

1984

First things first: Problems of a feminist approach to African literature

Kirsten Holst Petersen

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Petersen, Kirsten Holst, First things first: Problems of a feminist approach to African literature, *Kunapipi*, 6(3), 1984.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol6/iss3/9>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

First things first: Problems of a feminist approach to African literature

Abstract

In the autumn of 1981 I went to a conference in Mainz. The theme of the conference was 'The Role of Women in Africa'; it was a traditional academic conference and proceeded in an orderly fashion with papers on various aspects of the subject and not too much discussion until the last day of the conference when a group of young German feminists had been invited to participate. They dismissed the professor who up until then had chaired the session (he was a man), installed a very articulate student as chairwoman, and proceeded to turn the meeting into a series of personal statements and comments in the tradition of feminist movement meetings. They discussed Verena Stefan's book *Shedding* with its radical feminist solution, and they debated their relationship to their mothers, in terms of whether they should raise their mothers' consciousness and teach them to object to their fathers or whether perhaps it was best to leave them alone. The African women listened for a while, and then they told their German sisters how inexplicably close they felt to their mothers/daughters, and how neither group would dream of making a decision of importance without first consulting the other group. This was not a dialogue! It was two very different voices shouting in the wilderness, and it pointed out to me very clearly that universal sisterhood is not a given biological condition as much as perhaps a goal to work towards, and that in that process it is important to isolate the problems which are specific to Africa or perhaps the Third World in general, and also perhaps to accept a different hierarchy of importance in which the mother/daughter relationship would be somewhat downgraded.

First Things First: Problems of a Feminist Approach to African Literature

In the autumn of 1981 I went to a conference in Mainz. The theme of the conference was 'The Role of Women in Africa'; it was a traditional academic conference and proceeded in an orderly fashion with papers on various aspects of the subject and not too much discussion until the last day of the conference when a group of young German feminists had been invited to participate. They dismissed the professor who up until then had chaired the session (he was a man), installed a very articulate student as chairwoman, and proceeded to turn the meeting into a series of personal statements and comments in the tradition of feminist movement meetings. They discussed Verena Stefan's book *Shedding*¹ with its radical feminist solution, and they debated their relationship to their mothers, in terms of whether they should raise their mothers' consciousness and teach them to object to their fathers or whether perhaps it was best to leave them alone. The African women listened for a while, and then they told their German sisters how inexplicably close they felt to their mothers/daughters, and how neither group would dream of making a decision of importance without first consulting the other group. This was not a dialogue! It was two very different voices shouting in the wilderness, and it pointed out to me very clearly that universal sisterhood is not a given biological condition as much as perhaps a goal to work towards, and that in that process it is important to isolate the problems which are specific to Africa or perhaps the Third World in general, and also perhaps to accept a different hierarchy of importance in which the mother/daughter relationship would be somewhat downgraded.

One obvious and very important area of difference is this: whereas Western feminists discuss the relative importance of feminist versus class emancipation, the African discussion is between feminist emancipation versus the fight against neo-colonialism, particularly in its cultural

do your friends 'in the movement'
understand these things?

...

No, no, my sister,
 my love,
first things first!
Too many gangsters
still stalk this continent
too many pirates
too many looters
far too many
still stalk this land —

...

When Africa
at home and across the seas
is truly free
there will be time for me
and time for you
to share the cooking
and change the nappies —
till then,
first things first!

To this the Nigerian lecturer at Ibadan, Leslie Molaria Ogundipe, answers in a paper called 'Women in Nigeria'.³ It is interesting, she says, to notice that it is *his* world that has been raped and looted, and she points out that cultural liberation cannot be separated from women's liberation and that the problems of polygamy, women's role in the economy, their education and legal status have to be considered as aspects of the national struggle. Nadine Gordimer discusses the same problem in *Burger's Daughter* in which she is very dismissive about the possible role of a South African women's movement which crosses the colour and class barriers. However, black African writers who might wish to make the condition or role of women the subject of their fiction face a problem, which I think is uniquely theirs.

An important impetus behind the wave of African writing which started in the '60s was the desire to show both the outside world and African youth that the African past was orderly, dignified and complex and altogether a worthy heritage. This was obviously opting for fighting cultural imperialism, and in the course of that the women's issue was not only ignored — a fate which would have allowed it to surface when the

time was ripe — it was conscripted in the service of dignifying the past and restoring African self-confidence. The African past was not made the object of a critical scrutiny the way the past tends to be in societies with a more harmonious development, it was made the object of a quest, and the picture of women's place and role in these societies had to support this quest and was consequently lent more dignity and described in more positive terms than reality warranted. Achebe's much praised objectivity with regard to the merits and flaws of traditional Ibo society becomes less than praiseworthy seen in this light: his traditional women are happy, harmonious members of the community, even when they are repeatedly beaten and barred from any say in the communal decision-making process and constantly reviled in sayings and proverbs. It would appear that in traditional wisdom behaving like a woman is to behave like an inferior being. My sense of humour has always stopped short at the pleasant little joke about Okonkwo being punished, not for beating his wife, but for beating her during the week of peace.⁴ The obvious inequality of the sexes seems to be the subject of mild amusement for Achebe.

If Achebe is obviously quite contented with the unequal state of affairs, Okot p'Bitek takes this tendency a step further and elevates his female protagonist, Lawino, into the very principle of traditional ways. I find this book a very sinister double take. Lawino is secured the reader's sympathy in her verbal battle with her husband, mainly because he is so obviously weak, insincere and cruel, but then our sympathy for her is forced to become a sympathy for the traditional society she exemplifies, and Bitek makes her not only embrace, but positively eulogize the sexual organization of her traditional society and her own subservient role in a polygamous setting:

When I have another woman
with whom I share my husband
I am glad.
A woman who is jealous
of another with whom she shares a man
is jealous because she is slow
lazy and shy
because she is cold weak and clumsy⁵

This I see as a male writer deliberately misusing the persona of a female character to extol a grossly sexist system, which is obviously completely to his satisfaction. It is true that he also credits Lawino with a degree of jealousy, but the reader's response to that passage is one of mild amusement, and why? Because Bitek is using the stereotype of a jealous woman

being catty about her rival to make a condescending humorous description of the other woman.⁶

That this point of view would be considered controversial highlights the difficulty of a feminist literary approach, because in refusing to admire Lawino's romanticised version of her obviously sexist society one tears away the carpet from under the feet of the fighter against cultural imperialism. Lawino has become a holy cow, and slaughtering her and her various sisters is inevitably a betrayal, because they are inextricably bound up with the fight for African self-confidence in the face of Western cultural imperialism.

That this is a real problem is to some extent proved by the one writer, in fact the one novel which up until Buchi Emecheta's books has managed a clear repudiation of traditional society's treatment of women, namely Nurudin Farah's novel *From a Crooked Rib*.⁷ Nurudin Farah's nomadic, cattle-raising, hierarchical and Muslim Somalis are far removed, both in space and tradition from the azephalous, crop-growing and settled traditional societies of the mainstream of modern African literature, and he is under no obligation to admire it; on the contrary, he finds its patriarchal power structure repugnant and sees its maltreatment of women as one of its most serious abuses. In other words, he is not faced with the problem I have just outlined, and his book seems a simple and natural act of reflection upon one's past, drawing attention to perceived flaws and implicitly suggesting remedies.

If the discussion of women's role in traditional societies is fraught with difficulties, the discussion of women's role in urban African society (both transitional and modern) is no simpler. There seems to be a general consensus among sociologists that the position of women deteriorated during the colonial period. This was mainly due to the large-scale movement from rural areas into the extended slums of the new colonial centres like Nairobi and Lagos. The traditional tribal extended family mode of production clashed with the competitive individualism of the capitalist mode of production, and initially this left no or very little room for women. They lost their vital economic role as food producers, and their strict adherence to ascribed roles in a family hierarchy (they could be wives, mothers, sisters or daughters) puts an attempt at individual achievement outside their scope. According to Kenneth Little, they had a choice of three basic possibilities: they could be wives, thus remaining completely within the traditional sphere; they could become petty traders and thereby regain some of their importance to the economy; or they could become prostitutes.⁸ The last option was obviously disreputable, but it was the only opportunity for women to decide their own destiny

and improve their economic position as it was outside the jurisdiction of traditional society. The prostitutes in towns thus became not just social outcasts, but pioneers of a new and independent way of life for women, the founding mothers of many of the educated independent modern African women. There is linguistic evidence of this connection in many places, where the word denoting a prostitute is also used to denote an educated woman,⁹ and it accounts for the extraordinarily large amount of attention given to the prostitute in modern African fiction.

It is inevitable that the prostitute should be scorned and condemned, both because of the source of her income and because of the threat she represents to the established sexual organization of the society. Among the early writers, Cyprian Ekwensi stands out as the one who presents the most dishonest and bigoted portrayal of women.¹⁰ He combines an obvious sexual attraction to the prostitute with a heavy moral condemnation of her. This leads him to divide his female characters into the well-known categories of whores and madonnas. You sleep with the whores and then perhaps beat them up to teach them a lesson and make them change their wicked ways, and then you marry the somewhat boring, but pure madonna. The missionaries have not lived in vain! This reduction of women characters to aspects of male fantasy minimalizes their possibility for response and action. Their repertoire in moments of crises seems to be limited to three basic options: they can cry, cook a meal or offer sex. Ekwensi is not explicitly furthering an ideology; the purpose of his books lies, according to himself, in their entertainment value, and at times he comes close to writing a kind of closet pornography. In that particularly unfortunate combination of traditional African and British Victorian patriarchal attitudes Ekwensi represents the zenith. His books can serve as a good guideline to the extent and nature of cultural imperialism and African male chauvinism. The dilemma of 'what comes first' remains unsolved.

The question one asks is 'What are the possible ways out of this dilemma?' In the following section I shall outline some of the paths taken — or, in some cases, not taken — by African writers.

An all-encompassing ideology which could fit both women's emancipation and cultural liberation into the same pattern is an obvious answer, and for this one looks to the socialist writers, in particular Ngugi wa Thiong'o from Kenya and A.K. Armah from Ghana. However, a comparison of the two authorships forces one into the somewhat surprising conclusion that the two writers would appear to differ rather radically in their opinions. Armah's socialism seems to lead to extreme misogyny, Ngugi's to a more positive attitude towards women. This

reflects rather badly on their ideology, but it can be partly — if not completely — explained away by the particular attitudes and interests of the two writers concerned. Both Armah's and Ngugi's writing can be divided roughly into two categories: (1) The exploration of the ills of their respective societies in the light of their ideology; (2) suggested solutions in the form of allegorical models.

In Armah's books belonging to the first category, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and *Fragments*,¹¹ the women appear as one of the main obstacles to progress. They cling tenaciously to traditional extended family patterns, particularly in the area of communal sharing of economic resources which, when transplanted into a capitalist economy, becomes plain greed. With Armah's women there would seem to be no holds barred in their quest for money: they take active part in corrupt business ventures, they use sex as a bargaining power, and they even cause the death of their babies in their seemingly endless quest for money. Their values and relationships are reified, and this, in a socialist analysis, is exactly what happens under capitalist market conditions. But Armah fails to analyse these conditions, he merely describes them, conveying his anger and disgust rather than providing the possible explanations which his ideology puts at his disposal.

The other side of his writing which concerns itself with the positive models is set in the distant past and describes optimal solutions or behaviour in the time of the slave trade or Ashante wars.¹² In this part he does portray strong and courageous women, but it is his failure to suggest either explanations for present-day patterns of behaviour or present-day models, which marks him as a misogynist. It would appear that he has to go back in history several centuries to feel comfortable about creating a positive female character. His portrayal of women is the most important aspect in which he differs most radically from Ngugi.

Ngugi's writing also falls into these two somewhat rough categories of explaining the ills of his society and suggesting remedies, but with some modifications: the pattern is not strictly chronological and the author himself develops and changes throughout the authorship. In his first three novels which are set in village surroundings during and just after the Kenyan fight for independence¹³ the women have traditional roles as mothers, sisters, wives and lovers, and there is an emphasis on the nurturing, sustaining role of women. They also fail and betray, but as the novels are about failure and betrayal as such the women are not singled out as being particularly pernicious, but are described as an integral part of a neo-colonial situation which is painful and bewildering to the characters and the writer alike.

With *Petals of Blood*¹⁴ Ngugi moves into an urban post-independent world and the prostitute makes her appearance. She retains the 'alluring' qualities of Ekwensi's prostitutes, but she also becomes the symbol of the victims of neo-colonial oppression. The ideological purpose of the book which is to expose the mechanisms of neo-colonialism in present-day Kenya determines the action and character of Wanja in *Petals of Blood*. In Frantz Fanon's scheme of things the lumpenproletariat, amongst them the prostitutes who live miserable and debased lives, wake up and find themselves possessed of strength, dedication and idealism in the cause of the struggle against the imperial power structure, and in Ngugi's version of Fanon's dream all this comes true. But in the end the revolt fails all the same, thwarted by forces beyond the control of the characters. Consequently Wanja is a debased bar prostitute, victim of colonialism, a magnificent mother-earth figure and carrier of revolution and finally again a disillusioned prostitute living according to the motto that if you can't beat them, join them. She finally reverses that image by a final act of murder which is the true eruption of the anger of the oppressed, tainted by motives of personal revenge. Ngugi has expressed an early admiration for Ekwensi,¹⁵ and in the character of Wanja he has tried to combine Ekwensi's 'alluring' prostitutes with a genuine revolutionary purpose, and the result is an uneasy combination, a four-dimensional woman, attractive, admirable, rebellious, defiant, pitiable, disillusioned, exploitative, winner or loser, balancing precariously between allegory and realism. Ngugi solves these contradictions in the part of his authorship which suggests solutions. Allegory is the most direct way of conveying a message, and both in his plays¹⁶ and in his most recent novel, *Devil on the Cross*,¹⁷ he employs this device. The characters become one-dimensional and unequivocal carriers of the message. The writer's own views have crystallised. The doubts and failures of the characters in the early novels are gone, and at the end of *Devil on the Cross* Wariinga, the heroine, is a 'judo-kicking, gun-packed, self-employed mechanic'.¹⁸ Ngugi explains his reasons for this change: 'Because the women are the most exploited and oppressed section of the entire working class, I would create a picture of a strong, determined woman with a will to resist and to struggle against the conditions of her present being.'¹⁹

The most important and admirable part of Ngugi's increasingly radicalized view of the position of women is the fact that he links their sexual exploitation to their class or colonial exploitation. By doing this he bypasses the problem of 'first things first' by saying 'not one without the other'. This, then, could appear to be the ideal solution, but it has its problems and limitations. Even if one accepts the loss of artistic quality

for the purpose of carrying the message more clearly one finds that the allegorical mode quickly loses its power to influence because of its inevitable simplification and predictability. Another uneasy point is a feeling that Ngugi's car-mechanic heroine is a foreign graft onto Kenyan soil, an imported solution which strangely ignores what the Kenyan women themselves might think about the situation. This leads one to look for a female African writer who could explore the situation from within. The Nigerian writer, Buchi Emecheta, is such a person.

The points of difficulty and conflict in a feminist approach to African writing which I have outlined above describe very narrowly the areas which Buchi Emecheta deals with in the part of her authorship which is not strictly autobiographical: the glorification of women's position in traditional society for not unworthy reasons, the insistence on the importance of ascribed sexual roles, particularly motherhood, the early loss of economic influence due to town migration, prostitution as a solution to it and its lingering identification with educated women. This choice of subject is not the outcome of ideological considerations, as my pattern would seem to indicate; it is rather the outcome of a sense of outrage, coupled with a large amount of personal courage. In *The Bride Price*¹⁹ Buchi Emecheta describes the slow and seemingly inevitable destruction of a young girl by the forces of tradition. The atmosphere of inevitable doom in the book seems to me to be a deliberate mockery of the fate-ridden genre of the African novel, and as such it is a powerful tool in Buchi Emecheta's clearly ironic and at times sarcastic mode of writing. She solves the problem of betrayal, which she clearly has to face, partly through referring to autobiographical data which establishes her as a clear sufferer at the hands of traditional forces, thus legitimatizing her criticism of them, and partly simply by reversing the hierarchy of importance of her subject matter. Women's emancipation is to her 'the first thing'. Despite living in London she is more honest when she claims to be writing for her countrymen than the earlier writers. She addresses the perceived ills of her society and ignores the repercussions this approach might have in terms of creating an adverse image of Nigeria, be it traditional or modern. Nigerian women have finally been taken off the somewhat dubious pedestal of silent upholders of the wisdom of traditional ways.

Buchi Emecheta brings all these subjects together in what until now is her best and most forceful book, *The Joys of Motherhood*.²⁰ Set in Lagos in the period from before and till after World War I, it describes the arrival and subsequent fate of an Ibo village girl who is brought to Lagos as a bride to one of the men in the fast growing community of expatriate Ibo

wage earners. Nnu Ego's identification is totally with the traditional role as wife and mother of male children. However, economic conditions in the big city make this traditional aspiration impossible, and Nnu Ego is forced into petty trading as a means of survival. This proves to be a viable possibility, but economic change forced upon a group under the threat of starvation does not bring immediate social adjustment with it, so when Nnu Ego's son dies she is made to feel that this is caused by her having broken time-honoured rules. Caught between poverty and traditional demands she has no room for movement, she can only be in the wrong. Buchi Emecheta makes her heroine put up a hard and heroic fight against appalling social and economic odds, but the outcome is exceedingly depressing. Despite the fact that she gains her objective, which is to educate her sons and marry off her daughters so that their bride price can help towards the boys' school fees, she dies a lonely and disillusioned woman to be ironically vindicated by a magnificent burial which her 'been-to' son feels it is his filial duty to give.

The disillusionment of the plot whereby the main character remains true to her quest, goes through immense difficulties and finally reaches the objective only to be disappointed contains an obvious moral. Quests in literature are rarely fulfilled as they were intended from the outset, but in the course of trying to reach them other goals appear and new visions become possible. Not so with Nnu Ego. It is precisely her unswerving devotion to her goal of mother and wife that brings about her downfall. Not that there is anything wrong with those objectives, Buchi Emecheta does not maintain that, but she has herself made the move into the westernized world, in which achievement and through it a sense of personal satisfaction is a road which is also open to women, and she is stating her strong preference for it. She has a firm belief in the power of individual effort, and she advocates rebellion and flouting of traditional values as possible and at times commendable avenues of action. As a foil to her doggedly traditional heroine she outlines the life of a younger co-wife, Adaku, who was handed down to their shared husband on the death of his older brother. Her start in Lagos parallels Nnu Ego's. They both give birth to a son who dies in infancy, which plunges them into despair. This parallel obviously heightens the moral lesson. Adaku subsequently has two daughters, a further reason for despair, but she is rebellious and finally leaves the extended family to become a prostitute so that she can afford to educate her daughters, a thought that would never have occurred to Nnu Ego. The showdown between the two solutions to the women's problems is a lesson in what to do as well as a deliberate slaughtering of holy cows:

'I will spend the money I have in giving my girls a good start in life.... I am leaving this stuffy room tomorrow, senior wife.'

'To go and worship your *chi*?'

'My *chi* be damned. I am going to be a prostitute. Damn my *chi*,' she added again fiercely.²¹

The message of this is obviously not 'get ye to a brothel', but rather 'do something, whatever is within your reach', and the prostitute in transitional urban society has been vindicated on grounds of initiative and courage.

The final problem of my outline, namely the identification of educated women with prostitution, forms the subject of Buchi Emecheta's next book, *A Double Yoke*.²² The double yoke is not being black and a woman, but wanting to combine the roles of wife and educated working woman. The novel is a campus novel, set in Calabar where Buchi Emecheta spent a year as writer-in-residence and where she was obviously appalled by the attitude of both the male students and lecturers to the female students. Her heroine is put in the dilemma of prostituting herself to her supervisor and getting her degree, but earning the contempt of her boyfriend, or giving up her studies and becoming a wife. Predictably, in Buchi Emecheta's world, she opts for her education with many angry words about double morality and 'it takes two to make a prostitute'. However, in the end she may just win it all. The purpose of the book is quite clearly to tell Nigerian men a few home truths about their attitude to women and hopefully to change them.

Her writing has a vigorous moral purpose. A moral purpose and an ironic mode are not new in Nigerian literature, but the target group of Buchi Emecheta's irony and moralizing is the very group which has hitherto had a prerogative on moralizing. This makes her not an heir to an already established tradition, nor the follow-up of Flora Nwapa's books about the miserable lives of childless women, but the iconoclastic beginning of a new tradition.

It is no coincidence that this paper started as a discussion of images of women in literature written by men and ended by discussing a female writer and her portrayal of women's situation in present-day Africa. It is only just that women should have the last say in the discussion about their own situation, as, undoubtedly, we shall. This, however, is not meant to further the over-simplified view that a woman's view is always bound to be more valid than a man's in these discussions. The 'first things first' discussion as it appears in the writing of Ngugi and Buchi Emecheta is a good example of the complexity of this situation. Ngugi's ideological starting point seems to me ideal. 'No cultural liberation

without women's liberation.' This is — as I have tried to show — a more difficult and therefore more courageous path to take in the African situation than in the Western one, because it has to borrow some concepts — and a vocabulary — from a culture from which at the same time it is trying to disassociate itself and at the same time it has to modify its admiration for some aspects of a culture it is claiming validity for. Ngugi's limitations lie first in his lingering admiration for the Ekwensitype woman and then, paradoxically, in the lack of flesh and blood of his allegorical women who are admirable concepts, but not convincing carriers of change. Buchi Emecheta, on the other hand, can recreate the situation and difficulties of women with authenticity and give a valuable insight into their thoughts and feelings. Her prime concern is not so much with cultural liberation, nor with social change. To her the object seems to be to give women access to power in the society as it exists, to beat men at their own game. She lays claim to no ideology, not even a feminist one. She simply ignores the African dilemma, whereas Ngugi shoulders it and tries to come to terms with it. This could look like the welcome beginning of 'schools' of writing, and to my mind nothing could be more fruitful than a vigorous debate in literature about the role and future of women, particularly if it can combine the respective commitment and insight of its founding parents.

NOTES

1. Vera Steffan, *Shedding*.
2. Felix Mnthali, 'Letter to a Feminist Friend'. The poem will appear in a volume entitled *Beyond the Echoes*.
3. Leslie Molare Ogundipe, 'Women in Nigeria'.
4. Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (Heinemann, 1958).
5. Okot p'Bitek, *Song of Lawino* (East African Publishing House, 1966).
6. Here, as in many other places in this essay, a comparison with Sembene Ousmane's authorship comes instantly to mind. The only reason this has not been done is that such a comparison constitutes another paper.
7. Nuruddin Farah, *From a Crooked Rib* (Heinemann, 1970).
8. Kenneth Little, *African Women in Towns* (CUP, 1973).
9. See, for example, J.S. La Fontaine, 'The Free Women of Kinshasa' in John Davis, ed., *Choice and Change* (University of London, 1974).
10. See, for example, *People of the City* (London, 1954), *Jagua Nana* (London, 1961), *Beautiful Feathers* (1963), and *Lokotown and Other Stories* (Lagos, 1965).
11. A.K. Armah, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* (Heinemann, 1968); *Fragments* (Heinemann, 1969).
12. A.K. Armah, *Two Thousand Seasons* (Heinemann, 1979); *The Healers* (Heinemann).

13. James Ngugi, *The River Between* (Heinemann, 1965); *Weep Not, Child* (Heinemann, 1964); *A Grain of Wheat* (Heinemann, 1967).
14. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood* (Heinemann, 1977).
15. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, 'The Making of a Rebel' in *Index of Censorship*, Vol. 9, No 3, June 1980.
16. Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Micere Githae Mugo, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (Heinemann, 1976) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Ngugi wa Mirii, *I Will Marry When I Want* (Heinemann, 1982).
17. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Devil on the Cross* (Heinemann, 1982).
18. Izamide Hazely, 'Ngugi's Images of Women' in *West Africa*, 14 November 1983.
19. Buchi Emecheta, *The Bride Price* (Collins, 1978).
20. Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* (Allison and Busby, 1979).
21. Op. cit., p. 168.
22. Buchi Emecheta, *A Double Yoke* (Ogwugwu Afor, 1982).

SARA CHETIN

Armah's Women

Despite the increasing interest in African women writers' concepts of femaleness, few critics have examined how male writers have portrayed females or have questioned what the implications of these portrayals suggest. It seems apparent that a large number of African women writers have been motivated to present a female perspective somewhat as a response to the various male writers' distortions concerning femaleness. Whether these distortions reflect a conscious attempt to uphold the traditional view of African women's subordinate status in society or whether they merely indicate a lack of awareness of the female point of view is irrelevant. What is crucial is that certain male writers' concepts of femaleness perpetuate specific stereotypes instead of opening the way for new values and new ways in which people can understand themselves — and each other.

Ayi Kwei Armah's second novel, *Fragments*,¹ raises some interesting ideas that few critics have appeared to acknowledge. It is a novel full of