

Chapter Six

EXPRESSIONS OF PATRIARCHY IN ADAOBI TRICIA NWAUBANI'S *BURIED BENEATH THE BAOBAB TREE* AND AMA ATA AIDOO'S *CHANGES: A LOVE STORY*

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Abstract

*Patriarchy has different dimensions in Africa. These dimensions are captured by some African female writers with the purpose of condemning it and charting a course of liberation for women in Africa. In this paper, the works of two female writers, Adaobi Tricia Nwaubani and Ama Ata Aidoo have been selected with the purpose of determining how patriarchy has been expressed in the works. In Nwaubani's *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree*, culture and religion manifest in defining patriarchy. On the other hand, only culture counts in defining patriarchy in Aidoo's *Changes: A love story*. In each of the cases, the victims suffer oppression and suppression. It is pathetic that the victim in Nwaubani's work experiences lost ambition and dreams. Even though the victim in Aidoo's work fulfills her career dreams, it is not without pain and deprivations. The currency of Nwaubani's work reveals that the struggle continues even as the new dimension of religious extremism counts against women in the continent. The paper calls attention to the fact that patriarchy rejects collective efforts between men and women in building the society; and considering that the efforts of men over the years in Africa have not achieved great results, there is the need for their efforts to combine with those of women in all areas of life. This is unworkable if the women are not allowed to express their capabilities and capacities which over the years have been suppressed by patriarchy. Like apartheid, patriarchy should die in Africa.*

Introduction

The constant relegation and improbable portrayal of the image of women especially in Africa has been modified only after the rise of women writers. As more and more African women got educated and began to explore the social and political spheres, the women writers started recording and interpreting the changes they were going through in their contemporary societies. They had suffered in their patriarchal societies and could feel the pains of other women who lived in the bondage of men since times unknown. Thus, the picture of the cheerful and contented female complacency, presented by the male writers came to be replaced by a picture of the exploited woman who could evaluate her position in a patriarchal society and desire to live freely and fully.

Africa like any other societies support and encourage patriarchy is crippled by many impediments which contribute to their tragic underdevelopment. This situation has been a topical issue for the entire world since the end of the World War II. And, at the first international conference on women in Mexico in 1975 or the second one in Copenhagen in 1980 or the Nairobi forward-looking Convention in 1985 or the Beijing Conference in 1995 or the various efforts of the United Nations since 1970, there had been measures, plans and designs targeting at providing women with resources of empowerment to participate in and contribute meaningfully to the scheme of events around them.

The extent to which the measures, plans and designs have succeeded in Africa is clearly evident in with the ravaging underdevelopment, political instability, civil wars, militancy and insurgency. There numerous cases marginalization of women, cowering, suppression and oppression in different circles and levels, family, village, town, national and transnational. It is strange that currently, in most parts of Africa, women are devalued and considered "second-class citizens" and practically inferior to men. Women writers have noted this. For instance, Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* points out that women are constructed by men as passive and inconsequential objects. Of course, Akachi Ezeigbo argues that this has resulted in the perpetuation of female self-effacement and self-erasure which have insidiously demeaned womanhood for a long time (26). And, Kolawole Mary reveals that men writers reinforce this unfortunate situation by presenting women "as tragic heroines unable to speak from their subaltern position "(228).

A society dominated by men who make the rules that produce masculine values which suffocate the person and abilities of women, resigning them to the hopeless corner of a consumer and not a contributor, a servant and not a partner, a silent listener and not an instructor is not and would never be a progressive and productive society. It is response to this that African women have arisen in one way or the other to point to the directions of solutions to

the problems affecting Africa development. Even though this is resisted, it has received more impetus from the female writers.

With the rise of more African women writers, addressing issues such as education, marriage, motherhood, emotional, economic independence, political and economic marginalization of the women, domestic violence, the women's resistance to oppression, there is hope in the horizon that the patriarchal status quo would not be sustained and, more importantly, women would assert themselves and express their abilities in affecting positively the development of the continent. In this paper, the works of two African women writers, Adaobi Tricia Nwabani and Ama Ata Aidoo have been selected. There is good evidence that the works have contributed to the redefinition of female gender and presents a counter identification to men's voices concerning women especially in literature. They also present patriarchy as it affects women fighting to change the age-long wrong perception about them created in the minds of people about women while fighting to restore the image and dignity women as mothers and wives and urging for promotion of collaboration and complementarity among the sexes in the African society.

Remarks on the Writers

Aidoo and Nwabani are from Ghana and Nigeria respectively. Their writings have attracted the world's attention. Their repute as major and compelling voice in African women's liberation movement rests upon their protest against the victimization of women in the African society. They have contributed uniquely towards African literature, their strong commitment lies in their representation of the life stories of the African women. Through their writings they have shown how in African culture, women have been subjected to oppression, depression, suppression, rejection, segregation, and unfair victimization.

These two female writers of African fiction are counted among some of the celebrated contemporary writers whose works speak boldly and evocatively for the empowerment of women and other marginalized groups of their society. They are extremely poignant in their observations of the society in which traditional and the social context tend to devalue women and conventional feminine attributes where the women are forced to end up bearing an uneven burden of coercion and exploitation. They focus on the things that really matter and stick to showing things realistically. Their novels are rooted in humanitarian themes exploring issues of gender bias, marriage, motherhood, barrenness, polygamy, social injustice and sexual exploitation. In their novels they explore their deep concern towards the agonies of women.

Thus, they try to register their disgust at male chauvinism and the oppressive patriarchal system; they remind the women that the social condition of a society or a nation could be evaluated by the standing status of its women.

Their works obstinately encourage women to aim high by educating themselves. They show education, economic independence, and self-assertiveness as important steps towards liberation since there is a strong correlation between women's education and their overall progress including their economic development and empowerment. The core of their themes is what the African society needs to spring forth from poverty and economic failure. Unfortunately, the pursuit to bring women into economic development and empowerment is unfavourably tagged feminism.

Feminism, more generally is a struggle that arises from the inhuman treatment meted on women in our different societies. Of course, the mode and pattern of oppression and subjugation differs from one society. Elaine Showalter in *Ann Dobie's* acknowledges that there is "no single feminist approach to the study of literature" (107) as it varies from one society to another. While looking at the American society, she affirms that American feminist critics write to call for a better recognition in a society where the male writers have long stereotyped women. She also points that the French feminists are primarily psychoanalytic in nature due to the influence of Jacques Lacan's view of Imaginary Order. Again, Showalter maintains that the British feminist originally takes the Marxist position as they protest against the exploitation of women in life and literature; they are concerned with the issues of gender class and work to change the economy and social status of women. Particularly, she comments that feminism is,

trying to find ways to define the female experience, expose patriarchy, and save women from being the other. Those involved with literature-critics and writers-try to expand the canon to include female writers and to correct inaccurate depiction of women in the works of male writers (108)

Feminism has therefore become a force that has emerged to contend and destroy the structure of patriarchy to facilitate development in the world. The African society needs this more than any other continent of the world.

Patriarchy in Nwaubani's *Buried Beneath the Baobab Tree*

Nwaubani's *Buried beneath the baobab tree* reflects on disturbing gender issues in Nigeria which function under the guise of religion and tradition to frustrate the female voice of self-assertiveness and self-discovery. The dreams and aspirations of the women become fragile and uncertain as they live at the mercy of patriarchy. The story is based in the northern Nigeria where issues of political and religious bigotry are used as a tool in unsettling the freedom members of the society ought to enjoy. Girls from this region suffer the most as they are restricted from unveiling their physical self to members of the public or participate in any social or public activities as regards formal

education, politics or public offices. The men naturally believe that woman are made to satisfy their erotic pleasures and keep the home and that it is not of the women's interest to get acquainted with the happenings around them. The unnamed young female narrator, who is fondly called Ya Ta (daughter) by her parents, laments,

Back at home, Papa and my brothers sit in the living room and talk about the news on the radio while mama and I sit in the corridor or in the kitchen. Back at home, Mama must keep quite whenever Papa speaks and I must never question anything he says. Back at home, the men and boys know everything but here is school, I know more than all the boys. (5)

The essence of a male child is held in high esteem compared to the relegated female child who grows up in atmosphere of slavery. She is tamed in a way to accept herself as subordinated to the male folk and only in this order she could be accepted in the society. Her society therefore has no regards for her and her stance. Her dreams, ambition and aspirations become frail as she strives to appeal to the favour of the male folks who define and determine her success. Hence, in this novel Ya Ta affirms, "it is better to have more boys than one boy and many girls... or worse, to have no boys at all" (12).

The novel opens with the everyday aspects of life in a small Nigerian village, comprised of both Christians and Muslims who live peacefully, side-by-side. Life for the girls and women in Ya Ta's village is quite simple in some ways and yet complicated in others. Ya Ta has chores to do, helps her mother look after her brothers, cooks, cleans and also attends school. Like most young girls in Africa, Ya Ta has her life dreams and hopes to marry someday, even though marriage is not top in her priority list. She says,

I want to attend the special boarding school for girls in Maiduguri. I want to go to university and get a degree. I want to be a teacher and impact everything I know to other children like Jacob. I want to travel to the places I hear about from Malam Zwindila and from Papa's radio, countries in faraway corners of the world (49)

The use of 'I want' by Ya Ta reveals frail dreams, the dreams that could hardly come through by the power of the factors that place girls under and boys on top. To what extent the boys have utilized the privileges accorded them by patriarchy to affect the society most positively is a story that is yet to be told. Until it is told, the required vent for women to express their full potentials and abilities has to be fought for, achieved and utilized.

A monstrous face of patriarchy raised in the novel is the pressure on young girls to give up their education and marry at an early age in life. This factor could clarify even more deeply Ya Ta's, 'I want': her desires contradict the order of demands her patriarchal society makes on her. The challenge that has paved ways for few women to acquire high level education has been condemned by patriarchal machinery and there is the celebrated thinking that "educated wife would be less likely to abide by the wishes of her husband and in-laws" (27). As seen in the novel, YaTa's Muslim friend, Aisha is already married and has consequently withdrawn from school. This society abhors the education of the girl child. It views a waste to of resources. Thus, Aisha like many other young auspicious girls today forfeits their educational career for the sake of satisfying the erotic pleasure of their husband. It is only by dint of luck or special interventions that a girl child gets education. Ya Ta is a beneficiary of luck. Her father allows her to acquire elementary education. She reveals, "Papa wants me educated. He wants me to grow up and be like the women wearing white coats in the Maiduguri General Hospital, or like those he hears on his radio... (13)"

In the words of Ya Ta, we see that her father is attracted by the physical appearance of some women he has seen in the hospital and the voices of female announcers he hears on radio and would like her daughter to be like them. Unfortunately, the evident successes some women have achieved through the vehicle of education are misrepresented by the patriarchal calculations. Ya Ta comments, "unlike many other girls in our village whose parents do not think that sending a girl to school is important since she will end up getting married and taking all her father's years of investment to another man's house, (13)." Even though the calculations do not deprive Ya Ta of the favour she has found with her father, they deprive many other girl children their dreams of breaking even in life.

The biological differences between the sexes are defined by patriarchal whims and caprices. Take for instance; men see the position of women in urinating as something that makes them less human. One could find Igbo men derogatively describe women as those who bend to urinate, 'nwaanyi na-ehu ehu anyu mmamiri'. Again, menstruation is seen as what makes a woman unclean and it is common to find men avoid women in menstruation. In fact, in Ya Ta's society, it could make a girl miss school. YaTa herself misses days of school every month because of her period. Of course, these biological differences have nothing to do with intellectual and creative abilities but this fact is not recognized by patriarchy. It is rather employed to subjugate, suppress and oppress women and deny them their right to express their intellectual and creative abilities.

Patriarchy supports militancy and insurgency. The record of women participation in militancy and insurgency is not determined but the record of

women victims of these is replete. In Ya Ta's community, young girls' dreams are shattered when their community is immersed in fear of Boko Haram attacks. Particularly, YaTa along with her friends Sarah and Aisha is kidnapped and their families murdered. They are forced to make the difficult choice of doing whatever they need to do to survive. They are forced to learn verses from the Quran and marry Boko Haram members who are described as *rijale*, 'great fighters, commander of the great army of Allah.' The virgin girls become the reward of the *rijale*, "These are the virgins that Allah prepared for you" (176-177). Ya Ta wakes up to reality that "the rest of us have been preserved for *rijale*. We are their reward for being brave murderers, (177)." The young girls are indoctrinated with a version of Islam, which YaTa knows is not true Islam because she has grown up with Muslim friends. It is this interpretation of Islam that Nwaubani repeatedly points out is radical.

Nwaubani captures the fear and intense internal conflict the girls struggle with in their bid to survive with the Boko Haram members. Although YaTa hates living with Boko Haram, hates her husband who rapes her as she recounts "As soon as the *rijale* disembarks from the truck and van, he beckons on me to the tent and shut the flap. He pulls off his bloodstained shirt and jumps on to me, (238)". She knows what each day would bring. But trying to escape means going back to a world she no longer knows. Eventually, she is rescued by the Nigerian troop but this does not restore her dreams. They have been tampered with for life being pregnant for a man, her Boko Haram husband.

Overall, Nwaubani determines patriarchy as a monstrous phenomenon rooted in the misrepresentations of women by men and the misuse of privileges and rights men have arrogated to themselves.

Patriarchy in Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story*

The novel, *Changes: A love story* depicts the helpless state of a woman who strives to have personal definition of herself in a patriarchal society. Living in a world, where the success of her dreams and struggles are at the mercy of her husband, she refuses to be cowed by the impalpable existing norms made by men in her society. In defending political and cultural identity, men make women scapegoats of politics and culture. In this novel, Aidoo gives us a female protagonist who refuses to be that "voiceless woman" her husband, Oko expects. Esi Sekyi defies social convention, rejecting the stereotypical of a woman who must bear children to assure her status in the society and protect her marriage. She upholds the idea of controlling her own body, choosing to have pleasure with the man she chooses. She suffers the consequences of attempting to resist patriarchal expectations to life as she creates it.

Oko, representing the patriarchal force in Esi's life, works hard at it to define Esi's identity as a female. As much effort he makes to achieve this as much as he fails. Esi's resilience and commitment to break off from the patriarchal

force is manifested in successes. As an African woman who grows in a village, she becomes educated, a professional and an independent woman, who lives in Accra. Esi maintains her identity which adversely affects her husband, Oko who remains trapped in the fantasy of a constant, integrated, and permanent identity. He becomes paranoid imagining other men in his community laughing behind his back, "My friends are laughing at me.... They think I'm not behaving like a man" (8).

Marital rape is patriarchal injustice. In fact, nobody mentions rape in African marital relationships. Esi is faced with this injustice. Her protests could not save her from the menace. In the novel, it is seen how callous men could be while enjoying their patriarchal privileges and rights. On an occasion when Oko forces a sexual relationship on Esi, she describes it in terms inexistent in her native language to conceptualize male abuse. On this occasion,

Oko flung the bed cloth away from him, sat up, pulled her down, and moved on her. Esi started to protest. But he went on doing what he had determined to do all morning. He squeezed her breast repeatedly, thrust his tongue into her mouth, forced her unwilling legs apart, entered her, plunging in and out of her, thrashing to the left, to the right, pounding and just pounding away. Then it was all over. (9)

As part of her commitment to achieve freedom from patriarchal pressure, she takes her husband to courts charged with marital rape. Consequently, she sues for a divorce and gets it. And, to prove that the patriarchal rules qualifying women as simply objects for arousing male sensual desires, she chooses another man, Ali, a very charming and handsome married man. In this new relationship, she has a perfect space to express her sexual desires and the freedom to focus on her career. The polygamous relationship becomes the perfect site for Esi to combine all her aspirations; she has her house to herself and receives the man on days when she is willing to have a nice chat.

In the novel also, the prime position of bearing children is emphasized. Oko complains about his wife's career gives her lack of time for the family, and, mainly, her refusal to bear more children. He does not accept having only one child and does not comprehend how it would have to be normal to appeal to his wife on this matter. This situation leaves Oko with a feeling of frustration and lack of masculinity. This counts as one of his reasons for repeated forced sex.

In this novel, the reactions and responses of women to evident constraints imposed on them by patriarchy are pointed out. Esi fights against and through the constraints to prove that women have a right to education, career, views

and opinions about how things should go in the family. Even though, as much as she has fought does not give her the freedom she desires as she finds patriarchy an albatross overshadowing the feminine voice and destiny, she sets a pace for other women towards the much desired liberation from the patriarchal strangling forces.

Conclusion

Defining patriarchy from a dictionary or asking men would leave so many dimensions of it unattended to. Moreover, presenting it as a matter of discussion could bring up sentiments that would euphemize it. To attend to it practically and workably, the victims of the tradition must be allowed to tell their stories. The stories presented and reviewed in this paper give insight into what patriarchy has been and what it is turning into. The protagonist, in Nwaubani's work, encounters the power of patriarchy driven by cultural sentiments and religious indoctrination and extremism. In a society with this type of patriarchy women could only make progress towards achieving freedom by sheer luck. Her father becomes the factor of the luck, working by his exposure and fancies which are not culturally supported in his society. This luck does bear the fruit it ought to with the rampaging religious extremism, which kills everything for Ya Ta. In Aidoo's work, Esi rebels against the cultural forces which empower men to bear rule, calling the tunes in all matters concerning the life of women the society. Her actions are resisted by the men and more generally her society sees her as an errant wife. She becomes a stranger to her own but she is determined to make a difference. Of course, she succeeds in achieving a fulfilling career unlike Ya Ta in Nwaubani's work. Her marriage fails in her bid to to oppose the supremacy of her husband's decision and ideas and to express the fact that the woman has the power to choose the man she considers fit for her. The consequence of this is her breaking the hold of patriarchy but not achieving freedom from it. The man she chooses after rejecting her husband, Oko, turns to be another enforcing agent of patriarchy even though the relationship affords her the freedom to fulfill her career and other dreams and convictions about life.

Patriarchy is proven in these accounts as the roadblocks, obstructions and hindrances to the self-actualization and self-fulfillment of women in the African society. Evidently, as long as patriarchy is supported by cultural and religious instruments, women would hardly contribute to the society as much as should be the case. Some women in the African clime who have succeeded in expressing their potentials and capabilities are beneficiaries of luck interventions factored by men; some others could be described as errant women who have questioned the status quo.

There is no doubt that the contributions of women in their different capabilities as endowed or acquired would add substantially to and grow the African society and pull her out of the numerous economic and political

problems besieging her. The Igbo of Nigeria say, *A nyukọọ mmamiri ọ gbọọ ụfufu* 'when people urinate together, it foams', meaning that collective effort produces results. Patriarchy rejects collective effort between men and women and this is what must be redefined. The efforts of men over the years in Africa have not achieved great results. There is the need for their efforts to combine with those of women in all the areas of life where they are applicable. This would not be if patriarchy is not destroyed and cease like apartheid

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