

RETHINKING GENDERED SPACES IN AFRICAN LITERATURE: ACHEBE'S '*GIRLS AT WAR*' AND ADIMORA-EZEIGBO'S '*MAGIC BREAST BAGS*' IN PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The concept of space is a growing term in African literature, especially with regards to gender and sexuality. The African woman has remained a victim, embodying unease and resentment with social and cultural roles, thereby confining her to a particular place. This paper examines how Chinua Achebe's '*Girls at War*' and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's '*Magic Breast Bags*' engages the status, role and position of women in different spheres of life through a sociological and feministic perspective. The relationship between these texts and gendered spaces in society is analysed. Axiomatically, the study anchors on feminism, which as a social theory was developed as a result of women's quest for equality with men. It aims at changing the place of women in the society since women have all along been regarded as unequal to and less valued than men. The short stories expose the tension of gender roles and explores the arbitrary nature of the patriarchal system that aim to define female characters. These characters attempt to occupy and reclaim spaces in which to define themselves thereby giving the woman a reformed identity outside the confines of a restrictive culture.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Male Dominance, Discrimination, Emancipation and Leadership

Introduction

Literature in its oral and written forms has served as one of the important instruments in representing society and reality. It is a tool in the representation, comprehension and interpretation of various fields of human endeavour such as politics, religion, class struggle, social conflicts and gender relations, which is occasioned by patriarchy. In a patriarchal society the life of women have been man-made. Women have consistently done what men have either permitted or compelled them to do. They have always been the victims of male oppression and supremacy. Feminism advocates change and generates political movements in form of women's movements in order to gain enough power and influence to effect the changes it advocates. It motivates people to change their lifestyle, modify the existing social, religious, political, and economic relations and encourage its followers to preserve what they value. Men are, however, seen as perpetrators of female oppression and discrimination in a society which is viewed as male-dominated. Chinweizu, nonetheless, counters the assertion that the world is patriarchally biased against women. He contends that, "Feminist propaganda has sought to persuade the world that women are powerless in society, and that men are natural oppressors of women. It claims that wives are subordinate to their husbands in the home and that outside the home, men have excluded women from political, economic and cultural power" (p.9).

Chinweizu's position, notwithstanding, it is historically a given that in most places, traditional African societies have always expected women to take secondary responsibility to men in every aspect of their lives. Discrimination of male over female children persists in most

Akanegbu: Rethinking Gendered Spaces in African Literature...

parts of Africa. The male child is ever more important than the female child and young men are indoctrinated at an early age that they are superior to women.

The female character in African fiction hitherto, is a facile lack-lustre human being, the quiet member of a household, content only to bear children, unfulfilled if she does not, and handicapped if she bears only daughters. In the home, she is not part of the decision-making both as a daughter, wife and mother even when decisions affect her directly. Docility and complete subsumption of will is demanded and enacted from her. This traditional image of women as indeterminate human beings, dependent, gullible and voiceless, stuck especially, in the background of patrilineage which marked most African societies. (Chukwuma 1990: 133)

Gender issues have become very topical around the world today because the woman is moving away from roles which were once assigned to her, and to which she was very much restricted, to ones which were thought to be the preserve of her male counterpart, from voting to writing:

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, women had few legal rights. They could not vote, the universities and professions were closed to them. And if they married, they lost even the few rights they had – their property became their husband's properties, their children were their husband's properties and divorce was almost impossible (Alexander 1988: 18)

Nonetheless, there has been a progressive change and women revolted against some social norms and laws that deprived them of their independent existence as individuals and made them men's appendages. Women have changed a lot in their approach to marriage and life, especially in turning down socially constructed roles. Women have continued to take feminist stances; that is, asserting themselves by deviating from the traditionally accepted code of conduct for women to be sold to domestic slavery and given away as child-brides to aged husbands of parental choice.

Recreating the Image of Women in Africa

In patriarchal set-ups, men have an upper hand over women. Their sexist tendencies lead them to look at certain activities as inferior, hence suitable for women, and others as superior and suitable for men. The demarcation gives the men authority to effectively exercise dominance over women. Patriarchy, therefore, provides a context in which sexism becomes operational and serves as a basis for men to objectify women. Also, the idea of African women in male-dominated societies not talking in the presence of men unless they are given authorization to do so, gave rise to lowly images of the women in early African literature in particular. She was presented in roles which restricted her to bearing and rearing children, satisfying her husband sexually as well as physically taking care of him and his entire household. Such traditional roles appear in negritude literature and even in some post-independence works. This paper seeks to demonstrate that the foregoing tradition highlighted, is, however, gradually changing especially with the appearance

Akanegbu: Rethinking Gendered Spaces in African Literature...

of women writers and some male writers on the new literary scene.

The situation in the world today has changed tremendously as the woman is moving away from that position of subservience to one of prominence. A 1991 United Nations Publication states that:

Traditionally, male/female roles and male headed families are no longer the norm. As estimated one third of households around the world are now headed by women. In the Caribbean, women constitute up to 50 percent of all heads of households and in parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, the figure is 45 percent. (p.10)

Apart from heading households, women in many countries are also known to have voting rights, to go to university and to join any profession of their choice. Many are also known to have gone into politics and a few have headed governments. Examples include Margaret Thatcher of Great Britain and Corazon Aquino of the Philippines. All these is proof of the fact that the woman is embracing activities that she was once thought incapable of doing. This evolution of the woman from those traditional and negative stereotyped roles to more positive and meaningful ones in which she actively asserts herself and her personality is recognized today.

African artists, particularly female writers, are reacting positively to an awareness drive on gender issues, highlighting women's experiences and views in their works. Some notable male writers who formerly relegated women's experiences to the background are now focusing their creative lenses on women, so much so that some of them are delineating female characters who are highlighted as achievers, women who dominate the action of their works in

a more positive and constructive manner. Chinua Achebe, for instance, who has been called a phallic writer by some feminist critics, acknowledges in a 1987 interview in *Concord Magazine* the necessity of recreating meaningfully women's culture and world-view in this age of female awakening and female consciousness. This same year the editor of *African Literature Today* discovered that the women's voice in African Literature had been completely subsumed, and their contribution to the development of new literatures of Africa blotted out. That is why this editor decided to come out with an issue exclusively devoted to women. Part of the editorial comment recognised this neglect when the editor wrote that:

African women writers as a number of articles in the collection points out, have been neglected in the largely male-authored journals, critical studies and critical anthologies; and secondly, that the last ten years or so have been a tremendous blossoming of highly accomplished works by African women writers and it would have been inexcusable to continue to ignore them. (p.1)

This is true as before this date, the subject of African literature was largely a male affair while women were predominantly objects that were marginal to the central themes. For instance, Chinua Achebe's world before *Anthills of the Savannah* was essentially a world of male heroism and female defeatism, male audacity and female timidity. Mary E. Modupo Kolawole posits that Achebe's preoccupation with male vision, struggle and predicament left the women in the periphery of events. No female cast matches the courageous

stature of Okonkwo or Ezeulu until the emergence of Beatrice (2000: 15).

It is the argument of this paper that tradition in Africa today is undergoing changes and these changes are definitely affecting the society's definition of the role of women and their position. No segment of African society can express this phenomenon more succinctly than the creative artists who have uncompromisingly illuminated these changes in the lives of the female characters in their works and explored how these changes sometimes intensify the conflicts within the women, both male and female, in a sense, can be said to be very concerned with gender issues in their works that reveal some kind of alternative vision since they explore a kind of feminism that is revolutionary in its challenge to a system of domination that incorporates both patriarchal and sexist oppression. Creative writers, portray women variously as mothers, students, wives, lovers, victims of poverty and tyranny, exploiters and exploited, tempters and intellectuals. The readers of some of these writers like Flora Nwapa, Ifeoma Okoye, Buchi Emecheta, Tess A. Onwueme, Elechi Amadi, Chinua Achebe and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo are presented with accounts of women "Struggling and surviving" by any means, "scheming, planning, organizing, creating, responding to a society that would deny them a place, a voice value and at times even visibility" (Ezeigbo 1990: 145). It is in this context that we hope to appraise and situate the contributions of Achebe and Ezeigbo in their short stories.

Recreated Images of the African Woman as Presented in the Selected African Texts

Achebe's 'Girls at War' explores the depths of disintegration brought about conflict. The collection, gravitating around his experiences of war, presents women who led the path

towards a greater humanity. The trauma generated as a result of the Civil war is central to his story. The book is considered authentic and realistic because of the involvement of the author in the war. The characters bring back the memories and sufferings of wartime. At the outset of the story 'Girls at war', thousands of young men and women were daily turned away from enlistment centers because far too many of them were coming forward burning with readiness to bear arms in defense of the exciting new nation. Both sexes are seen here on equal footing as they are about to serve the common cause of the country:

That was the day he finally believed there might be something in this talk about revolution. He had seen plenty of girls and women marching and demonstrating before now. But somehow he had never been able to give it much thought. He didn't doubt that the girls and the women took themselves seriously, they obviously did...the prime joke of the time among his friends was the contingent of girls from a local secondary school marching behind a banner: WE ARE IMPREGNABLE! ('Girls at War'p.105)

The traditional constructs of male superiority and the predefined roles, too, are absent. Even a woman who is considered weak is ready to bear arms alongside men for her country. Reginald gives Gladys a lift to Enugu when she is on her way to join the militia. A man with traditional views regarding the fixed gender roles, Reginald tells Gladys to go back to school 'because girls were not required in the militia'. ('GAW' p.105). Reginald was simply reflecting the male attitude in advising Gladys to return to school. Reginald told

Gladys to go back to school instead of joining the militia, it can be surmised that, at least at the time, he believed the militia (and the war it was responding to) to be men's responsibility, while it was a woman's to go back to school and learn. At a time when a nation is in desperate need of hands, feet and bodies, Reginald saw only that a woman was stepping into a role that, in his view, should have been held by a man, though he is unable to give any real justification for this view. This is the consequence of gender roles and expectations placed on both genders by their society. Instead of seeing a Nigerian citizen fighting for what they believe in, he sees gender first and separates the duty of the soldier from the gender of the soldier. Even at the enlistment centre she is told to go back to her school or join the Red Cross. Undaunted, Gladys patches up with the Civil Defense in her zeal to serve her nation. Indeed, her conduct at the Awka check-point alters the views of Reginald.

But after that encounter at the Awka check-point he simply could not sneer at the girls again, nor at the talk of revolution, for he had seen it in action in that young woman whose devotion had simply and without self-righteousness convicted him of gross levity.... She wasn't going to make an exception even for one who once did her a favour. He was sure she would have searched her own father just as rigorously. ('GAW'p.106)

When they meet next, the war has progressed, Reginald finds her employed as a local vigilante under police constables. The girl is sincere and devoted to her work. When he tries to bypass the routine checkup by pretending to be an influential man, she remains unperturbed. She refuses to give him preferential treatment, and is immune to pressure and

intimidation. She says, “You people gave us this job to do” (‘GWA’p.104). Her sincerity and dedication impresses him; there is something about her determination to do her job well without deference to anyone, including someone she’s met before, gives him hope. This realization is a consequence of individuals not meeting the expectations placed on them through gender roles. Whatever reason Reginald had for believing women had no place in the militia disappears when he actually sees a woman fulfilling her duty. He is impressed to see a dedicated soldier who happens to be a woman, instead of the reverse. He is happily surprised and it alters his entire view of women soldiers, at least for a time. Reginald represents the patriarchy that is both responsible for the roles women take on, and that judges them when they either do or do not fit those roles. Gladys represents the women of Nigeria (and, indeed, women everywhere) and how they are judged whether they operate within or outside of these roles. Whether she does or does not conform to the expectations placed on her. When she steps outside of the typical gender role expected of her and joins the militia, Reginald is offended and mocks her and only sees the good she’s doing when she is not affected by his attitude. When she leaves the militia and steps into a role seen as more typically feminine, Reginald loses all respect for her. Instead of questioning the social collective responsible for creating these roles and pushing women into and out of them, Reginald acts as if it is Gladys who is at fault.

When she confronts him about her friend Augusta’s shopping trip to Libreville, she responds: “That is what you men want us to do” (‘GAW’p.112). He feels duty bound to take care of her because she has revealed to him his own faults. He feels guilty for his previous behavior with so many

Akanegbu: Rethinking Gendered Spaces in African Literature...

people. At one time he had left an old woman by the roadside in preference to Gladys. But now he picks up a disabled soldier. Even his driver is astonished when he asks him to stop. "I never give lift these days", ('GWA'p.122) he had said to Gladys. But now he breaks his rule. Her presence had brought about this transformation in him. Without mentioning it directly even once, she makes him see things in a way he has not done for a long time. At the time of air raid, she could have run to safety but she goes back to the car to save the soldier. She seems to show Reginald the road to salvation and greater humanity by sacrificing her life for an unknown person. She might have changed in appearance and may have adopted an immoral profession, but deep down inside she remains the girl at the Awka check post who had once impressed Reginald by her integrity. Even in her last moment she leads the path of true humanity. 'Girls at War' reveals Achebe's disposition towards women in general. He has otherwise on many occasions been accused of a bias against women. 'Girls at War' traces a progressive change of attitude of men towards women. Gladys becomes the hero in the war scene in the final part of the story. In the very heat of the moment when the wounded soldier cried for help, Reginald was willing to flee to save himself thereby leaving the stranded soldier who could not open the car to save his life but Gladys deemed it fit to respond to his call "...vaguely he saw Gladys stop; he pushed past her shouting to her at the Same time to come on...he saw the remains of his car smoking and the entangled remains of the girl and the soldier" ('GAW'p.122).

Gladys shows strong determination in achieving responsibility in the face of war changing the status quo that women are irrelevant and second class citizens. She is courageous and selfless even when death stares her at her

face, she sacrifices her life for humanity. The traditionalists may view womenfolk as weak, unreliable and obtuse just like Reginald in the beginning does. They may judge a woman on the scale of honour and shame associated with the female body. But when a whole generation of future mothers is trapped in a moral dilemma, we can hardly expect the traditional standards of morality to hold. Achebe is not trying to justify Gladys' choice of using her looks for survival. Without taking a moral stand, he lets the reader form an opinion of the war situation and the various problems an ordinary citizen has to face. In 'Girls at War', he focuses on how the implications of war are different for a man than a woman.

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo in her 'Magic Breast Bags' presents a patriarchal society that is concerned about the girl child and the importance of early marriage in the Igbo society. Nwecheonye a girl of twenty-five years old is single and this issue becomes a problem not just for her and her family but for the entire society as most girls in the community get married before they are seventeen. Early marriage is very common in Africa especially in Igbo land (Eastern Nigeria). Young girls marry at the age of infancy depending on the part of Igbo land and their custom. Some marriages take place just after the birth of a baby girl in which the suitor brings kola nut and wine. The mother of the child pours the wine in a plate and then feeds the child and she is betrothed. In some other parts, girls are given out in marriage at the tender age of about twelve or thirteen when they are expected to be virgins.

A girl's training from the outset is geared towards marriage. Emphasis is laid more on good behaviour, cleanliness, obedience and hard work (Apena 282). This aims at creating harmony in the future home. "A girl's life,

Akanegbu: Rethinking Gendered Spaces in African Literature...

therefore was not accidental but essentially a preparation for marriage. It was her great object in life. If she failed in that, she was considered to have nullified her existence” (Jordan: 210). According to Nawal El Saadawi in her *Women at Paint Zero*, marriage was a system built on the most cruel suffering for women” (87). Wifhood is portrayed as the worst status of a woman. The women are subjected to physical violence and emotional turbulence.

A leading light, as it were, to women who are satisfied with the responsibilities of minding the homes, procreation and farming. Efurú, as a character, has shown that men are after all not the bosses that culture and tradition bequeathed on them. From Adizua to Enebere and Nwosu, the major male characters, it is observed all failed in performing even the natural responsibility of husbanding and farming. Their wives in most cases become the bosses as a way of playing down on the negative notion that the woman is weak. They engaged in farming, trading and the likes to keep the home going. Efurú is so enterprising and resourceful that she even paid her own bride-price. This is against the tradition and culture of the society. Chinweizu in his well-articulated text entitled, *Anatomy of Female Power* asserts:

Because every man has as boss a wife or his mother or some other women in his life, men may rule the world, but women rule the men that rule the world. Thus contrary to appearances, woman is boss, the overall boss... (p.12)

This has laid to rest the age-long notion that the woman is weak and docile. Nwapa has developed a very strong-willed character in Efurú in order to challenge the masculine genders claim of dominance and superiority, and being in control of everything including the running of the

home. The gender difference most often echoes familiar scripts about male and female traits. In the words of Martha Chamallas, “they are often synonymous with masculine and feminine behaviours commonly regarded as stereotypes. Women are said to be nurturers, interested in children while men are risk-takers, more driven to competition than women, and more focused on acquiring resources that is, more interested in money” (p.19). The above copiously quoted idea seems to be in contrast or some aspects do not go well with the character of Efurū, who is so resourceful and compete with even her male counterpart in trading. Yes, she is a nurturer, even without children of her own, yet she feeds many. She can as well be described as an “asset” due to her enterprising nature with her “Midas touch” in wealth acquisition. She rises above the limit set by tradition for women in her culture. African culture portrays the woman as one who can be replaced. But when the same concept of replacement in marriage is on the side of woman, it is seen as a taboo.

Nwecheonye the protagonist in Ezeigbo’s ‘Magic Breast Bags’ as a result of pressure and stigma of late marriage decides to marry Ezekwakija an ex-military man who fought the Second World War for the British government. The marriage is a turbulent one and did not last for six months because “Nne and Ezekwakija never got on well; they were always fighting. Nne said he was abusive and foul-mouthed. He swore all The time and intimidated her with his military antics.” (‘Magic Breast Bags’ p.13)

Nne as Nwechonye is popularly called is a victim of domestic violence as her husband Ezekwakija on one of his beating sprees breaks her jaw and she decides to go back to her parents in Umudunu; her people were horrified, her

mother wept and she becomes ‘the butt of every joke and her name became a subject for *ikpem*, satirical remarks in the village’ (‘MBB’p.14). In a typical African society, it is an abomination for a girl to have a failed marriage and thus she experiences insults and humiliation which made her leave her village in search of succour. As a nobody and a wife of an ex-soldier Nne is enrolled in a renowned tailoring centre in Onitsha which sets the tone for her empowerment and innovation as exemplified in Ezeigbo’s *Trafficked*. Nneoma and Efe though trafficked, molested and dehumanized found their voices through entrepreneurial skills. For two years Nne learnt the skill of tailoring and her cheerful personality, maturity and good looks gave her wide acceptance and she was the favourite of all her instructors ‘white and black alike’ (‘MBB’p.15).

Nne’s acquired skill becomes a revolution for the people of Umudunu especially for the women who she made *akpa-ara* for because ‘before then, if women had to run, they held their breasts to prevent them from swinging freely’ (15), the women in Umudunu and the surrounding villages did not wear bras.

Many did not wear clothes but tied *wrappa* around their waist. Married women and elderly women tied *wrappa* above their chests to cover their breasts or *itepu*, blouses, with no support for their pendulous breasts. (‘MBB’p.15)

Through determination and her sense of creativity Nne solved an-age long problem by sewing *akpa-ara* that fitted women’s breast and *obante*, underpants for men. With her skill she endows the women of her community with beauty and colour in the *Umu-Mma* dance group and confidence to *Nwanyi-mgbaragada-ara* whose ‘breasts were so big that they

reached her navel and passed it; that was how she got her queer name. She could not manage them and stayed home in utter dismay' ('MBB'p.16). Her hard work, courage, wisdom, intelligence, resourcefulness, independent-mindedness, self-confidence, business acumen and her ability to see magic in little things brings her fame as a seamstress everywhere and her famous bras were called *akpa-ara amansi*, magic breast bags.

'Magic Breast Bags' is a protest of side-lining women thus revealing a shift from tragic heroism to emphasizing their roles as assertive leaders, conquerors and survivors. The author highlights the womanist perception of marriage as retarding women's freedom and explaining how freedom can bring about self-actualization as seen in the life of the protagonist. Nwecheonye's story is an interesting confirmation of the woman's ability to overcome marital misery and rise to prominence. Her experiences in marriage are portrayed as hindering achievements. The demands of traditional Igbo marriage deprives the woman of her self-esteem and economic power.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that patriarchal values are disintegrating gradually with the ever growing number of women acquiring education, not just formal education but also professional and entrepreneurial education. This has not only brought financial security for them but has also increased their self-confidence and added to their social status. African women are growing conscious of their individual selves and are getting due respect. The short stories of Chinua Achebe and Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo not only take note of the exploitation of

Akanegbu: Rethinking Gendered Spaces in African Literature...

women in the patriarchal system but also records the change that is taking place.

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