

**A snapshot of the African woman: A study of Shimmer Chinodya's *Dew in the morning* and Ifeoma Okoye's *The fourth world***

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***Abstract***

*This study examines the portrayal or the snapshot of the African woman in Shimmer Chinodya's *Dew in the Morning* and Ifeoma Okoye's *The Fourth World*. In fiction, the African writer uses his work as the platform to expose some social problems and at the same time reveal his viewpoint regarding such glitch. It is interesting that the novelists under study are a male and a female, so, we observe the delineation of the woman in the narratives from the masculine and feminine perspectives. Chinodya is from Zimbabwe and first published his novel in 1982 while Okoye, a Nigerian published her work under scrutiny in 2013. Although these novels are set in different milieux, what is common in their narratives is the ubiquitous or the recurrent nature of oppression and debasement which the African patriarchal society metes out to the woman. The reader observes the dedication of the two writers in highlighting the profundity of female abashment; using the feministic theory to the study of literature, this research explores the degree of female exploitation and degradation. Thus, the reader witnesses the symmetrical relationship between the themes of the novels under discussion. Having seen the depth of the female debasement and oppression, this study recommends that both male and female writers of fiction should present an objective cum realistic picture of the African woman while education and jobs should be provided to the women to encourage economic*

*independence. Furthermore, in the characterization of women, writers need to portray exemplary and dynamic female characters who will serve as role models to the young girls and women in general.*

**Keywords:** *snapshot, woman, oppression, debasement*

## **Introduction**

Chinodya and Okoye use their narratives to reveal the depth of squashing the African society metes out to the woman. They are distinguished writers who react to the oppression and exploitation of the women. *Dew in the Morning* and *The Fourth World* remain plausible works of social criticism that depict the snapshot of the life of the woman in her milieu. In the novels, the authors delineate the exclusion and alienation of the woman from the scheme of things. They use their works as the shibboleth to criticize the challenges facing womanhood not only in Zimbabwe and Nigeria but Africa at large.

The depth of jingoism enshrined in the patriarchal society has ascribed a debasing status to the woman who is seen as either an object to be acquired or an animal to be tamed. This erroneous belief makes the man to see himself as a superior being with his controlling and overbearing tendency while the woman is perceived as an inferior specie who must live according to the man's dictates. Joyce Meyer avers that, "women have not enjoyed their rightful place ... women are terribly mistreated" (vii). Women's oppression and marginalization hinder their growth and advancement.

The retardation of the progress of womanhood has led to the subject of feminism as an important discourse in literary criticism. Of late, some women challenge their degradation both in real life

and in the fictional world while some do not have the audacity to do so.

According to Ann Dibugo Oguamanam, in Africa, “Women are subjected to much pressure as a result of cultural dictates which tug at women’s psyche ... women undergo harrowing experiences in our society and it becomes a commitment on the part of the female writers to narrate this ordeal and offer counsel to women on how to confront their degradation” (“Female Predicament” 1-2). To the men in Africa, the fulfillment of a woman is measured when she gets married and gives birth to children who will continue the family lineage and at the same time serve as the prop of her old age. Much premium is attached to children and a woman who does not have them is perceived as worthless. On the contrary, Meyer asserts that a woman can enjoy her life and do great exploits even if she is not married.

### **Theoretical clarification**

Feminism is associated with the struggle to set women free from oppression and patriarchal inhibitions. Feminism fights for the rights of the woman and helps her to rediscover her identity. Feminist dialectic argues that the women are not only subjugated but always debarred from important programmes based on cultural regulations. Oguamanam insists that, “this ratiocination has attracted series of literary debates with the masculine group seeing the movement as an affront on the already established patriarchal Decalogue” (Female Predicament 2). So, feminism means striving to bridge the gap between the male and the female politically, culturally, socially, economically, among others. Likewise, Ngozi Illoh notes that, “women are deprived of their rights and are exploited by men” (232). Therefore, feminism gives an account of

how women are humiliated, abused and manipulated by masculine scorners.

Through feminism, women are acquainted with the knowledge and experiences that will enable them to empower themselves financially and otherwise. This female consciousness propels women to achieve greater heights and helps them to shun pessimism and negativity as a marginalized group. Also, as a result of feminine sensibility, the woman sees herself as a subject and not an object and challenges the barbaric and harsh rules which the African society imposes on her. Having acquired freedom of thought and action, she venerates herself and gets equipped with the liberation that helps her to question her oppression. The empowerment and assertiveness which the feminist movement offers will boost female renaissance. Therefore, the woman undergoes the process of positive change which will put her at the same standard and equivalence with her male counterpart. The feminist campaign exposes the violations and abuses that are meted out to the African woman. Oguamanam stresses that:

Feminism as a theory of criticism upholds that women should be able to define their personhood and understand that they are not inferior but, equal to men. They have to strive to get education and contribute positively in their society as the men. Women need economic empowerment in order to obtain political as well as sexual freedom. Since social mythology supports patriarchy, feminists advocate that education remains the only sinew for the women to transcend oppression. Also, feminists are of the view that women must be resolute in their bid to liberate themselves from the

shackles of a stifling culture. (“Female Enchainment” 34).

From the quotation above, one observes that women need to work hard to be free from subjugation. There should be much dedication and commitment to be emancipated from the injustice the society gives out to the woman. Women should be resilient, confident, daring in order to win the battle toward their positive individuality; they must shun any form of abuse, emotional fatality or denial which will affect their evolution and refinement.

### ***Analysis of Dew in the Morning***

Chinodya adopts the medium of his novel as the dais to illustrate the depreciation, debasement and oppression of the woman in Africa. It is really provocative, lachrymose and dreary reading from a man’s perspective highlighting the subjugation and subversion of women in his fictional work. In the author’s demonstration and illumination of Cheru at works, he shows how the society looks down on women, the novelist recounts:

Her dress was torn under her armpits, showing her thick damp curly hair. She evidently wore nothing under her thin blouse, as her nipples stuck out like marbles ... plucking the mealie – cobs from the stalks ... she had strong slim arms but her nails needed cutting (47).

In the aforementioned quote, the writer wants the reader to see the negative portrayal of women in Africa as Cheru is presented as a tempter who is dirty, coarse and totally lacks elegance. This crude manner of presenting the woman depicts some men’s lack of reverence and low opinion of women. Also, in a hilarious way albeit unconsciously, he delineates Cheru’s father as a worthless

man who treats his wife as a piece of acquired furniture. According to Cheru, “he used to fight with my mother and my sister and I ran out to sleep in the bushes. He chased her around with a spear. He had the spirit of a dead man inside him and no one could drive it out ... His spirit made him drink like a bull” (48). Ironically, this man who vents off his anger and strength on a helpless woman by battering her, a placid man dies “in a fight with another man” and bleeds “like a slaughtered ox” (48). The ill-bred and ill-tempered man sees no reason to treat his wife with respect, therefore, he batters her at will to show off his superiority.

The woman is perceived as an ignoble being who should never be idolized. As a result of this assumption, Sayed Sadek reiterates that women must empower “themselves through the resistance devices based on such concepts as sisterhood and female consciousness” (169). It means that women must work together to free themselves from servitude. Similarly, the African traditional society is discriminatory that even from a young age roles in the family are based on gender echelon. The roles that are ascribed to the boys reflect their superiority over the girls, hence, such stereotype remains in progression in every facet of the society. This credence is reduplicated in *Dew in the Morning* when Jairos rebukes Godi’s mother for giving a demeaning chore to her boys. He hollers:

Jairos: “What, Masiziva! You make your boys wash dishes?”  
Masiziva” “What can I do, Headman Jairos? My girls are still too young”. Jairos: “Well, then get a girl to do the washing up. Come on, Lulu, my girl. Help Godi wash Masiziva’s dishes.” (5).

From the foregoing, the reader witnesses that the society ascribes some air of importance and self esteem to the male child while debasing his female counterpart. This kind of conjecture is

what he grows up with and asserts his authority over the woman wherever possible, be it at a workplace as a colleague or at home as a wife. The oral jurisprudence infused in the cultural African environment has suppressed women's fruition and progression. In addition, the narrator expresses that women are cheap, inferior and can be manipulated to one's advantage in the dialogue below:

Boyce: "Have you ever fondled a girl? ... I can get you a girl if you want".

Godi: "I do not want to be a father yet".

Boyce: "I can get you a girl who is too young to have a baby. A girl without any breasts and without a single curl of hair"! (114).

To further accentuate his claim on the empty, lousy and inadequate nature of the woman, Boyce narrates his escapades:

I had a funny experience with her one night last year. Her elder sister kept nudging me into lying with her. The sisters both had illegitimate babies and were jealous of their young unspoilt sister, and they arranged for me to go into the grain hut with the girl. It was very dark in there and my head hit the roof. At first the girl refused to take off her dress but I tore it away from her body ... I know she wanted to, but was afraid of the pain ... I scrambled out and left the girl to find her own way out of the that horrible hut (113 – 4).

In the quotation above, the writer wants his readers to observe how some men feel about the woman: a cheap, meretricious and gullible fellow who is never to be valued. Therefore, the novelist becomes a voice in the struggle to set women free from oppression and discrimination. Likewise, the storyteller recounts the unfaithfulness of the men and the mental agony it can inflict on

their wives. Madoo has a sexual relationship with his sister's mother-in-law. As a result of the fact that her husband is always "away for months on end", he offers her companionship and buys her beer at beer parties. Madoo often comes home late, sometimes, he will not come back and his wife suffers in loneliness. He is often too drunk to notice that his young wife "was crying as she suckled the young baby. But she would be too tired to quarrel. She knew anyway that this would only raise his temper to dangerous levels" (136). According to the narrator, the raging alcoholic often unleashes emotional anguish on the wife. He states that:

But one night he did not come home. The cock crowed twice. She sat awake nestling her baby ... she shut the door softly behind her ... Wrapping her petticoat closely round her, she stepped into the path between the seas of grass, probing the night with her eyes. She heard a dog slink behind her ... she saw the two graves ... her naked feet numb as they gripped the damp sand ... Further along among the trees, two dark figures, a man and a woman, were staggering along the path ... He laughed drunkenly as he undid his trousers. A moment later she had stopped squealing and was hissing and gurgling like a choking child as he crushed her huge plump body (136-7).

The above citation exposes what many women suffer in the hands of their husbands. The reader feels for the young woman in her agony as she weeps in the bushes. This amorous affair leaks before the people and it is taken to the court. Madoo begs his wife and promises to buy her a cow if she does not betray him but, she is visibly in pain. Ironically, the woman's husband divorces her for

the licentious act, his son divorces Madoo's sister while Madoo's wife helplessly decides to stay in her home. The lesson implicit in this narrative is that the African man cannot tolerate infidelity while the woman accepts her condition with listless resignation.

On the other hand, in the case of a proved perfidiousness between a man and a woman, it is the woman who is entrapped, she suffers as a result of her disloyalty and loses her home while her lover holds sway in his own abode. Lauretta Ngcobo reiterates that "all these crimes against women stem from one fundamental principle – the social and sexual subordination of women. There is an age-old fear that the independence of the female spirit will destroy the pillars of our society" (540). This forms the basis of female exclusion from the scheme of things as well as their oppression. In addition, girls are delineated as being cheap or even close to prostitutes. Remoni illustrates how he manipulates and exploits the gullible girls:

I can't spend two nights without entering a girl's hut. There is not a single girl's hut in this village whose interior I do not know. I want to know all the girls too. Every one of them. I want to know how they hold a man and how they cry ... Me! Give a girl anything! Not me! I am too smart for them. I flatter them into doing it, I don't spend my earnings on those girls. I don't work for them (180).

From the above excerpt, one observes that women are seen as nether, hence, their degradation. According to Evelyne Accad, it is as a result of such social conditioning that makes the women “doubt themselves, be incapable of being robust and having an autonomous existence. These stereotypes lead women to failure, to victimization and insanity” (161). This means that the African patriarchal society has been foul in matters relating women. Thus, the novelist wants the reader to see the manner women are perceived in the African culture and how such perception can affect a woman’s identity.

In the same vein, Mai Joki is presented as an underlying and chaffy woman who does a debasing business by selling pills for abortion. She is seen as a disgrace to womanhood since she encourages young girls to be licentious. Women are treated with contempt, for instance, when Godi asks Remoni about his wife’s reaction to his flirting nature, he retorts: “sometimes she fumes. But she is only a woman” (182). It shows that a woman is nethermost and valueless to him. But, here is a man who boasts of his wife, property and compound when his huts and every property are acquired by his wife before he married her. Ironically, this prostitute of a man cannot impregnate his wife and he is always owing people.

The writer presents him as a foil to Godi’s mother who tells him that she has worked hard before employing him and if he leaves “ten men like you would not wreck me” (194). This is a woman whose husband works and lives in the city but the reader witnesses her resilience and tenacity to achieve great strides out of farming. She is the power house of her home. Chinodya delineates a determined and resourceful woman who is the stronghold of her family; the author celebrates an African woman who competes favourably or even better than the men. He uses his novel as the

expedient of exposing feminine oppression, therefore, through this work, the novelist questions the suffocating male dominance and exploitation of women in Africa. The barefaced exploitation of women is trenchantly portrayed in *Dew in the Morning* and the reader sees Masiziva carrying out perfectly well those duties assumed to be the prerogatives of the men. It is a perspicuous feminist novel which glorifies the strength of a woman. Remoni has no respect for Masiziva who employs him because she is a woman. He refuses to weed and tells her: “It was a woman’s work, men worked with oxen and ploughs, not with hoes” (188). Men show themselves as superior even before women who are more successful than them.

Similarly, women are accused falsely, for example, Mai Mapanga is castigated of poisoning her husband in order to inherit his “huge herd of cattle” (117). Is it not contradictory that a woman who is incriminated for killing her husband, forces herself “to go into the grave with him. They struggled to pull her away from the edge” and “after the burial, she went to the grave, stooped to clear some dry twigs from the path ... She was leaning on the wooden grave, staring at the mound” (118-9). The African society steals a woman’s joy and existence; impugning her for the death of her husband can be seen as an abhorrence which will lead her to melancholy and dolefulness. Whatever evil that is done in a milieu is attributed to the woman. Mai Mapanga is accused wrongly of casting a spell on Mudi. Her insistence on her innocence is seen as a lie. The men go to the city to seek menial civil service jobs while women like Masiziva and Pendi stay in the countryside to plough the fields and rear animals; nobody celebrates their strength and diligence, yet, they are resolute, and work hard in order to maintain their homes.

### **Analysis of Ifeoma Okoye's *The fourth world***

Women are oppressed in the African society and they cannot resist certain regulations imposed on them. For instance, Kodili, Chira's mother is forced to marry at the age of sixteen. It is believed that marriage will offer her a form of temporary escape from hunger, tedious work and poverty. This is also the case of many young girls in Kasanga Avenue (17). In the same vein, Kodili wants her daughter to get married to Maks at a tender age; Chira's mother whose health is ebbing sees her daughter's marriage as an escape route from penury and the opportunity to enjoy the good things of life which have eluded her. However, Chira refuses to be swayed by pressures around, her focus remains her desire to obtain western education. She sees beyond the benefit Maks' wealth will offer her. There is feminine bonding as Mama Egodi gives her surreptitious advice to Chira not to marry Maks against her wish. She makes her to understand the disastrous effect of what her mother and Apia are trying to lure her into. She admonishes her: "Take your time. Decide for yourself whether to marry Maks or not ... I wish I had not listened to my mother. She made me marry before I became a woman. I became pregnant two months after I became a woman. Here am I without a husband and with three children" (17).

This distressing quotation aloft shows the outcome of forcing a girl into an early marriage. The woman sees herself at the point of no return; she is badly entrapped with the bleak future awaiting her and the children. She has no job, finance and education that promotes good parenting, she can neither take care of herself nor her children. She is too poor and cannot provide for her husband's burial as well.

Kodili is often sick, lives in abeyance and totally depends on her teenage daughter for her sustenance. Okoye uses the medium of her novel to criticize early and forced marriage. For Kodili to

convince her daughter, she emphasizes that, “ I didn’t know what your father looked like before I agreed to marry him. I met him for the first time he came back from Kafanchan to arrange the traditional wedding ceremony” (154). The parents decide for their children and this is the reason why many girls are beguiled into troubled marriages. Also, the novelist uses *The Fourth World* to reveal the exploitation of women, Chira has gone to her uncle Amos to demand her father’s share of the family land to enable them to carry out his burial. He shouts at her:

I said shut up your mouth before our ancestors turn in their graves! Your father must have suffered from a flash of insanity to say that to you. Women don’t have any say in family land matters. They are not even allowed to be present when land matters are discussed. Because you are at secondary school, you think you can meddle in men’s affairs. With my brother gone, I will hold his share of the family land in trust for your brother Nodu until he becomes a man ... I will do whatever I want to do with them” .... (83).

The preceding quotation shows the plight of women in the African society. Women are not deemed worthy of any family bequeath or inheritance. In the same manner, the excerpt reveals the harrowing experiences and the exploitations widows are subjected to when their husbands die. Amos’ action highlights the greedy and unsatisfying nature of the men and other relations and their penchant in coveting what belongs to the helpless widows. On the other hand, Chira and her mother cannot fight someone who is stronger than them.

Except Chira who remains optimistic, Okoye's women are miserably delineated. They are docile and victims of a male dominated society. Chira is intelligent and wants to go to the university but, there is paucity of fund as her labourer father has promised to sell his land to train her to the university when the times comes. With the death of Akalaka, the young teenage girl with only her senior secondary school certificate is entrusted with the redeemer motif of taking care of her ailing mother with the paltry money she earns. Unfortunately, she loses this job and roams every nook and cranny of Enugu scouting for another job.

Chira, her mother and other women are faced with starvation, hunger and depravity; it is their impecuniousness that attracts the reader's pity. Following the death of her husband, Nebolisa loses her sanity because she cannot fend for herself. Since she is unable to provide money for her son to learn a trade, he resorts to crime and loses his life. The lives of the women are immersed in pauperism and chaos. For instance, Mama Egodi is decoyed into singing on the street and one sees how excited she is when an unknown man pays her and other women five hundred naira each.

The reader is astonished at her optimism to do it again since she has not made such amount in a month while selling "under the scorching sun or pouring rain" (100). She is ready to do anything no matter how debasing to feed her family. It is very important to equip the girl-child before she goes into the marriage institution. This can be done by sending her to school which will help her to acquire financial independence and mental stability. Okoye confirms to this when she avers that, "education is not only about money, it's also about being able to stand on your own, about believing in yourself, about having choices, about having a measure of control over your life" (207). Because these women are

helpless, they are stoical and behave as if suffering is part of everyday existence.

Ogom, with the support of her mother, drops out of school purposely to get married to a man residing in Europe. Her mother like Kodili sees her daughter's marriage as a great feat to a man she barely knows. Chira is astonished at Ogom's confusion as her would-be husband neither calls nor writes her.

In the past, the girl-child is discriminated against, the boy-child is preferably sent to school in order to acquire knowledge to help him continue with the family lineage while the girl is seen as another man's inheritance who will be sold off to an available suitor. Mama Egodi wishes she is dead because she has a catalogue of debts to settle including her rent. On the other hand, without investigating Maks' background, Kodili coerces her daughter to marry him and encourages her friend Apia and other neighbours to convince Chira to accept Maks' marriage proposal. Apia taunts Chira with her iniquitous remarks to marry Maks because of the crumbs she receives from Kodili. This shows that girls are forced into marriages to satisfy the yearnings of their parents against their personal wish.

Okoye's narrative transcends fictionalism because it presents a realistic snapshot of the African woman. Agatha reveals that due to poverty, at an early age, she accepts to marry a man she "hardly knew" because he resides in US. She tells her excruciating tales of how she suffers in Europe:

I knew next to nothing about my husband before I travelled to the US to marry him. I was thrilled that a man living in that famous country wanted to marry me. I imagined all sorts of good things waiting for me in the much-talked-about country and I couldn't wait to say goodbye to my crushing

debts, my huge financial responsibilities and my hunger ... My husband abused me in every way. He turned me into a goose that laid golden eggs for him. He had paid for me to study nursing and he made sure he recovered all he'd spent and more. He took all my earnings ... we fought nearly everyday over money (289).

The above citation depicts the bossy nature of some men who are out to overhang the woman's peace and freedom. Also, Ogom travels to Washington to meet her new husband who never cares to come and take her home because he lives with an African American woman (287). He simply yields to the pressure of his parents in getting a wife from Africa.

Chira sees Maks as a careless and uncaring man who cannot make a good husband. It is from Akubata that Chira hears about Maks' previous marriage to Bella. According to her, "Bella also complained that he controlled her in every way, telling her what to do and what not to do, what to wear and what not to wear and where to go or not to go. Bella was full of complaints" (309). This depicts Maks as a man who has no respect and regard for women. A woman who lives with such a man that has overbearing and controlling nature will surely treat his wife like a slave. Having interacted with him, Chira observes a glimpse of his behaviour and realizes that he is highhanded and the possibility of oppressing her will not be far-fetched. The African woman is deprived and made to depend on the man at her own risk, for instance, Ogom's first cousin's husband wants his wife to stay as a housewife. After five years of marriage, she is divorced with neither a job nor a child to call her own (301). She has to stay without a job in order to please a man who pushes her out later and brings in another woman.

The chauvinism in the man will always make him to use crafty ways to manipulate the woman to his own selfish advantage. The lopsidedness in patriarchal structures makes some men not to realize the need for gender complementarity. The reciprocal contributions of roles in the families can also translate into the success of the larger society. Osima's wife who has spent four years at the teacher training college comes out without a certificate to call her own because Osima prevents her from writing her examination. He does not want his wife to work because he believes he has enough money to care for her thereby making her dependent on him forever (257). This makes the woman to lose her identity and will continue to look up to the man in everything.

The imperiousness on the part of Osima makes itself manifest in his excessive control of the woman who is now helpless and unpromising. Therefore, the female writers use the platform of their fictional works to create awareness for the African woman to realize herself and create her autonomy. According to Flora Nwapa, "the women's movement inside and outside Africa as well as the various women's studies programs ... The voice of the African woman is being heard, ... A lot still needs to be done" (532). This means that, for the female writers of fiction and critics, we have to work hard towards women's emancipation.

Correspondingly, the humiliation women suffer in the African society is really dehumanizing and traumatizing. For example, a widow is expected to wear one mourning cloth of either black or white and sleeps in it throughout her one year of mourning. In addition to this, "as a widow, she had had all her hair shaven off". (133). Thus, Okoye's *The fourth world* recounts a vivid description of the horrible and contemptible suffering women undergo in Africa. According to Elizabeth Stanton, men subjugate women because they believe that God Almighty is male, and the male

specie who has the same attribute or sexuality with him must be eminent, therefore, they degrade the woman (14). Okoye's fictional work becomes a blockbuster that captures the humiliation, deprivation and the oppression that blight the lives of women in the African society. Therefore, to see clearly the picture of the woman in Africa, it becomes pertinent to read Okoye's *The fourth world*.

### **Conclusion**

This study has been able to delineate the picture of the African woman in the African society. The life of the African woman is characterized by oppression and dreariness, the harsh nature of the African society which is anchored on the deceptive old wives' tale that the African woman is inferior and must be subdued remains untrue and a mere fallacy. This study has immeasurably examined the portrayal of the woman in Chinodya's *Dew in the morning* and Okoye's *The fourth world*. This paper contends that women belong to a silenced and disadvantage group, unarguably, the African woman is deprived, manipulated and suppressed in order not to be independent of herself. The awry patriarchal structures promote the man's visibility, growth and refinement and retards feminine advancement and conspicuousness. The works under discussion become a clarion call to liberate women in Africa from marginalization and suppression. For the African society to foster tremendously, there is the need to encourage gender collectivity.

### **Recommendations**

This study recommends a true representation of women by the African writers while dynamic and exemplary female characters should be delineated to serve as role models to the feminine group. Education must be provided to the girl-child and jobs created for

the educated women to foster economic independence. Finally, the society needs to encourage reciprocal or mutual relationship between men and women in our homes, traditional institutions, workplaces, political establishments among others.

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