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## Unbending Gender Narratives in African Literature

By Charles C. Fonchingong<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

The last century has witnessed an upsurge in literature triggered by the feminist movement. This unprecedented event has transformed the various literary genres that are being deconstructed to suit the changing times. African literature has not been spared by the universalized world order. The paper attempts a re-analysis of gender inequality from the pre-colonial to post-colonial period from the lenses of literary narratives. Male writers like Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi Wa Thiongo, and Cyprain Ekwensi in their literary mass are accused of condoning patriarchy, are deeply entrenched in a macho conviviality and a one dimensional and minimalised presentation of women who are demoted and assume peripheral roles. Their penchant to portray an androcentric narrative is at variance with the female gender that are trivialized through practices like patriarchy, tradition, culture, gender socialization process, marriage and domestic enslavement. The paper concludes with some contemporary showcases and meta-narratives by both male and female writers like Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Bâ, Ama Ata Aidoo, Flora Nwapa, Sembene Ousmane and Leopold Sedar Senghor who attempt to bridge the gender rifts in the African literary landscape.

*Keywords:* Africa, Gender, Genre, Literature, Narratives, Women.

### Introduction: Revisiting the gender question

African literature is replete with write-ups that project male dominance and inadequately pleads the case of the African woman. It becomes imperative to trace the genesis of gender inequality in African literature. As Kolawole (1997) notes, by omission or commission, most male writers in the early phase of African literature encouraged the marginalisation of women. In this context, female characters are made marginal to the plot of the fiction, while only a few emerge as powerful and credible protagonists. Chukukere (1995) affirms that the ideal female character created by male writers often acts within the framework of her traditional roles as wife and mother. So strong are social values that the respect and love which a woman earns is relative to the degree of her adaptations to these roles. For instance, while Chinua Achebe's Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) slaughters a goat for one of his wives who has had three sons in a row, Elechi Amadi's Madume in *The Concubine* (1966) is demoralized by his wife's inability to produce a male heir. On the other hand, a barren woman is stigmatized, considered a social misfit and invites the wrath of her family and society. There existed a complementarity between male and female roles in pre-colonial African societies (Van Allen, 1975 Hay and Stitcher, 1984) and it is during and after colonization that the downfall of the African woman from a position of power and self-sovereignty to

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becoming man's helper occurred. The omission of female authors from the collection of works that are definitive of literary excellence is a matter of great concern and this lack of acclaim can be partly attributed to the lack of criticism these authors' works receive (Kumah 2000). Increasing attention is being accorded to the mediation of gender relations in contemporary African literature. However, there has been very limited account to the nature and historiography of gender in all avenues of African society, and by the same token, taking cognizance of the contextual realities of earlier African literature. This study departs from this tradition by mapping the contours based on onslaughts from feminist critiques. The central questions taken on board are: How are men and women in particular depicted in African literature in the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial eras and how is the 'battered' image of the female gender being redeemed in contemporary write-ups? What reading can be given to literary text by early male writers and how do female Africanists react to sexist depictions of women and gendered power structures? On the basis of epochal evidence, this study argues the case that pioneer male authors cannot be indicted for obliterating women in their literary pieces.

### **Re-capturing Some Narratives on the Female Gender**

The presentation of the female gender is mostly sloppy and biased. Chukukere (1995) contends that male writers who examine women also assist in endorsing an institutionalized and one-sided vision of female heroism in African fiction. Cyprain Ekwensi, a writer much pre-occupied with female characters in contemporary life treats them through preconceived stereotypes – prostitution versus motherhood and wifhood. This stance contrast markedly with Leopold Sedar Senghor. While Cyprain Ekwensi conceives of motherhood as an ideal norm for a woman, Leopold Sedar Senghor's writings raise women to metaphysical proportions. Senghor's image of a woman is transcendental, representing a life force that reflects the mythic cycle of birth and regeneration. The mother thus becomes a symbol of Africa. In the poem 'Murders', Senghor decries the blood spilled by Africans to defend their sovereignty. The glimmer of hope and the blotting out of these sad moments emanate from the African woman's fecundity. "You are the clay and the plasma of the world's virid spring, flesh you are of the first couple, the fertile belly, milk and sperm" (96).

However, both Senghor and Ekwensi in their writings fail to pinpoint the complexities of women's lives which partially constitute a dilemma – the ambiguity in the perception of women's roles by these authors. Chinua Achebe's mouthpiece – Uchendu in *Things Fall Apart* draws our attention to the subordinate and supreme position of women:

*...we all know that a man is the head of the family . . .  
A child belongs to its fatherland and not to his  
motherland, and yet we say 'Nneka' 'Mother is  
Supreme '! Why is that? (121 – 122).*

Women's role in child bearing, contribution as mothers particularly in food provisioning and household management has been to say the least, presented paradoxically .According to Kumah (2000), in many instances African women writers are marginalized by their

male counterparts and their works either remain unacknowledged or tokenized by literary critics. In order to detect the origins of gender inequality in the African artistic landscape, it is relevant to address the imbalances in the portrayal of the female persona which according to Ruthven (1984) has reduced women to mere objects of voyeuristic attention, only fit as portrayed through types and stereotypes, for the cinders and smoke of literature's backyard. Soyinka's fictive world is one in which women are portrayed in their diversities. They are shown as objects of admiration, indispensable to the male-dominated world. Old women are revered as the 'dome' of religious mysticism, as seen in the symbols of Iya Agba and Iya Mate in *Madmen and Specialists*. In his *Season of Anomy* (1973), Ofeyi falls short of the positive radical motivator of social change that she appears to be. It is paradoxical that although Soyinka believes women to represent the body of religion and its roots, he presents a collection of debunked, under-rated, over-idealized non achievers. One is inclined to agree with Carole Boyce Davies (1986) that Soyinka could present women as neither victors nor victims, but partners in the struggle.

As is commonplace in Soyinka's novels, myths and beliefs present a potential avenue for the explication of gender inequality in African arts. Displaying rigid consonance with the 'Adam myth' which considers the woman more as an adjunct to man than an existential entity in her own right, the early James Ngugi's *The River Between* (1965) presents a mythical explanation to the subversionist place accorded the woman in society "... women once owned everything, but became very harsh ... while they were pregnant, their husbands plotted and took everything from them ..." (18). This position is consolidated through Iya Agba and Iya Mate in *Madmen and Specialists* where old women are revered as the "dome" of religious mysticism easily vulnerable to evil, hence must be kept permanently under close watch.

Chinua Achebe, one of the most celebrated African novelist and patriarch presents his early women as victims of a society regulated by cultural norms and traditional values. Writing at a time of nationalist ferment (Oriaku 1996) and motivated by a desire to restore the dignity and pride of the black person in his culture, Achebe attempts to recapture the strength of the African past hence the stress on macho heroism and masculinity. This male dominant approach is reflected in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1982). His *Things Fall Apart* famous for the macho image of the protagonist-Okonkwo leaves little room for the projection of feminine values. Okonkwo vents his anger at his son Nwoye, who preferred his mother's stories of the "tortoise and its wily ways" to his father's "masculine stories of violence and bloodshed" is very instructive. When Nwoye committed the ultimate 'abomination' of establishing links with church goers, Okonkwo repudiates him "How then would he have begotten a son like Nwoye... Perhaps he was not his son! No! ... how could he have begotten a woman for a son? Looking at his favourite daughter, Ezinma, he had thought: 'she should have been a boy (61-63). Sons were considered as belonging to the mother when they were involved in some malpractice. This is illustrated in *Arrow of God* when Oduche attempted to kill the sacred python. This was an abomination and Ezeulu could only protect his integrity as the head of the deity by being indifferent. He interrogates the mother as to the whereabouts of "her son". But the same Ezeulu rebukes his wife for questioning the rationale of sending Oduche to study the whiteman's religion by saying "what concerns you with what a man wants to do with his son". On the basis of the above

narratives, Strong-Leek (2001) makes the case that women are indoctrinated to envision the world from a patriarchal perspective.

Central to the plot construction and characterization of African male writers is the patriarchal subjection of women. The repercussion of a woman's unorthodox behaviour is shown as Okonkwo heavily beats Anasi, his wife for failing to provide his meal and Ekwueme in *The Concubine* (1966) attempts to physically discipline Ahurole. Thus a woman's honour and dignity often consist in her strict adherence to idealized norms of wifehood and motherhood. This state of affairs is challenged by Phiri in *The Chief's bride* (1968) where women fight against domestication. The thirteen year old Tamara rejects the statusquo by fleeing from her marital home. Even the authority and traditional weight of chief Gamma could not stop her. She blatantly threatens the chief to collect the cattle from her father that served as the bride price.

Borrowing from the Marxist ideology of haves and have-nots points to the minimal position of women in Africa as reflected in Ngugi's Kenyan society. Ngugi's women represent the downtrodden and the pariahs of his society. The following phrases in his play *I will marry when I want* (1980) bears testimony to the marginal position of women. "Two women are two pots of poison" "Women cannot keep secrets". A woman's word is believed only after the event". In the play, Gathoni strives for her freedom and emancipation. Though a sterile attempt, she registers a point. In a war of words with the mother, Wangeci as to why she won't get a husband who will procure her a spring bed, Gathoni retorts "Is that why you refused to send me to school, so that I may remain your slave picking tea and coffee so that you can pay your son's school fees ". She ignores the proposal outrightly and when forced again by her mother, she is insistent "I shall marry when I want, nobody will force me into it". Women are also denigrated through beliefs and mythical representations. Elechi Amadi in *The Concubine* weaves an entangling web of myths around Ihuoma supposing her to be married to a marine deity, thus being responsible for the seemingly coincidental deaths of her spouses. This situation does not only attach a bedeviling stigma to her hard-earned reputation in the Omokachi world, but immerses her into a state of irreparable pathos throughout the novel. An obnoxious and pestiferous culture provides clauses that inhibit the progress of women and maintains them permanently in the suffocating stench of submissiveness. As a corollary to the devaluation of women in literature written by men, it is pathetic to note that the emancipation drive commences at the first cry of a baby depending on the sex. While Adag, Wigwe's wife in *The Concubine* gives birth to a male child and this is accompanied by pomp and heavy feasting, Madume is emasculated, demeaned and effeminate by his wife's continuous birth to female children implying the absence of an heir.

As a consequence of the male-dominated literary tradition, many of the depictions of African women are reductive-perpetuating popular myths of female subordination (Kumah 6). Emecheta strongly criticizes this false characterization, stating:

The good woman, in Achebe's portrayal drinks the dregs after her husband. In Arrow of God, when the husband is beating his wife, the other women stand around saying it's enough, it's enough. In his view, that kind of subordinate woman is the good woman (Adeola 42).

This position is echoed by Cornwall (2005) who identifies contradictory sets of images at the core of arguments in Africanist gender studies: 'women as victim' and 'women as heroine'. The woman as victim conceptualization situates African women as powerless and voiceless victims of ever deepening oppression rooted in layers of male-supremacist 'tradition', colonialism and development. This representation is polarized by a countervailing set of images that cast African women as 'feisty, assertive, self-reliant heroines. In this light, the place of culture in African art becomes germane in our understanding of gender relations.

### **Culture and Tradition as Agencies of Gender Inequality**

Instances of female subordination as a result of tradition and culture feature prominently in the narratives. This concern is buttressed by Omolara Ogundipe Leslie (1994) who identifies traditional structures as one of the mountains on the back of an African woman. It is fostered through the gender socialization process which connects macho strength and heroism to males and associates the traditional roles of wife and mother to females. The ensuing gender asymmetry conceived, internalized and borne out of this need not be over emphasized. A number of narratives make the case stronger. Osam in the play *Anowa* reminds Badua of his gender role "you know that I am a man and getting daughters married is not one of my duties. Getting them born, aha! But not finding them husbands" (p.11). Teresa Meniru (1976) in *Unoma* presents a situation where female children are bound by tradition to assume the role of domestic servants. "Girls were introduced to domestic duties very early in life. They learn from their mothers how to cook and keep the house". In addition, *Unoma* is brought up to believe that "as a girl ... she would not go to school". In *Things Fall Apart* (1958), women are viewed mainly as child bearers and helpmates for their husbands. Due to the phallogocentric notion that women must produce many hardy, male progenies to be valued within their cultural milieu, Ekwefi is considered a cursed woman because after ten live births, only one child—a daughter—survives (Strong-Leek 2001). Buchi Emecheta in *The Joys of Motherhood* (1994) traces gender inequality in the Igbo society as hinging on the tenets of the gender socialization process, customary and traditional practices. Oshia the son of Nnu Ego refuses to fetch water for his step mother emphasizing that he is a boy "why should I help in cooking? That is a woman's job". In that society, it was customary for girls to be forced into early marriage and the bride price used in sending boys to school. This is illustrated in the novel where Adankwo, the widow inherited by Nnaife declares that when the twins will reach the age of puberty, they will be forced into marriage so that the bride price obtained will be used in paying the fees of their brother.

This scenario is re-enacted in *Ewa and other plays* by Anne Tanyi -Tang (2000). Ewa, the protagonist has no say in her marital home. She is subjugated to the extent that she can't learn a trade or at least further her education. Ewa sadly remarks "we are living in a man's world". In *Footprints of Destiny* by Azanwi Nchami (1985), women are portrayed as mothers and domestic servants. Katie, a seventeen year old girl is forced to travel to Kribi to take care of young Martin Paul while he goes to school. Ekodi reiterates this role saying "Katie, Martin-Paul is in your hands. If anything happens to him, it's you I shall blame". Paul Samba crowns it all "she is coming to Kribi with me to keep the house for me and to help take care of my son". These illustrations reflect demeaning

stereotypes depicting spheres of influence for men and women. The dichotomy of public/private certainly underscores the African patriarchal victimization of women. Women's voices were mostly squashed and they were projected more in the private domain while men operated in center ground. Women never had much say in community matters and in most instances, they tacitly condoned and were brainwashed into accepting their slavish status.

The heavy hand of tradition is visible in the marital institution. The intensity of marriage in the sociology of African life is heralded by Oriaku (1996). He posits "... marriage both in real life and fiction, is perhaps, the most circumscribing factor in the life of an African woman". Marriage acts as an avenue for violence and a plethora of injustice against women, a phenomenon Judith Newton and Deborah Rosenfelt (1985) call "the intersection of multiple oppression". In *Anowa* by Ama Ata Aidoo (1970), Badua defines the traditional role of women "marry a man, tend a farm and be happy to see her peppers and her onions grow. A woman...should bear children many children so she can afford to have one or two die." (p.12) As a custodian of tradition, he is emphatic "a good woman has no mouth and brain". This position is picked up by Kofi Ako who reminds his wife Anowa of her limits in their verbal tussle over the possession of slaves "who are you to tell me what I must do or not do?"(p.29). "We all know you are a woman and I am the man" (p.30). In the play, the joys of motherhood could be reaped by women who could give birth. Those who could not give birth were cut off from the group of the venerated.

While male readings indicate that "the man is the point of reference in this society, Palmer (1983:40) stresses that as child bearers, women are pivotal to the literal survival of community and societal norms. Against this backdrop, Anowa is "worried of not seeing signs of a baby yet" (p.25) and considers herself a 'wayfarer' without any belongings and family. Her sense of void and emptiness is re-emphasized by Kofi Ako who states "women who have children can always see themselves in the future" (p.36). Emecheta sees the motif of marriage as a form of slavery for the woman. In her *Second class citizen* (1974) Francis is presented as a feudal lord who stays at home and feeds fat on the labour of her serf wife – Adah. Adah is saddled with a husband who is perpetually unemployed and does not bring home a dime. She assumes the breadwinning role, does housekeeping and looks after the children. At night she is forced to give into Francis' incessant demands for his "sex rights". As if these were not enough Francis would beat her up and destroy the hard-earned property. Against this backdrop of irresponsibility and physical assaults, Adah opts out of the dehumanizing marriage. Women's debased position is given negative credence in Linus Asong's *The Crown of Thorns* (1995). He looks at marriage as an institution where the man's genitals are "washed" by his wife. "... A virgin had been chosen to wash the genital of the chief " (45). As a corollary, Mariama Bâ's feminist tirade, *So long A letter* decries polygamy as a sacrilege to the precepts of genuine marriage. In her epistolary, she narrates the oddities of an abandoned wife, single mother and widow. Aissatou rejects polygamy out rightly "I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only garment, I go my way". Polygamy functions as a male preserve to control women's sexuality. Along these lines are inheritance and succession rites where surviving male relatives of a deceased man may inherit his surviving wives, echoing the commodification of African women.

Both Chinua Achebe and Elechi Amadi in *Things Fall Apart* and *The Concubine* respectively portray Okonkwo and Madume who attempt to transform their matrimonial

homes into battlegrounds through consistent wife beating and physical assaults. Ekwefi's brutal battering by Okonkwo for not serving his food on time and more so the flogging of his youngest wife, Ojiugo in the Week of Peace is strong evidence of the devaluation of women in marriage. There is, moreover, no week or even day of peace for the women of Umuofia. They cannot find sanctuary within the confines of their homes, or in the arms of their own husbands (Strong-Leek 2001).

Connected to anachronistic traditions, beliefs and cultural practices is the gender socialization process. Concretely, the educational process both in the traditional pre-colonial, colonial and post colonial eras in Africa all bear traces to the subjugation of the female gender. A testament, par excellence to this fact can be diagnosed through an analysis of male and female access to education, climaxed through Gathoni in the Ngugi's *I will Marry When I Want* (1980) and Njoroge in James Ngugi's *Weep Not Child* (1964). While Gathoni is frustrated at her inability to go to school because she has to pick tea for her brother to be educated, Njoroge is thrilled with excitement in a "waking dream" that sends her to school. The flagrant misrepresentation of women internalized through the gender socialization process have lowered women and led to a backwash in the social ladder, relegating them to the margins.

### **Male Imaging of Women in African Poetry**

Poetical representation is one of the genres that uncover a significantly different range of images from the stereotypical image of women as mothers, wives and marginalized beings. From the anthology of Poems of Black Africa edited by Wole Soyinka (1975) it is evident that women are given a multi dimensional and broad perspective. An appraisal of some of the poems project women as community-builders; their productive and reproductive roles are highlighted and the African woman is celebrated in negritude poetry. In spite of the fact that African poets underscore the primordial role of women in their societies, they are also preoccupied with behaviour and practices that negate women. Some of the themes explored include: prostitution, poor mothering, barrenness and infertility. Lapin (1995) notes that men in the early years were usually the first educated, and hence the first authors. They populated their literature with women but in an idealized mode, woman was mother-nurturer and by extension symbol of a sweeter, more secure Africa which the educated man left behind. The community building role of women is brought to the fore in *Benin Woman* by Odia Ofeimun. The poet pays tribute to a fallen heroine whose extraordinary powers led to the liberation of her society. The poet salutes her courage.

'Emotan, I make my solemn prostration to your guts!' Even the bronze statue erected in her honour is not enough consolation to the poet who is perturbed by the loss 'And how I wish some woman now would bear your name anew for my sake' (52).

Women's community servitude, reproductive and productive role is emphasized in *Black Mother* by Viriato da Cruz. The black voices dotted all over the globe from "the cane plantains, the paddy fields, the coffee farms, the silk works, the cotton fields" show appreciation for the relentless efforts of the black mother.

The physical capability of the black mother is x-rayed through her "gleaming back" as she has to stoop low to till the "world's richest soils"(81). Her "sustaining milk" has given several generations a livelihood. In *Woman* by Valente Malangatana, the poet eulogizes women for their indispensable role in production and procreation. This is



illustrated in a vivid description of woman as one “who adorns the fields ... woman who is the fruit of man”(260).

The virtues of the African woman are celebrated in Negritude poetry, a movement that attempts to recapture Africa's glorious past. Leopold Sedar Senghor-one of its principal ideologues is caught in the feeling of nostalgia for a distant homeland. To ward off the sense of aloofness, Senghor in the poem *For Khalam* celebrates the African ancestry and landscape with emphasis on the African woman.

“When shall I see again my country, the pure horizon of your face?”

“When shall I sit down once more at the dark table of your breast”?(270).

According to D'Almeida (1994), the image is one in which Africa is compared to a nurturing mother and the African mother is given the proportion of the whole continent. Unfortunately, this notion is far removed from the reality of women's daily existence and the negritude author's seemingly positive portrayal of the African women operated against the latter's interest (D'Almeida, 1994: 91 Stratton 1994: 40).

Despite the exaltation accorded the African woman, African poets have vigorously condemned practices like prostitution, infanticide; poor mothering that neutralize the virtues of motherhood. In *The Roses are Withering*, Richard Nturu frowns at the vice of prostitution which has eaten deep into the social fabric of his society. The society is morally debased and women take centre stage in perpetrating the vice: “At the centre of every woman is a core of a prostitute”. The poet also lashes out at the men who use ‘cheques as a passport to sex’ (148). This vice is also echoed by Jared Angira in the poem “Phlora”. The poet presents Phlora who becomes a fortune seeker by indulging in a series of love affairs that end in a fiasco. After wasting her youthfulness, it dawns on her that she cannot realize her materialistic dreams. Tibenderama on his part is concerned with poor parenting in *The Bastard*. The poet recounts the suffering and horrendous experiences of orphans due to the absence of motherly love and affection and irresponsible fathers who shun their responsibilities. The absence of parental love leads to a lamentable situation where the woman takes to the streets. The “unlucky creation” (bastards) “never will he know motherly love or feel soft hands”.

They either end up as dumped fetuses in latrines and ditches or abandoned children for the lucky ones who go through a smooth reproduction. The poet cries out at his crime-ridden society “O crime! O murder of small flesh that might have grown to greatness and wisdom”(150). The economic resources the women are purportedly after does not change their livelihood as “their own meal is a cassava stick with salt” (151). The poem, *To the childless* by Kittobe, is a treatise to barren and infertile women. They are described as “cold nests” in which “the migrant bird lays no eggs” and as “fruits that ripen, rot” (155). Such cases represent women as a negation to the virtues of womanhood.

### **Bridging the Gap**

Contemporary female writers have made giant strides in an attempt to re-define and focalize on the one-sided presentation of the African woman in African literature. Lapin (1984) observes that nearly three dozen women are currently recognized as authors across the African continent, and they have been joined by some male writers in giving serious treatment and a realistic characterization and all rounded perspective of the female gender. Writers tackle the gender equation in various ways as they strive to reverse aspects of female marginalization. A mother stands for traditional African society

straining to uphold its standards against the corroding influence of the west. A wife reduced to servitude represents the cruelty of badly managed polygamy. Often, female protagonists deploy their energy in righting the wrongs of the past by attempting to restore women to their rightful position either head-on in the manner of Sembene Ousmane's revolutionaries or in the probing style of Emecheta's multi-dimensional woman. In the *Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta provides a unique dimension that challenges the myth that motherhood is synonymous to female self fulfillment. The symbol of Nnu Ego, who labours all her life to nurture several children, finds them deserting her. Here, Emecheta lampoons the blatant yet often "stuck to" fact that childbirth brings joy to the mother and defines her self fulfillment and position within her household and society. Emecheta and other female writers present the developmental nature of the female character through a varied exploration of the theme of female assertiveness in the various societal facets which enslave the female. Basically, their thematic message is that even in the face of an oppressive system of deep rooted norms and practices that foster female subordination, the female must strive to assert herself. In the *Second Class Citizen* (1974) Adah fights against the pressures of poverty, patriarchy, marriage and social customs that assail her. She fights tirelessly to extricate herself from the shackles and manacles of discrimination that entrap the girl child. She prefers to keep aside some money for the management of the household to permit her register for her examinations and welcomes battering wholeheartedly for her action. When her husband (Francis) demands that she should not practice birth control, she defies his authority and gets a birth control device. When Francis places a hard request for her to get a job at a shirt factory, she chooses to pick up a job at the library instead. Female assertion reaches its peak when Adah refuses to have sex with Francis until he accepts that they see the Nobles for their new home—a problem he had been shilly shallying over. Adah is conscious of the odds against her, but fights on as an existentialist heroine. She resolved at a tender age 'never in her life ... to serve her husband's food on bended knee' (20). When Francis attempts to frustrate her dream of becoming a writer by burning her book 'The brain child', Adah gets depressed and leaves him. The act of desertion depicts the African Woman's yearning for emancipation and efforts at conquering a wider public space.. Though she suffers assaults and destruction of property, the court adjudicates and restitutes her entitlements. Adah's story is a replica of the modern African woman struggling against patriarchy, male supremacy and social custom. Emecheta has filled the gaping gender gap between male and female characterization and shown the other side of the coin. The rural back-house, timid, subservient, lack-lustre woman has been replaced by her modern counterpart, a rounded human being, rotational, individualistic and assertive fighting for, claiming and keeping her own" (Obiageli and Otokunefor 1989). Mariama Bâ in her celebrated epistolary *So long a letter* repudiates with mordant disgust, the irreparable sense of poignant pathos, ingrained in polygamy, especially on the woman folk. Using the intellectually sensitized Ramatoulaye and her friend Aissatou, both victims of polygamy living against a background of a tacit, yet stringent Muslim culture. Mariama Bâ extols the need to revolutionize through their actions – hence breaking the scurrilous shells of introvert ness to challenge the status quo. Thus, the later becomes a medium, an aperture through which she advances her views of her envisaged status for women. Flora Nwapa, a foremost female writer threads the same line in her novel *Efuru* (1996). The heroine Efuru is portrayed as a dignified and assertive woman in a

continuous struggle to remedy her plight. Her decision to walk out of a marriage that had encumbered her with nothing short of misery against the rigid conventions of a traditional African society that considers divorce as a taboo is salutary. Efuru defies tradition by running away to get married without bride wealth. She rebels against doing farmwork and against staying indoors the customary three months after circumcision. Believing she is barren, she begins to engage in trade after her husband Adzua, like his father, becomes a vagabond. (Mutiso 1974). This is climaxed by her decision to worship Ohamiri the river goddess -symbolic to a pilgrimage, a return to the real essence of personhood. According to Obiageli and Otokunefor (1989), the true test of the woman continues to be the marriage institution. In this closed-in arena, every married woman has to fight out her survival as an individual. The marriage paradox lies in the fact that it is both sublimating and subsuming.

The female writer and her commitment according to Omolara Ogundipe Leslie lies in representing and re-enacting the role of the African woman. Teresa Meniru in *Unoma* (1976) presents a heroic march of a heroine, Unoma who does not only bypass the culture of the Okehi clan by going to school, but equally edges in all spheres of life. Unoma's saving of the drowning boy is figurative and extrapolates the importance the woman specie can play in revitalizing existence and her paramount contribution to the sustenance of humankind. In *Anowa*, Aidoo presents Anowa who defies tradition and picks up a husband out of her freewill. She quits the parents' house after quarreling with her mother who addresses her husband (Kofi) as "a good for nothing cassava man, a watery male of all watery males" (p.15). Being a scholar of literature becomes a vantage point for waging a relentless struggle regarding the culture and political audibility of African woman (Kolawole 2002).

### **Male Writers and meta-narratives**

Ngugi Wa Thiongo asserts that literature does not occur in a vacuum. It is shaped by political, social, cultural and economic ideologies. Some male writers are making frantic efforts to reconstitute the fragmented presentation given the African female in their early write-ups. The apparent imbalance in the literary sphere which hitherto was male centred is being given a critical re-think. Formerly, the female character was projected typically in traditional and pastoral roles like reproduction, production and community services. Her obligations ranged further to cooking the family meals, honouring her husband's bed and at other times battling to overcome infertility and the abuses in the absence of fecundity. She was mostly presented in her care giving roles that has a direct bearing on the household economy. These aspects were in vogue in the earlier novels of African male writers. They wrote at a time of nationalist ferment and were caught up in the miasma of recapturing Africa's glorious past that was dented by colonialism. Their chauvinistic approach was punctuated by the challenges of the period which necessitated the heralding of the masculine traditions. Achebe (1979) had even argued that "every writer is the product of his age".

With the onset of the feminist movement and the attempts to re-constitute the distorted image of the female gender, most male writers are revisiting their earlier approaches by presenting women in an all rounded perspective. Writers like Sembene Ousmane, Ngugi Wa Thiongo and Chinua Achebe are giving the gender question a critical dimension.

Sembene Ousmane in *God's Bits of Wood* (1970) amidst a male oriented and dominated world present women taking up leadership positions. Sembene defies the stereotype that women cannot be potential leaders and do not possess organizational capacity through his presentation of Penda. She mobilizes the women and is the spokesperson in the strike action. When they arrive the outskirts of Dakar, she lets them know that

“The soldiers can’t eat us. They can’t even kill us. There are too many of us. Don’t be afraid, our friends are waiting for us in Dakar. We’ll go on”. Ngugi is noted for his attempt to rewrite women back into the African literary landscape. His women are empowered with strength, foresight and perseverance. In *I will Marry when I want* Gathoni is shown as an independent woman in her decision to contravene traditional precepts by choosing a husband of her choice and not that imposed by her parents. She also shows a strong sense of awareness to the injustices of her community as evident in her exclamatory statement to the mother “... and all that so you can get money to pay fees for your son!”. The education of the girl child; a domain that fosters female marginalization also preoccupies Ngugi. When Gathoni is jilted and abused by John Mhuuni of being a prostitute, the parents get so upset and Gicaamba is quick to caution them on the importance of educating the girl child by stating: “we the parents have not put much effort in the education of our girls, we oppressed women, giving ourselves numerous justifications ... forgetting that the home belongs to boys and girls.” Male writers are not resting on their laurels as they attempt to bridge the gender gap in African literature. There is compelling evidence that the female gender is given an extended treatment that takes into cognizance their multifaceted roles in contemporary African societies.

It should be noted that Achebe moves from the peripheral role women assume in the earlier novels to playing a central role in shaping and mediating the realms of power in *Anthills of the Savannah*. Beatrice is the fulcrum of social change right in the nucleus of socio-political schema. She becomes a source of motivation, inspiration and encouragement to Ikem, the artist and social conscience and to Chris, the political conscience (Kolawole 1997). In other words, she is the moral conscience, especially, in a society where to use Achebe’s words, intellectuals are vaporized. In Beatrice, Achebe makes amends for feminist critiques of his treatment of women in his earlier fiction by presenting a professional woman operating on the same wave length as the most powerful men in the land. From patriarchal worlds of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* and Ezeulu in *Arrow of God*, Achebe has journeyed on a progressive gender course in *Anthills of Savannah*. The portrayal of Beatrice represents a woman shouldering the responsibility of charting the course of female emancipation. The point is driven forcefully in the following quote ‘You have to tell us. We never asked you before. And perhaps you’ve never been asked... you may not have thought about it; you may not have the answer handy’ (90).

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to add another dimension to the looming question of inequality in African literature through a gender lens. Male writers have not been spared the criticism of being androcentric based on their amplified presentation of the male gender. The tendency has been to draw hasty conclusions on the dilemma of the African

woman. The study shows that women have not been terribly trivialized, for their instrumental roles in family and community building is eulogized especially by the African poets. Some of the earlier male writers like Achebe, Amadi, and Soyinka accused of their a priori approaches of instituting a male hegemony cannot be blamed totally because their epoch was marked by a fight to restore the tenets of the African tradition that had witnessed a backlash and denigration from imperialist influxes. The male who had been on the offensive had to be acknowledged, thereby effacing the complementarity of roles and traditional mechanisms of gender relations. Female writers like Emecheta, Mariama Bâ, Aidoo, Nwapa who felt women were not given a fair treatment are revisiting "the female question" in order to re-present her case. They have argued against the negation of motherhood, patriarchy, polygamy, female subordination and enslavement particularly in the marital institution.

It is high time for male and female African writers in the contemporary era to retrace their roots, and in the process, finding a point of convergence that will provide greater meaning to the interactions of the male and female in the search for a construction of an African feminist standpoint based on our cultural specificities. As shown in the literary pieces, redefining the literary terrain to take full account of women's and men's changing roles and community engagements are being revisited.

The literary genres should emphasize show cases of complementarity at the individual, family and societal levels. Practices that are considered inimical to development like widowhood, polygamy, succession rites, incest, tribal conflicts, discrimination against the girl child, forced marriages, occultism etc warrant a stronger interrogation without any biases and prejudices. This will fill the missing links and gaps by re-situating the role of men and the dignified place of the African woman in the African literary landscape in a globalizing world context. This position resonates forcefully in write-ups by contemporary African male and female writers.

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