



# Transcending the Age of Androcentric Representations in African Women's Writing

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**Abstract**— African Literature has been the field of male writers and has lacked the feminine lens for a long time. These male writers have depicted the African woman as obedient who obeys man without discussion. However, this unrealistic presentation has been rectified only after the rise of women writers. As more and more African women got educated and started to participate in social and political fields, the women writers started portraying and reporting the changes they have been experiencing in their contemporary societies. As they have been suffering in their patriarchal communities, they could feel the agonies of these women who have been living in subjugation to men since old times. Using Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* and Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*, the article analyses how African female writers have cleverly and surreptitiously carved out for themselves advantages and immunities which ordinary women and even ordinary men could never imagine. Such statuses were like personal identity cards which neither outlived them nor were revealed by other women during and after their existence.

**Keywords**— African Literature; discrimination; female writers; gender; stereotypes.

The world of African literature, until the recent times has been a masculine field. After the Second World War, as the process of decolonization started, writers from the newly independent African countries began to rule the literary scene. The majority of the African literary works, in all genres have been created by male authors who by and large, reduced women to a secondary place writing through their own lens. Adeleke describes the male domination of African literature as: "African literature is a male-created, male-oriented, chauvinistic art"<sup>1</sup>(Adeleke, 1996). If some of them mythologized women as 'Mother' or 'Earth', others depicted a marred and stereotyped image of women. They presented them as passive people, brightly tolerating the second position assigned to them by men in a male chauvinistic society. As Kolawole 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"<sup>2</sup> (Kolawole, 1997). Chukukere 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"<sup>3</sup> (Chukukere, 1995).

This unfaithful portrayal of the African woman has been refined only after the coming of women writers. As more and more African women got educated and started to join social and political sectors, the women writers started registering and expounding the modulations they have been enduring in their contemporary societies. As they have been suffering in their patriarchal societies, they could feel the torments of these women who have

<sup>1</sup> Adeleke, J.A. (1996). *Feminism, Black Feminism and the Dialectics of Womanism*. Nigeria: Ibadan, AMD Publishers.

<sup>2</sup> Kolawole, M. E. M. (1997). *Womanism and African Consciousness*. Africa Research and Publications.

<sup>3</sup> Chukukere, G. (1995). *Gender Voices and Choices: Redefining Women in Contemporary African Fiction*. Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth Dimension Publishing.

been living in subjugation to men since a long time. Thus, the image of the satisfied and contented woman, portrayed by male writers, came to be displaced by an image of the abused woman who could assess her situation in a patriarchal society and want to live freely and delightedly which demonstrates the forthcoming vision and determination of the female gender to "enter the sphere of transcendence"<sup>4</sup> (Massey, 1998).

African female writers discuss the issues that concern the traditional African women. Education, marriage, motherhood, polygamy, economic independence, political discrimination of the women, domestic abuse, the women's resistance to persecution, etc are the major themes of their writings. Their works reflect their interest towards the position of women and their adherence to liberate women from all forms of perversion. According to Bond: "The woman writer has a special task. She has to present the condition of women in Africa in all its aspects. There is still so much injustice....In the family, in the street, in the institutions, in society, in political organizations discrimination reigns supreme...."<sup>5</sup> (Harrell-Bond, 2003).

African women writers like Buchi Emecheta and Mariama Bâ are the most recognized contemporary writers whose writings speak clearly and freely for the empowerment of women. Their works are extremely piercing perception of their culture in which traditional and the social framework serve to degrade women and the conventional feminine attributes; where the women are obliged to wind up bearing the burden of subjugation and enslavement. They focus on issues that really matter and adhere to portraying things realistically. Their novels are deeply rooted in humanitarian themes investigating subjects of gender bias, marriage, motherhood, barrenness, polygamy, social injustice and sexual exploitation. Through their novels, they express their great interest towards the miseries of women. While attempting to record their hate at male chauvinism and the harsh patriarchal framework, they inform the women that the social state of a society or a nation could be evaluated by the prosperous status of its women.

*Second Class Citizen* published in 1974 is written by Buchi Emecheta and has some autobiographical elements. The story is about Adah's strife to get access to schooling as Emecheta herself fought hard to be educated. From the beginning, Emecheta has taken a serious stand against the discrimination of women. When

she wrote the novel, Nigerian people considered that it was better to send boys to schools since they were likely to support them in their old age. Girls were barred from it as they were destined to wed and live with another household. Education was very expensive, so people choose to invest money in sons rather than on daughters. As a girl, Adah, the main character, spends her days at home with her mother while her father is away at work. Adah's brother goes to school but she isn't permitted to because she is a girl, even though she is determined to. One day, she escapes the house while her mother is diverted and entered a classroom during an ongoing lecture. Even though she perturbs the class, the teacher, whom she had already met a couple of times, just looks at her and smiles and lets her sit in on the rest of the class. When she returns home, the police are there and her mother is punished for child neglect, yet Adah is allowed to continue attending school, but there were debates going on about sending her school. Adah's mother told her friends: "A year or two would do, as long as she can write her name and count. Then she will learn how to sew."<sup>6</sup> (Emecheta, 1974).

A few months later, Adah's father goes to the hospital but does not come back. Her mother is inherited by her father's brother, her brother goes to live with one of her father's cousins, and Adah is sent to live with one of her mother's brothers. Simply because she could bring a higher bride price if educated, she is permitted to attend school. Suitors come; however, she is not keen on any of them. Rather, motivated with the possibility of gaining a scholarship to secondary school, Adah embezzles the money for the sitting expense, passes the examination, and obtains the scholarship. She goes to the Methodist Girls' School and finishes the four-year course.

Wanting to proceed with her education at the university, Adah realizes that she will not be permitted to live individually. Hence, she weds a student, Francis Obi, who is too poor to pay the bride price, with the hope of being able to attend school and study at her particular stride. Rather, she gives birth to a daughter and starts working for the American consulate library to feed her husband and children. Francis is due to travel to the United Kingdom. Initially, Adah wants to travel with him but plans do not go as she wants and so Francis takes the lead and she joins him later on with her children. Adah works so hard to pay for Francis's education and at the same time look after the children, she wishes to write but her dream is pitted against the coercions of a stubborn and swollen husband and largely indifferent white society. Being a female writer Emecheta consciously tends to speak out

<sup>4</sup> Massey, D. (1998). *Blurring the binaries? High tech in Cambridge*. In R. Ainley (Ed.), *New frontiers of space, bodies, and gender*. London, UK: Routledge.

<sup>5</sup> Harrell-Bond, B. (2003). *An interview with Mariama Bâ*. Trenton: Africa World Press Inc.

<sup>6</sup> Emecheta, B. (1974). *Second-Class Citizen*. South Africa: Heinemann.

against the oppression of Igbo women. She quests for an ideal social change. Because she is a woman she belongs to nowhere as she is a frustration to her parents, her family in-laws and in general to the society. In this novel also, Emecheta associates the string of Second World War to demonstrate the devastation caused by it. "So, since she was such a disappointment to her parents, to her immediate family and to her clan, nobody thought of recording her birth. She was so irrelevant. One thing was sure, though: she was born during the Second World War" (Emecheta, 1974).

In *Of Woman Born* (1976), Adrienne Rich unwittingly describes the African traditional social setting when she portrays women as: "the power of the fathers: a familial, social, ideological, and political system in which, by direct pressure or through tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education, and division of labor men determine what parts women shall or shall not play, and the female is everywhere subsumed by the male"<sup>7</sup> (Rich, 1976). Traditionally a woman is regarded because of her housekeeping tasks but she is given a second status in a family.

In *Second-class Citizen* Adah is altogether a different woman. From her childhood she battles to achieve her goal. She wants to study. It was her unconscious desire to become successful by getting knowledge. Fonchingong states that "contemporary female writers have made great strides in an attempt to re-define and focalize on the one-sided presentation of the African women in African literature"<sup>8</sup> (Fonchingong, 2006). Adah destroys the image of the fragile woman. She does not like to be weak. She never wants to be appreciated because of her gender and her housekeeping performance. In spite of her knowledge and equivalent competences, she is considered second to her husband in her family. She attempts hard to have a control over her body. It has been always normally viewed that women are peace maker. They have to take care of their family, whether they are single or married. The same role is expected from Adah but she differs from the other women of community. Adah finds herself in hot water. She bravely confronts the odd situation; she struggles against the pressures of poverty, patriarchy, marriage and social traditions that batter her. Sotunsa notes that: "African female writers began to present female protagonists who are pitted against all odds,

yet emerge liberated and determined to exist with or without the man"<sup>9</sup> (Sotunsa, 2008).

Adah battles enthusiastically to save herself from the constraints and restrictions of discrimination that surround the girl child. She chooses to save some money from the management of the household to allow her register for her examinations. When her husband says that she should not practice birth prevention, she challenges his authority and gets a birth prevention device. When Francis advises her to get a job at a shirt factory, she gets a job at the library instead. Female assertion achieves its crest when Adah rejects having sex with Francis until he agrees to see the Nobles for their new home. Adah is aware of the odds against her, but battles on as an existentialist heroine. She resolved at a tender age "never in her life ... to serve her husband's food on bended knee" (Emecheta, 1974). Maggie Humm observed that: "Women become feminist by becoming conscious and criticizing the power of symbols and the ideology of culture"<sup>10</sup> (Humm, 1986). When Francis tries to disappoint her dream of becoming a writer by burning her book 'The brain child', Adah becomes nervous and abandons him. The act of abandonment reflects the African woman's desire for liberation. Though she endures violation and decimation of property, the court settles and restores her rights. Adebayo urges female writers to start writing and depicting female characters as having a destiny of their own without men, and by so doing they will assert the right not only to name themselves but also to "define themselves from the point of view of what they have and do with their lives, rather than the point of view of what they lack or must not do"<sup>11</sup> (Adebayo, 1996). Adah's story is a portrayal of the modern African woman fighting against patriarchy, male chauvinism and social tradition. "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"<sup>12</sup> (Obiageli and Otokunefor, 1989).

*Second-Class Citizen* portrays many sides of Emecheta's life. Like Adah, Emecheta was not permitted to go to school; instead, her younger brother was favoured

<sup>7</sup> Rich, A. (1976). *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: Norton.

<sup>8</sup> Fonchingong, C. C. (2006b). Unbending Gender Narratives in African Literature. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 8(1), 135-147. <https://vc.bridgew.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1354&context=jiws>

<sup>9</sup> Sotunsa, M. (2008). *Feminism and gender discourse the african experience*. Sagamu: Asaba Publishers.

<sup>10</sup> Humm, M. (1986). *Feminist Criticism: Women as Contemporary Critics*. London, Harvester Wheatsheaf.

<sup>11</sup> Adebayo, A. (1996). *Introduction: Feminism and Black Women's Creative Writing: Theory, Practice and Criticism*. Ibadan: AMD Publishers

<sup>12</sup> Otokunefor, H., & Obiageli, N. (1989). *Nigerian Female Writers. A Critical Perspective*. Oxford, England: Malt house Press Limited.

over her. However, she finally convinced her parents to allow her to go to school, after persuading them of the advantages of her education (the more educated a woman, the higher her bride price). Emecheta first attended an all-girl missionary school. But a year after her father's murder as a soldier in the British army in Burma, she was sent to a Methodist Girls' High School in Lagos with a full scholarship. In 1960, when she was 16, she married Sylvester Onwordi, by the time Emecheta was 22, she had given birth to 5 children and her marriage had turned worst, with Sylvester permanently oppressing her. Chika Unigwe states that: "An African woman writer is twice marginalized, that is perhaps why it is important to [her] that [she] write here and now. And why it is important to [her] that [she] tell [their] story, and not be intimidated into telling stories that 'people' want to hear"<sup>13</sup> (qtd. in Azuah, 008).

At that age of 22, Emecheta walked away from the abusive marriage and set out on her own, with her 5 children. In the years that followed, Buchi Emecheta earned a BSc degree in sociology from the University of London, published 19 novels, 2 plays, 1 autobiography and had several articles featured in reputable publications. In 2005, she was bestowed with the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (OBE).

There are a lot of lessons Buchi Emecheta's life and achievements can teach us. One of such is that it is feasible for a woman to succeed without a husband close by. There are many other prosperous women whose lives can prove this reality. Marriage is not the criterion of the woman's achievements. No woman should be obliged to stay in a marriage that is progressively and permanently destroying her soul. She can be autonomous and not an inferior being to a man if she wants. A woman is not a second-class citizen that cannot survive without the support of a man.

This vision is shared by Mariama Bâ, a Senegalese Noma award winner, who encourages the women writers to write on the contemporary socio-political issues such as the male chauvinism and the discrimination of women; she believes that the only weapon which is valid and effective for a review of their gripes is literature. She states that:

"As women, we must work for our own future, we must overthrow the status quo which harms us and we must no longer submit to it. Like men, we must use literature as a non-violent weapon. We no longer accept the nostalgic praise to the African mother whom, in his anxiety, man

confuses with Mother Africa. Within African literature, room must be made for women...room we will fight with all our might"<sup>14</sup> (De Leeuw, 1987).

Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* is a cry from the heart of a Senegalese woman, because it discusses cleverly the issues of Senegalese women, in general and of Muslim woman in particular. The use of Western literary letter in this novel empowers the subaltern women like Mariama Bâ and the protagonist Ramatoulaye to make their voices clearly heard to the people in the central power. The writing of a letter thus suggests a spiritual journey of the doubly persecuted protagonist, Ramatoulaye to reach an emotional freedom. Ogun-dipe-Leslie notes that the woman writer has two tasks: "first, to tell about being a woman; secondly, to describe reality from a woman's view, a woman's perspective"<sup>15</sup> (Ogun-dipe-Leslie, 1987).

The novel is written as a series of letters between the main character Ramatoulaye and her best friend Aissatou after the unexpected death of Ramatoulaye's husband Modou from a heart attack. Through the letters Ramatoulaye portrays the feelings that immersed her during the first few days after her husband's passing and describes accurately how he lost his life. She then narrates the story that she led with her husband, leading up to when Modou disappointed her by wedding a second wife without her knowledge after 30 years of marriage. Though she is a teacher and has a professional life of her own, she is also a committed mother. Her tender and her patience are seen when her husband, Modou, chooses to take a young second wife; a woman the same age as one of his daughters (perfectly acceptable in Senegalese-Muslim culture) and renounces Ramatoulaye with her twelve children. Despite Modou's treachery, Ramatoulaye decides to remain married to him. She describes to Aissatou how she managed this disloyalty emotionally and how she grew throughout each event in her life.

The two friends have experienced delusion and treason from husbands to whom they were married for a long time. However, they behave differently toward their calamities. While Aissatou moves forward and begins a new life as a single mother, Ramatoulaye sets herself up to live in polygamy. Coulis observes that: "Aissatou has known the same betrayal as her friend. And yet, she, unlike Ramatoulaye who chose to stay and remain a co-wife,

<sup>14</sup> De Leeuw, W. S. (1987b). Mother Africa on a Pedestal: The Male Heritage in African Literature and Criticism. *African Literature Today*, 15, 35–54. <https://scholarlypublications.universiteitleiden.nl/access/item%3A2882947/view>.

<sup>15</sup> Ogun-dipe-Leslie, M. (1987). The female writer and her commitment. *African Literature Today*, 15, 5–13. <https://www.africabib.org/rec.php?RID=119525933>

<sup>13</sup> Azuah, U. (2008). Of phases and faces: Unoma Azuah Engages Sefi Atta and Chika Unigwe. *Research in African Literatures*, 39, 108–116.

refuses to accept the situation and leaves. She will not accept the othering by her husband, or his attempt at colonizing her and their children"<sup>16</sup> (Coulis, 2003)

Aissatou takes Mawdo's treachery seriously and rejects to forgive or forget; she chooses divorce and assumes full responsibility of herself and her children. This choice is very daring and really uncommon in a society where polygamy forms the normal and not the exception. Ramatoulaye's choice to remain as Modou's wife originates from her beliefs in the holiness of the institution of marriage. She thinks that a woman needs a man in order to preserve balance in the society, she reflects: "I am one of those who can realize themselves fully and bloom only when they form part of a couple. Even though I understand your stand, even though I respect the choice of liberated women, I have never conceived of happiness outside marriage"<sup>17</sup> (Bâ, 1981).

Their different responses to polygamy only mirror their distinctive attitudes on women's issues; while Aissatou views polygamy as an enemy to battle, Ramatoulaye considers it as a curse that society puts on her with which she needs to adapt. However, their capacity to deal with this difference of point of view shows the solidity of their friendship. This situation demonstrates that differences do not always break down female solidarity; they can be cleared, and sometimes they are not even an issue. Ramatoulaye reflects: "Friendship has splendors that love knows not. It grows stronger when crossed, whereas obstacles kill love. Friendship resists time, which wears and severs couples. It has heights unknown to love" (Bâ, 1981).

Bâ's novel encourages women to simulate these examples so as to win the challenging road of sisterhood. Aissatou and Ramatoulaye's relationship portrays a good example of female bond. The psychological help they offer each other is supplemented by concrete support, as the car Aissatou purchases for her friend reestablishes her pride and gives her new ways to express herself. The novel demonstrates that friends need to share not only delights and distresses but also plenitude and hardship. Aissatou's generosity in offering her friend a car protects Ramatoulaye from the shame of taking public transportation while her co-wife drives her own car. This gesture restores Ramatoulaye confidence as she learns to drive. This action not only gives her a means of transportation, it also cures her sorrow and restores her esteem and respect. *So Long a Letter*, thus, portrays a solid

form of female friendship that ultimately extends to female sisterhood as Aissatou and Ramatoulaye not only empower each other but also participate in nation building. The solidarity they build and maintain secures their survival against the constraints of male chauvinism, customs, polygamy, colonialism and any form of discrimination.

After that Ramatoulaye narrates the happenings before and after Modou's death. It is through 'Mirasse', the forty-day mourning period that the narrator Ramatoulaye describes in details the depiction and interpretation of the events which give nothing but sorrows and sufferings to the honorable soul of Ramatoulaye. She describes her loathing in a passionate way over the hypocrisy of the people. She mourns the fact that the real goal of such ceremonies is deceived due to the commercial intention of the people and their excessive significance to the issue of prestige. The accent becomes sarcastic when she comes across the total cruel behaviour of Tasmir, Modou's elder brother. His proposal disregards for religion agonies her clean soul. As in the middle of Ramatoulaye's period of mourning, Tasmir has the daring to conjure the conventional practice of spouse inheritance to ask Ramatoulaye's hand after she leaves mourning. Ramatoulaye becomes furious and she responds resentfully to Tasmir's request: " My house shall never be for you the coveted oasis: no extra burden: my "turn" every day: cleanliness and luxury, abundance and calm! No, Tasmir! " (Bâ, 1981). Through her anger Ramatoulaye gets the power to refuse her suitors' proposals for marriage; she recognizes that Tasmir's goals in her are absolutely financial, however Daouda Dieng, who always sustains Ramatoulaye, is also unable to induce her to wed him. In a letter to Daouda, she explains the reason for her denial: "Abandoned yesterday because of a woman, I cannot lightly bring myself between you and your family" (Bâ, 1981) by taking this attitude Ramatoulaye deduces that a more noticeable solidarity among women is required to diminish the suffering women experience in polygamous conditions.

*So Long a Letter* is a realistic masterpiece. It is a fictionalized real-life experience partly of the writer herself and that of the people around. The novel proposes a solution or a way out for women in a polygamous environment through formal education. The tone is denying and deploring as the writer sympathizes with the victims of polygamy. She similarly tries to wake up the consciousness in women all over the world to protest against polygamous practices. It is a letter intended to caution, alert and convince young men and women against polygamous practice, it portrays how ladies are oppressed by means of masculine society. All the more terrible: "a woman gives up her personality, her identity, becoming a

<sup>16</sup> Coulis, S. (2003). *The Impossibility of Choice: Gender and Genre in Mariama Bâ's So Long a Letter. Emerging Perspectives on Mariama Bâ: post colonialism, Feminism, and Postmodernism*. Ed. Ada Uzoamaka Azodo. Trenton: Africa World P.

<sup>17</sup> Bâ, M. (1981). *So Long A Letter*. Ibaden: New Horn Press.

thing in the service of the man who has married her" (Bâ, 1981). Ramatoulaye has needed to fulfill the duties of mothering and educating, while tolerating the discrimination of a male chauvinistic environment. The disgusting and hideous avocation provides Ramatoulye with the force to assert for women's robbed rights. She contends him that: "we have a right, just as you have, to education, which we ought to be able to pursue to the furthest limits of our intellectual capacities. We have a right to equal well-paid employment, to equal opportunities. The right to vote is an important weapon" (Bâ, 1981). Thusly, Bâ blends the still security in her society. In addition, she develops female solidarity and sisterhood. Then again, she likewise addresses the foundation of African feminism. Mariama Bâ, as a famous writer, has succeeded in portraying the merciless conditions of women in Africa. This adroit depiction raises her rapidly through women's activist progressive system of African authors.

### CONCLUSION

Buche Emecheta and Mariama Bâ engraved renowned places for themselves in the African literary scene as modern thinkers and writers with striking clearness. The importance of their writings lies in the portrayal of the debased condition of women and the disintegrating social order viewed through the lens of gender sensibility. Their novels attempt to exhibit the presence of a female tradition in fiction which is both enhancing and empowering. Through their writings, they have redefined the definition of feminism. They are primarily interested in subjects like gender discrimination, polygamy, second class imposed on women in male chauvinistic societies and their ensuing battle against these abusive conventions. They demonstrate how women need to manage to set up themselves as independent individuals. Though it may appear to be not a simple mission for them to make it to the best, considering the harsh extremisms and intolerance in their cultures, they have performed their best to enter every field of human activity and pick out a social transformation. Their works attempt to emphasize the fact that gender bias, meaningless traditions, and subjugations of all sorts are to be completely denied from the society and they have to go many miles ahead to reach an age of real women empowerment. Through their refined stories which aim at 'Awakening' of the heroines of their novels, they stimulate not only the African women, but the women of the world to derive revelation from them, achieve their individualism and to bear in their minds that the ultimate solution of transcending the age of gender discrimination relies on women themselves. They encourage the women to develop ability for suffering and

sacrifice. In this regard their novels mark the beginning of a renaissance among all the women of the world, the beginning of their true all-round development. They display also their deeper interest in journey from 'traditional heritage' to "modernity"; it is a long journey which lays assertion on thinking, designing, arranging, managing, making choices and creating something creative. Their novels, thus, portray their serious adherence to the harsh reality that at all levels woman has been thrown at the grace of waves and winds by the selfish ends of men.

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