

▶ African Feminists Towards The Politics of Empowerment

Profa. M.A. Meyre Ivone Santana da Silva

Doutoranda- Universidade de Santiago de Compostela

For a long time African women writers have been invisible from what is characterized today as African literature or Postcolonial literature. Their works were excluded from African literary criticism, or the African literary canon. As Lloyd Brown states: "the women writers of Africa are the other voices, the unheard voices rarely discussed and seldom accorded space in the repetitive anthologies and the predictably male-oriented studies in this field."(Brown;1981:3). Brown also points out that this "male-oriented" and exclusivist criticism on the part of Africans and other black Africanists has determined what constitutes African literature: "Those critics and anthologists have treated the African subject as an exclusively male product"(Brown,1981:5).

There are some reasons which contributed to the African women's exclusion from the African literary canon. The first reason is the low number of African women writers when compared with their male counterparts. Brown attributes this imbalance to a truism in modern African history that women did not have the same educational opportunities, then fewer acquired literacy or university education that have been prerequisites for writing in European languages.

Carole Boyce Davis in her essay "Feminist Consciousness" also remarks on the African women's role as subject to interconnected forms of oppression: to the racism of colonialism and to indigenous and foreign structures of domination. Davies points out that the colonial policies combined with indigenous attitudes contribute to denying African women access to education.

According to Davies, the early criticism of African literature was from European male academicians who used to do their evaluation through their western male-oriented point of view.

African women's voices have been unheard, thus the images of African woman in pre-colonial as well as in colonial periods were mostly presented by African men who were in charge to write the African literature and through their patriarchal view to tell their female counterparts experience. We should bear in mind that "much of this early literature deals with the social and political implications of colonialism and man's struggles within, and away from its confines. Women are usually made peripheral to all of that and function either as symbols or as instruments for the male hero's working out of his problems"(Davies:1986:3).

The misrepresentation of African women in the male literature or their invisibility from the African literary canon has nothing peculiar because they have played relevant roles in the oral tradition.

In an article entitled "African Women and African Classics", Okell Oculli shows her preoccupation with the small number of African women writers. She argues that women have been the foundation of traditional African literature, and the role of African men in this world was as "consumers, enchanted listeners, and learners"(Oculli,1976:7). She ends her essay challenging African women to "return to their historic position of power as the creators and carriers of classical literature of African descent"(Oculli,1976:23).

Considering that Oculli wrote that article almost three decades ago it should be noted that in fact African women writers have already started gaining power in the literary arena. Such feminists as Ama Ata Aidoo, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie and others propose to reveal the inequalities of pre-colonial and post-colonial Africa.

Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, a Nigerian feminist writer believes that the commitments of the African women writer to the empowering of the African woman is to deconstruct the African woman stereotyped images

and fight against several forms of oppression that women still suffer in Africa. The first relevant aspect towards a politics of empowerment for African women in Ogundipe-Leslie's view is the demystification of certain male stereotypes of the African woman as goddess or as Supreme Mother, self-sacrificing and suffering willingly and silently. An African woman is frequently seen as fertile mother of the nation, an image that African male writers have contributed to disseminating.

This mystification of African mothers is due to the importance of motherhood in Africa. This theme is of extreme relevance to African societies, so as a result, it will be present in most of the works by African women. Although motherhood is not an exclusive concern of black women, it has been given a different relevance by black women and mainly by African women due to the imposition of mothering in Africa.

African people's ideas about African motherhood emanating from African societies have been quite different from the West. The concept of motherhood has been of central importance in the traditions of people of Africa. F. K. Buah in *A History of Ghana*, posits the importance of motherhood in African societies from a patriarchal point of view. According to him, a "fruitful" marriage should have children, if not it must be considered as a "non-blessed" marriage and most of the times the result of it could be divorce. In most African societies the woman that cannot have children, "the barren woman" is seen as evil. Instead, the woman who has many children acquires a higher status and is considered blessed. In African societies the mother is respected and mythologized, the woman generally acquires a higher status if she has children, preferably sons.

In the Nigerian Igbo society, mothers and wives play contradictory roles, the man who worships his mother is the same one who despises his woman. A. P. Egejuru states, in her essay *Paradox of Womanbeing* that in Igbo cosmology the mother is compared to earth the woman's role as the giver of life. "Not only does a mother give birth to life, she nourishes the baby with her milk just as the earth does to all living things that she gives birth to (Egejuru,1997:13).

African patriarchy has relegated to African women the mythological role of mother, even the women who have fought in revolutions were cut out of the political arena or from full national participation after independence. According to Elleke Boehmer, despite the promises of national freedom, women were excluded from full national participation on an equal footing with men. She states that, "Mother Africa may have been declared free, but mothers of Africa remained manifestly oppressed" (Bohomer,1991:7). In the nationalistic rhetoric, those nationalists claimed masculine identity as the norm and the woman as just the bearer of the sons of the nation with a valuable place in the construction of the nation.

One of the main concerns of African women writers is to fight against some African traditions that still oppress women. According to Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, one of the most relevant forms of oppression is the African tradition that most times empowers the man and disempowers the woman. Within traditions, marriage has been very oppressive for African women. First the woman loses status by being married because in the indigenous systems, which are still at the base of the society, the woman as daughter or sister has greater status and more rights within her birth lineages. Within marriage, she becomes a possession; she is voiceless and often rightless in her husband's family except, in some groups, through what accrues to her through children (Ogundipe-Leslie: 1994:75).

Another traditional aspect discussed by Ogundipe-Leslie is the bride price. According to African traditions the African man who wanted to marry a woman should give her family compensation: dowry or the bridewealth. This material compensation given to the family could be in gifts, like bulls, cows, goats or in money. In Ogundipe-Leslie's opinion, "the bride price promotes the commodification of women"(Ogundipe-Leslie;1994:211).

Taking into consideration the singularity of some situations in Africa, as for example, some oppressive indigenous traditions and the history of colonization, the politics of empowerment for the contemporary African woman proposed by Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, Ama Ata Aidoo and other African feminist differ from the one proposed by the western feminists. In spite of the fact that African women recognize the relevance of western feminism in unveiling the disempowered situation of women under the patriarchal system, and although they acknowledge the influence of the feminist movement, they also perceive its

limitations in coping with the reality of African women. Nevertheless, they propose an alternative movement which will take into consideration Africa's history of colonization and Imperialism, African traditions and the necessity of not separating oneself from the African male in the reconstruction of Africa.

African feminists recognize the necessity of constructing an oppositional thought in order to empower oppressed men and women or the whole oppressed society. African female writers remarks that African feminism is a movement that seeks the liberation of Africa from external powers.

African feminism is an inclusive movement which integrates the whole African people into the construction of the African continent. It takes into account needs and goals that arise from the particular realities of women's lives in African societies and the necessity of a reconstruction of Africa. Phaniel Egejuru and Ketu Katrak in their book *Womanbeing and African Literature* have the following to say: "Women's issues constitute important aspects of working towards a most just and humane future for African society" (Egejuru and Katrak;1997:9). Nevertheless, this is a discussion that goes beyond gender and proposes a deconstruction of western ideology, and a resistance to imperialism and/or neo-imperialism.

Carole Boyce-Davies provides a summary of the concerns of African women writers. She argues that a genuine African feminism should firstly recognize the necessity of a common struggle with African men in order to reconstruct Africa. She states that their movement is not "antagonistic to men but it challenges them to be aware of certain silent aspects of women's subjugation"(Davies,1986:9). The second aspect for an African feminist consciousness is to recognize that there are/were some inequalities in African societies and the colonialism introduced others. The third aspect should be the recognition that African societies are ancient societies, then African women's issues should be analysed historically. The fourth aspect should be the analysis of African societies, retaining what is of value to African women and rejecting those aspects that work to their detriment.

The politics of empowerment for African women proposed by the African feminists is a movement which searches for the full participation of African women in African societies' issues because they defend that there will be no liberation for Africa without women's liberation.

Works Cited

Referência Bibliográfica

Boehmer, Elleke. "Stories of Women and Mothers: Gender and Nationalism in the Early Fiction of Flora Nwapa." *Motherlands, Black Women's Writing from Africa, the Caribbean and South Asia* Ed. Susheila Nasta. London: Women's Press, 1991

Brown. Lloyd. *Women Writers in Black Africa*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1981.

Buah. F. K. *A History of Ghana*. London/Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1980.

Davies, Carole Boyce and Anne Adams Graves. "Introduction: Feminist Consciousness and African Literary Criticism," *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*. Trenton, N.J: Africa University Press, 1986.

Egejuru, Phaniel Akubueze. "The Paradox of Womanbeing and The Female Principle in Igbo Cosmology." *Womanbeing and African Literature*. Eds. Phaniel A. Egejuru and Ketu H. Katrak. Trenton, N.J.: African World Press, 1997.

Oculli, Okell. "African Women and African Classics." *African Women*. 7 1976 22-23

Ogundipe-Leslie, Molara. *Recreating Ourselves, African Women and Critical*

Transformations. Trenton, N.J: Africa World Press, 1994.

Peters, Jonathan A. "English- Language Fiction from West Africa" A History of Twentieth Century African Literatures. Ed. Oyekan Owomoyela. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993.