

1989

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### Recommended Citation

Ngara, Emmanuel, The Portrayal of Women in African Literature, *Kunapipi*, 11(3), 1989.  
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol11/iss3/10>

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## The Portrayal of Women in African Literature

### Abstract

Before I go into the subject matter of my paper let me explain that my observations on the portrayal of women in African literature should be seen in relation to three basic assumptions. First, works of art issue from historical conditions and are reflections of particular social conditions and relationships. By this I mean that the views of women expressed by male African writers do to some extent correspond to the actual position of women in African society. My second assumption is that there is no literature which is above class interests, by which I mean that the works of a writer reflect the class interests of the author and are likely to reveal the views and preoccupations of his or her class. My third and final assumption is that the writer's level of consciousness and ideological orientation will influence his or her views about class and human relationships. In other words a writer who is highly conscientized and ideologized will perceive the problems of women in society much more acutely than one who is not. The point I am driving at is, first, that the literature discussed in this paper is a literature written by male members of the African intelligentsia who therefore portray male and female relationships in African society from the point of view of male members of that class; and secondly, that each writer's view of women is nevertheless influenced by his level of political consciousness at the time of writing, meaning that we cannot expect to find a completely uniform view of women in all the literature written by male members of the African intellectual elite. Furthermore, many writers have developed in political consciousness, and consequently the views of women expressed in their works have changed over the years.

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Before I go into the subject matter of my paper let me explain that my observations on the portrayal of women in African literature should be seen in relation to three basic assumptions. First, works of art issue from historical conditions and are reflections of particular social conditions and relationships. By this I mean that the views of women expressed by male African writers do to some extent correspond to the actual position of women in African society. My second assumption is that there is no literature which is above class interests, by which I mean that the works of a writer reflect the class interests of the author and are likely to reveal the views and preoccupations of his or her class. My third and final assumption is that the writer's level of consciousness and ideological orientation will influence his or her views about class and human relationships. In other words a writer who is highly conscientized and ideologized will perceive the problems of women in society much more acutely than one who is not. The point I am driving at is, first, that the literature discussed in this paper is a literature written by male members of the African intelligentsia who therefore portray male and female relationships in African society from the point of view of male members of that class; and secondly, that each writer's view of women is nevertheless influenced by his level of political consciousness at the time of writing, meaning that we cannot expect to find a completely uniform view of women in all the literature written by male members of the African intellectual elite. Furthermore, many writers have developed in political consciousness, and consequently the views of women expressed in their works have changed over the years.

In support of my assertion that African literature tends to reflect the interests of male members of the African intelligentsia, I wish to draw the attention to the fact that in most novels of the early period, i.e. novels written before, say, 1970, the hero is almost inevitably a male member of the African intelligentsia - Camara in *The African Child*, Waiyaki in *The River Between*, Obi in *No Longer at Ease*, Odili in *A Man*

of the People and so on. In all these and other novels of the time women play a secondary role in the affairs of society and the principal female characters are portrayed as adjuncts to the main male characters. In typical fashion the hero sees himself as incomplete unless he possesses a girlfriend or wife. Thus female characters are not introduced as individuals in their own right, but are part of the array of devices used to portray and develop the male hero. Even in a novel like Ngugi's *The River Between* where a young girl, Muthoni, rises above the prejudices and narrow-mindedness of her divided society and seeks to reconcile traditional Gikuyu values and Christian beliefs, such a character is partly introduced in order to foreshadow what will happen to the hero of the story, Waiyaki, who later preaches reconciliation between the two antagonistic forces.

In some of the novels of the period the African elite is not an important factor. This is true of such works as *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* which deal with events that took place before the African intelligentsia came into existence as a class. But the role of women in these books is clearly a subordinate one. They do not participate in important matters of state and decisions about their own children are made by the elders - who are all men - without reference to them. A case in point is the fate of Ikemefuna in *Things Fall Apart* which is decided by the elders without reference to Okonkwo's wife. Here Achebe is merely reflecting the position of women in traditional Igbo society.

The male African writer's perception of the relationship between men and women is expressed in a particularly striking manner in Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy*. The principal characters are, as to be expected, men, and the hero, Ofeyi, has a girlfriend called Iriyise who is captured by the forces of reaction and whom Ofeyi and his group of revolutionary men must search for and liberate. But the significant thing about Iriyise is that she is not just a woman; she is not simply Ofeyi's girlfriend. She is in fact a symbolic character, a personification of Ofeyi's idea. The quest for Iriyise goes beyond the quest for a beloved one. It is a quest for an idea. It symbolises, among other things, Ofeyi's final decision to embrace the turbulence of violence as opposed to the artificial peace of passivity. This comes out clearly in the manner in which Ofeyi relates and reacts to both Iriyise and another beautiful woman, Taiila. Taiila combines two principles of peace - her oriental background which can be associated with serenity and contemplation, and her admiration for the contemplative and peaceful life of Christian nuns. Iriyise, who is a vivacious woman, lacks Taiila's serenity, and the search for her is a turbulent one requiring the searcher to take the most dangerous of risks. Ofeyi at one point finds himself caught between these two apparently contradictory principles having to make a choice

between Iriyise and Taiila. What Wole Soyinka is doing in actual fact, is to objectify the contradictions in the personality of his male hero by presenting them to us as two women with widely differing interests and personalities. Taiila symbolises Ofeyi's natural inclination to non-violence, while Iriyise represents his eventual acceptance of the necessity to use force in the fight against oppression. Thus these two women have no independent existence of their own; they are portrayed as part of the development of a man's character and consciousness. When Ofeyi himself is asked why he has taken such a risk in searching for a captured girlfriend, his response is: 'I'm sure every man feels the need to seize for himself the enormity of what is happening, of the time in which it is happening. Perhaps deep down I realise that the search would immerse me in the meaning of the event, lead me to a new understanding of history.'<sup>1</sup> For Ofeyi, therefore, the search is significant not as an indication of the love that exists between him and Iriyise, but because it leads to a greater understanding of the dynamics of history.

In its portrayal of women, *Season of Anomy* is somewhat out of step with some of the novels written in the 1970s, for there are certain positive developments in this period. In Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons* we are given a very positive image of African women. There are several female characters who are depicted as playing an important role in the struggle of the African people to achieve true independence and cultural integrity - chief among these is the prophetess Anoa who is the first to advise the wayward people to return to 'the way' or authentic African values. In parts of the book women are depicted as much more sensible, industrious and patriotic than African men who are portrayed as violent, indolent and greedy. The impression is given that in certain periods of African history women were much more perceptive about the dangers that might beset the African community and the antics of exploitative and voluptuous races than their male counterparts. Thus in times of drought and hunger they worked hard to sustain life while their men spent their time drinking a drink called ahey, and when the Arabs came with their uncontrolled sexual appetite black women put up a brave fight and even succeeded in killing some of the enemy leaders. The following quotation is an indication of the contrast that Armah draws between the indolence of men and the industry and usefulness of women in times of crisis:

It has come down that the men - cursed the tyranny of belly and tongue - were most concerned to have water enough to mix their ahey in, and then they sat through moistureless afternoons season after season consuming stored supplies, staring up at the clear white skies, muttering mutual incoherences about the beauty of such skies - how often the unconnected eye finds beauty in death -

while the women looked at the same whiteness, saw famine where the men saw beauty, and grew frightened for our people.<sup>2</sup>

The next writer I wish to examine is David Maillu who, because of his lighthearted style and 'vulgar' language, has received less attention from critics than he deserves. One of his works, *After 4.30*, can in fact be described as a book on Women's Liberation. The protagonist of the novel, the typist, is a conscientized proletarian woman who is bitterly critical of male ideology on the question of the place of women in society. Among other things she refuses to accept that the term 'prostitute' should be applied to women alone because, as she says,

If women were the prostitutes  
I'd like someone to tell me  
with whom they prostitute  
with women?  
So you see, men prostitutes  
don't consider themselves prostitutes.<sup>3</sup>

To men, women are mere objects to be acted upon; things who owe a debt and allegiance to men by virtue of their sex. A woman, says Lili's boss, is 'a cob of maize for anyone with teeth'<sup>4</sup> or, to put it in more elaborate and blunt terms, 'By virtue of being a women you're in a natural debt of some kind to pay tribute to me because I'm a man.'<sup>5</sup>

Maillu is satirizing the ideology of men in this male-dominated society where women find themselves oppressed and exploited at work, at home, everywhere. At places of work male executives make use of their positions as bosses to demand sex from their secretaries. Unless she submits to her boss's sexual desires, a typist has no hope of promotion. At home wives are at the beck and call of their husbands. Those women who marry wealthy men pay for the luxury of their homes with misery and tears. The men expect their wives to treat them like gods, and when a wife annoys a husband he threatens to throw her out and replace her with a 'fresh' one.

The typist in Maillu's *After 4.30* has affinities with two of Ngugi's major characters, and I now want to turn our attention to Ngugi's treatment of women in two of his more recent novels, *Petals of Blood* and *Devil on the Cross*. *Petals of Blood* is Ngugi's first socialist novel, and one feature that distinguishes the work from most other African novels is the author's approach to characterisation. Ngugi has committed class suicide here and does not use a member of his own class as his hero and mouthpiece. Instead we have four major characters representing different sections of Kenyan society: Karega is a trade unionist and a member of the proletariat; Munira is a school teacher who has been

converted to some form of religious idealism; Abdulla was a petty trader whom the advance of capitalism has reduced to the level of the lumpenproletariat;<sup>6</sup> and Wanja is a prostitute. Our focus is on the female character, Wanja.

Like Maillu, Ngugi adopts a different view of prostitution from that commonly accepted by society which condemns prostitutes as a race of sinful and infectious females infested with vermin. As a perceptive writer Ngugi questions this simplistic attitude which is hammered into our heads by dogmatic preachers passing judgment on human beings from the pulpit. Ngugi wants us to rise above a superficial understanding of the problem and examine the causes of prostitution. He also wants prostitutes to realise that they also have a role to play in combatting the causes of their degeneracy. Through Wanja we are made to realise that capitalism is responsible not only for the poverty and misery of the likes of Abdulla, but also for the rise of prostitution. Wanja is what she is as a result of the social and economic conditions of her society. She is completely alienated from herself, not only by selling her labour, but by selling her body as a commodity. For her life in Kenya has been reduced to the survival of the fittest. Either you exploit or you are exploited. As Wanja puts it, 'You eat or you are eaten.' She therefore decides to exploit her male exploiters by setting up a whorehouse where she and the girls she employs offer sex in exchange for money. It is important to realise that Wanja is on one level a symbolic character standing for the nation of Kenya. What Ngugi is saying is that Kenya is a prostitute like Wanja for she invites capitalist forces and allows herself to be exploited in the same way, and that as long as she carries on like that she cannot hope to be productive. It is therefore necessary for Kenya to disengage from exploitative and other unproductive forces and align herself with progressive forces. Hence by the time we close the book we know that Wanja's level of consciousness has risen above the 'you eat or you are eaten' philosophy because she ultimately turns against her exploiters, Chui, Kimeria and Mzigo, who are members of the exploitative national bourgeoisie. She also has to make a choice between Munira, the confused idealist, and Karega who champions the socialist world outlook. By throwing in her lot with the latter she aligns herself with the forces of progress.

In *Devil on the Cross* Ngugi's consciousness in matters relating to the condition of women has developed to a higher level. As in *Petals of Blood* we have not one but several main characters, but the protagonist is a woman, Jacinta Wariinga. The novel is about capitalist exploitation and its effects on the African masses in general and on women in particular. Here Ngugi portrays capitalism as a form of theft, meaning that developing countries are deprived of their resources and the labour of

their citizens is exploited to the advantage of international capitalism which uses the national bourgeoisie to further its aims. In Kenya, the book suggests, capitalism begets corruption which takes the form of the exploitation of women by rich men - the same theme explored by Maillu in *After* 4.30. Thus the protagonist, Jacinta, is a pretty young woman whose school career is brought to an end by a voluptuous 'sugar daddy' in the person of the Rich Old Man of Ngorka who makes her pregnant. After her expulsion from school she works as a typist and soon realises that bosses expect their secretaries not only to type for them, but also to give them sexual pleasure as and when they so desire. She soon learns that 'The Modern Love Bar and Lodging has become the main employment bureau for girls, and women's thighs are the tables on which contracts are signed'.<sup>7</sup> The novel suggests that in such a situation it is necessary for the exploited women to rebel against their oppressors by becoming ideologized and turn into revolutionary workers who are capable of fighting the capitalists and rejecting their dehumanized selves. Jacinta Wariinga realises all this and so from Chapter 10 onwards we are presented with a completely transformed woman who has developed beyond the protestations of Maillu's typist. She has rejected the image which the male-dominated society has of women in several ways: She wears jeans and a khaki shirt just like men; she has been trained as a mechanical engineer and refused to accept a position where she is reduced to a downtrodden subordinate working for a corrupt male chauvinist; she can now dismantle and re-assemble internal combustion engines. In short, Jacinta has been transformed into a socialist woman, a woman who is not alienated from herself, who is neither a decorative flower and juicy apple for sensuous men nor a passive object of history, but a fully developed person in whom the intellect, physical beauty and the capacity for manual work are richly and beautifully co-ordinated. It is a pity, in my view, that Ngugi destroys his perfect creature by introducing in her an element of violent militarism which is not likely to win the sympathy of people, for in a bid to prove her equality with or superiority to her former oppressors, she shoots and kills the Rich Old Man of Ngorka. This, to me, is not the best solution to the problem of the exploitation of women by men.

In conclusion let me say that what my paper has shown is that while women have so far played a subordinate and largely negative role in the works of male African writers, there is an indication that the situation is changing. As more writers become more conscious of the condition of women in society, female characters will assume a more assertive stance and play a more positive role in African literature. But one must emphasize that this development will be influenced in no small

measure by the changing status of women in society, which is something that is to a large extent determined by the determination and effort of women themselves because in the final analysis any oppressed group is its own principal liberator.

#### NOTES

1. *Season of Anomy* (London: Rex Collings, 1974), p. 218.
2. *Two Thousand Seasons* (London: Heinemann African Writers Series 218, 1979), p. 11.
3. *After 4.30* (Nairobi: Comb Books, 1974), p. 9.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 38.
6. This term refers to beggars, loafers, prostitutes and other people of no particular occupation.
7. *Devil on the Cross* (London: Heinemann African Writers Series 200, 1982), p. 19.