's statements provide an example of how important it is to clearly establish the criteria on the basis of which an author, or a text can be judged and classified as feminist.

At the moment the question or theme about the female gender-the training, education of the girl child, the position of the women at home and in the political and national scheme of things have continued to dominate discussions in the print and electronic media with a view to changing our mental, social and cultural orientations and thought patterns in order to be in tune with current trends in modern societies the world over. Further more, gender debates influenced by post structuralism have given rise to an understanding of the dynamics, complexity and diversity of feminism, which make it necessary to speak of feminisms rather than feminism. This plurality emerges from a wide range of coordinates, with regional differences playing an important role. Partly as a protest against white history of and the white domination within feminism, but also due to the need of taking into account the material circumstances and cultural histories of Africa societies, African feminism has come to stay. For

sometime, however, the African discourse on feminism is manifested in part in the theorization of alternative concepts to feminism. The best-known is Chikwenye Ogunyemi's concept of African womanism; which she developed at the beginning of the 80's almost at the same time as and without the work of Alice Walker's womanism. Other concepts worthy of mention are Mary Kolawole's womanism, Molaria Ogundipo Leslie's stiwanism (acronym of social Transformations including Women in Africa) and Nnaemeka's negofeminisms-feminism of negotiation. The Nigeria feminist scholar, activist and writer Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, and many others speak of African feminism in order to express the ambivalence or difficulty of being located within the network of global feminism, and focuses on concepts emerging from the concrete social and cultural constellations of African societies (Adimora Ezeigbo, 1996).

Because there are diverse terminological approaches to African challenges of gender issues, it is difficult to assume homogeneity of feminism in Africa. The diversity of socio-cultural realities on the African continent has had a lasting effect on conceptions of feminism, making it necessary to use the plural with regard to feminism in Africa as well. African feminism in a way is aimed at establishing an ideological premise in modern African States. Generally speaking, African feminism gets to the bottom of African gender relation and the problems of African women-illuminating their causes and consequences- and criticizes them. In so doing, African feminisms aims at upsetting the existing matrix of domination and over coming it, thus transforming gender relationships and conceptions in African societies and improving the situation of African women.

In addition to that, African feminism aims at discussing gender roles in the context of other oppressive mechanisms such as racism, neocolonialism, (cultural) imperialism, socio-economic exclusion and exploitation, gerontocracy, religious-fundamentalism as well as dictatorial and /or corrupt system. Secondly one could say that many African feminists do not stop at the criticism of patriarchal structures, but also attempt to identify both traditionally established and entirely new scopes and alternatives for women which would help to overcome their oppression and improve their condition in the society. In literature the criticism of gender is often combined with a criticism of the patriarchal character of language and literature. This approach often involves a break with male literary discourses in terms of styles, language and narrative

techniques. Consequently the concrete orientation and execution of criticism in African feminist texts varies widely in terms of form as well as content. Whereas, "The Graduate by Grace Ogot is just as much an African feminist text as is Calixthe Beyala's novel, *Tut'appelleras Tanga*, yet there can be no doubt that these texts are worlds apart-albeit feminist worlds. This then makes it imperative to distinguish different versions of African feminist literature.

In other words, proceeding mainly from the concrete orientation of that criticism as well as some of the paradigms referred to above within which the criticism of existing gender relation can be realized we therefore distinguish three main currents of African feminist literature namely reformist, transformative and radical African feminist literature. However, the currents are very heterogeneous but the borders between them are very thin. Quantitatively, the transformative African feminist texts are more dominant and also much more heterogeneous than the other two currents.

Further more, in the texts of reformist, African feminism, individual, patriarchal molded attitudes, norms and conventions, both century-old and modern, which discriminate against women and hinder their self-realisation are censured. In their works, the reformist African writers want to negotiate with the patriarchal society in order to gain new scope for women, but accept the fundamental patriarchal orientation of their society as a given fact. Alternatives to what is criticized are always discussed in their texts. It is assumed that the society is dynamic and so it is capable of reforms and change, and in keeping with this logic, the texts usually have a conciliatory happy end. Moreover, a liberal treatment of men is very typical of this branch of African feminist literature. Men are criticized as individuals not as representatives of men as such. In these cases, it is usually shown that men and women are allies when it comes to taking a stand against these circumstances. Sidiwe Magona's "To my children's children" (1990), Grace Ogot's *The Graduate* (1996) as well as Flora Nwapa's novels *Efuru* (1966) and *Idu* (1970) are typical representatives at this group of African feminist literature.

Meanwhile, literary texts, which can be classified under transformative and radical African feminism, in contrast, put forth, an essential and fundamental critique of patriarchal social structures. Discriminatory behaviour by men is described as typical for men as a social group and

criticized most sharply. Also, very often spoken of, is the fact that women – as a consequence of their socialization – reproduce those very gender relationships which discriminate against women, is thematised. It could however, be said that there are decisive differences between transformative and radical African feminist literatures. They manifest themselves in the concrete negotiation of men and women, with regard to the question of whether the criticized gender structures are considered surmountable and whether the criticism is articulated in a differentiated way.

In transformative African feminist texts, men are criticized much more sharply and more complexly than in reformist literatures. Though, as a rule, the demands which are directed at men are more fundamental and extensive than those made in reformist literature, transformative texts start off by assuming men's capability to transform. However, to a much lesser extent than in reformist literature is this capability suggested by having a man change his way of thinking and behaviour radically in the course of the plot. Much more often it is symbolized by the fact that the man, who embodies the behaviour to be criticized and overcome is contrasted with one or more positive counterparts.

Another important aspect is that transformative African Feminist Literatures more or less explicitly hold the view that men are not only accomplices but also products of patriarchal patterns of thought. In relation to the negation of men, the behaviour of women who reproduce structures discriminatory to women is depicted as surmountable in principle. The majority of these literary texts also describe a way of life which represents a positive counter – concept to what is criticized. Within this group, texts which thematise the gender question alone as well as texts which additionally illuminate one or several other mechanisms of oppression can be found. The novels of Mariama Bâ (1980; 1981), Ama Ata Aidoo (1970), Buchi Emecheta (1979) and Titsi Dangaremba (1988) fiction, belong to this school of African feminism.

On the contrary, radical African feminist text argue that men as a social group, inevitably and in principle discriminate against and maltreat women. Here men characters are portrayed to be by nature or because of their socialization, hopelessly sexist and usually deeply immoral, men characters who depart from this pattern are rarely found – and those who do are powerless. This powerlessness is depicted or symbolized either by

their premature death or by their inability to realize their positive ambitions. Another fundamental characteristic of these texts is their use of tragedy and violence. The women characters suffer physical and psychological violence in the hands of men to the extent that even a partial improvement in the situation of women is unthinkable. In a way one could say that the radical texts are distinguished by a disturbing lack of perspectives. Thus, for example, death and murder carry the end of most of these texts. This approach is often tied to the fact that their women characters are also oppressed on the basis of, for example, their socio-economic states and / or racial background or identity. Thus, the gender question is combined with an examination of other mechanisms of oppressions.

However, men are not even depicted as allies or collaborators in the struggle against these forms of oppressions. These texts display a devastating pessimism, fundamentally denying any hope of a transformation of prevailing gender relations. Not even the reproduction of patriarchal structures through women's behaviour is described as surmountable. At the most, sisterhood or solidarity among women is shown as a possible source of solace or a vague anchor of hope. It is characteristic of radical African feminist texts that they do not differentiate when criticizing traditional and modern forms of gender oppression. However this refusal to differentiate must not be misread as implying that radical African feminist writers reject their African cultures, rather it is a result of the uncompromising rejection of all forms of oppression of African women. Typically representative of this group of texts are the short stories of Kenyan women authors published in Kabira's Karega's and Nzioki's anthology "They've destroyed the Temple" (1982), Calix the Beyala's novels *C'est le soleil qui m'a brulé* and *Tu t'appelleras Tanga* (1988) as well as Nawal El Saadawi's novel "Women at Point Zero" (1975).

## **TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF THE DIFFERENT CURRENT OF AFRICAN FEMINIST LITERATURES**

In this section, we are going to briefly discuss some three texts that thematically treat these different perspectives in their literally preoccupation.

### **a. Transformative African Feminist Literature**

Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue Lettre*. Here the author believes in changes and complementarity between the two genders

– men and women – in the discharge of their socio – political duties in the society. In her novel, “Une si Longue Lettre” (1980), Mariama Bâ provides a sharp criticism of gender relationships in Senegalese society. She criticizes the discrimination against women in the spheres of society, especially in politics. The main subject of the novel however, is the gender relations within the family. In this regard she examines the role played in women’s life situations by traditional caste and rank systems as well as that of Islamic institutions such as the *mirasse*, which forces recently – widowed women into social isolation for several months. The main focus here is on polygamy, which is roundly condemned.

Not only men, but women too are held responsible for the gender relationships discriminating against women. The writer shows that women make life hard for fellow women, and how they do this. Thus, for example, older women use the power given to them by social hierarchies to satisfy their interests unconditionally not caring that they are destroying the lives of their daughters, daughters-in-law, and other young women in the process. Ultimately the mother-in-law of Aissatou and Ramatoulaye are the actual supporters of the polygamous marriages, destroying not only Aissatou and Ramatoulaye’s happiness, but also the future of the two wives.

However, the alternative offered in the text lies not in Aissatou’s and Ramatoulaye’s life without men, but in a partnership that is based on love. Ramatoulaye says rather programmatically:

*“I remain persuaded of the inevitable complementarity of man and woman love ... remains the natural link between these two beings ... The success of the family is born of a couple’s harmony (pg. 88 – 89).*

#### **b. Radical African Feminist Text**

Calythe Beyala’s ‘Tu t’appelleras Tanga’.

Tu t’appelleras Tanga (1988) by the Cameroonian writer Calithe Beyala is highly characterized by resignation and aggression. The writer refers to her critical examination of gender relations as feminitude – an allusion to Negritude. The novel is set in a slum of Inningue’, an imaginary African city, marked by shattering hopelessness and grimness. Yet many details in the text suggest that it represents Douala – the city where Beyala was born and grew up. Beyala characters live in abject poverty and are plagued by paralyzing depression prominently in the tragic life of

the protagonist Tanga, which shows that the novel considers that even a partial improvement in the situation of women is unthinkable. The text gives the impression that all men are potential wife beaters. As a child, she is sexually abused and even impregnated by her father. Moreover, her parents force her into prostitution. Tanga tries to escape the grimness and brutality of her childhood by seeking refuge in a dream world. She believes – wrongly – that she will be able to find shelter in the hand of a loving man and a nuclear family. She reasons thus:

*“I will have my house, the garden, the dog, the magpie at the end of the meadow, children” (pg. 46).*

However, none of the men whom Tanga meets has even the slightest motive or ability to love in a way that comes close to these dreams. Instead of finding love throughout her life Tanga is beaten, enslaved and raped by men. In fact, there is not a single intact family nor a single man capable of love in the entire novel. Beyala suggests that women carry the double yoke of gendered poverty. This can be seen in the fact that instead of forming an alliance against these odds, Beyala’s women characters make life even more difficult for one another. She symbolized this shattered women to women relationship through the depiction of a deeply troubled mother-daughters relationship which Beyala traces back to the fact that men have destroyed motherhood.

**c. Reformist African Feminist Literature**

Grace Ogot’s *The Graduate*. In the novels of this literary perspective, it is assured that the society is capable of change and reform. In these texts, individual, particularly molded attitudes, norms and conventions, both century-old and modern, which discriminate against women and hinder their self-actualization are criticized and censured. *The Graduate* (1980), is a representative of reformist African literature. It exercises a partial criticism of patriarchal gender relations, primarily gender inequality in politics, and also describes these circumstances as reformable. Accordingly, the text also assures of men’s willingness to have a rethink in some way. The novel takes a critical look at the fact that though Kenyan women played a very active role in the national liberation movement, after achieving independence, politics was declared men’s business. The protagonist, Juanina, was actively involved in the liberation struggle is angry about the fact that in the newly



elected parliament, only 10 of the 184 members are women and not a single ministry is entrusted to a women. Juanina's anger echoes Ogot's own frustration. When Kenya achieved its independence in 1963, she was one of the 10 members of the first Kenyan parliament. Then in her later functions as minister, she experienced the disadvantage of and discrimination against women in politics first-hand. But being a reformist African feminist writer, Ogot does not leave it at this bitter point, instead she counters this glooming reality of daily political life with positive alternative which is depicted a happy ending.

This could be deduced from Jakoyo's wife's comments when she says:

*"At last I can lead a descent life. You have brought honour to the family, dear, I am so proud of you, she looked at him wickedly and winked. 'I will reward you handsomely when we get home, to compensate for the seven years lost' (pg. 44). From the foregoing, one can say here that Grace Ogot is ultimately concerned not only with a fundamental transformation of gender relations, but also with a partial alleviation of women's burdens, a partial improvement of the situation of women. Women should observe their traditional responsibilities, but should also be given new rights and possibilities.*

## CONCLUSION

Taking a clue from all that has been discussed above so far, it could be seen that authors of all generations contribute to transformative literature in the society. For example, the textual examples used in the classification show that all the currents of African feminist literature are quite heterogeneous as far as regional, social and religious origins of the authors are concerned. Only the generation to which the authors belong can be brought to bear on their feminist orientation and literary preoccupations. In contrast, it could also be observed that there is a tendency for the reformist branch to recruit mainly among the pioneers of African. Feminist literature, while radical literature seems to be primarily the domicile of the youngest authors who were born after most African states gained independence – that is after 1960, and who started to writes in the 1980.

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