



**WOMEN AND THE REVOLUTION SPIRIT:  
USING MARIAMA BA'S *SO LONG A LETTER*, AKACHI  
ADIMORA-EZEIGBO'S *TRAFFICKED* AND CHINUA ACHEBE'S  
*ANTHILLS OF THE SAVANNA* AS PARADIGMS**

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**Abstract:**

Literature as a discipline has attracted varying dimensions of attention over the years. Scholars have conceptualized literature and have come up with postulations. As the literary genres develop, so also do the criticism on these genres. The critical approach to the study of literature has come to x-ray literary works to ascertain their content and worth. It is through this critical approach that certain preoccupations of writers and their depiction and portraiture of characters are beginning to raise eye brows and are being questioned. Thus, efforts are being made in many quarters to dismantle the ugly trend of imbalance character portrayal in works of literature. It is through this critical approach that the ideology of feminism sparked off from. Writers are now on a corrective mission to balance the equation for the writings of many men has been one sided, portraying the female as baseless. Writers have made revolution part of their tool for this onerous task. It is in view of the foregoing that this paper critically analyses the revolution spirit in women. Drawing from the experiences of characters in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* and Chinua Achebe's *Anthill of the Savannah*, the paper posits that writers can, through their character portrayal, effect changes in the scheme of things in the society and chart a new path for the society to follow. It draws extensively from the feminist ideology making statements that revolution is an indispensable ingredient in the strife for self-empowerment and self-actualization. The paper then recommends that for the growth, progress of the society, there should be balanced character portrayal, and female writers should galvanize their fellow women into actions that will culminate in self-actualization.

**Keywords:** feminism, African literature, feminist writers

### **Literature: Functional Conceptualization**

Literature is believed to be a mirror held to life. The belief gives credence to the concept of literature as mimesis, as a reflection of life. Life issues are polarized as there are many divides and ideological stances. So also do such ideologies filter into literature for, literature aligns itself with, and to the society. The literacy genres (written) in Africa have explored varying ideologies thus, writers have tried to put down messages for consideration while penning down their ideological stances. Given that literature is not divorced from the society, it takes into account the human conditions in such societies. Thus, literature has the inevitable presence of historical and sociological facts which typify the societies they emanate from. In line with this, literature can function also to chart a way or new agenda for the society. Ogene (2011, p.479) believes that literature has the capacity to redesign, reconstruct and redirect the focus of any society that gives life to it. In doing so, old designs and constructions are abandoned.

As has been noted earlier, literature emanating from Africa has explored varying degrees of ideologies. With the advent of colonialism came literacy which imbued Africans with the tool to fight their colonial masters. Literature that emanated from African then was anti colonialists in nature, as the literary genre aligned itself with the struggle to dismantle the domineering effects of colonialism. That having been actualized, the ideological stance has tilted to portray post-colonial disillusionment, the fight against neo-colonialism and presently, there is the feminist ideology espousing gender equity with a view to destroying the obnoxious practices inherent in the African society and to give the women their pride of place (Ibe, 2000, p. 2).

Literature, being society specific and a product of the society, not only reflects the society but, affects it in varying dimensions. Thus, literature is not just a reflection of the society but rather, a projection of the people's aspiration for the future (Duvignand, 1972, p. 67). The foregoing typifies that literature plays an indispensable role in the society as it can chart a new cause for the society or better still, present ideologies, which when considered, lead to the advancement of the society. It is pertinent to note that literary works represent the ideologies of writers which Uwakwe and Nwaogu (2013) believe can result/stem from accumulation of personal as well as historical experiences, emotional tendencies, customs and traditions. Thus, literary artistes, while exploring ideologies, pen down their passions and sensibilities which have the capacity to spark off battles of consciousness, conscientization and, by extension, revolution. This can be achieved through the vehicle of criticism for, it is through criticism that

literature studies, analyses and judges the ethics and mores of a given society (Ogene, 2011,p. 479).

The criticism given to literature by artistes on the feministic sign post is an eye opener to what literature can do in the society. This is in line with Jeyifor's (2007) assertion that critical discourse not only assures the survival of literature but, also determines the conditions in which it survives and the use to which it is put. Attempts will now be made to appraise feminism drawing out sign posts of revolution, which is the thrust of this paper.

### **African Literature before Feminism**

The first section, the conceptualization of literature, posited that writers explored certain ideologies in their literary works. Before the rise of the feminist ideology, writers had presented the woman in a pejorative manner, character depiction of females were stereotyped. They were either prostitutes, or properties to be owned. This emanated from the Africa culture which gave the woman no voice of her own, as she was to be seen and not heard. EL-Saadawi (2007, p.520) asserts that women were portrayed by male writers in her society as instruments of the devil, stupid, explosive danger, and animals without brain. All these expressions demean the women because, they all have derogatory import.

We noted earlier that ideologies could emanate from historical experiences, customs and traditions. Traditional Africa society saw the women as having no existence without the men. Women were seen as properties to be owned and used at will. This same import found expression in the literary genres. In *Things Fall Apart* for instance, Achebe portrayed the woman as voiceless and properties to be controlled. Achebe wrote that Okonkwo had three wives and controlled all of them. This meant that none of the wives could agitate for/against anything because; the society had not given them the right and leverage to do so.

Because the African society was patriarchal in nature, the literature that emanated from it did not fail to be tailored with the import of patriarchy. The artistic world was male dominated and thus, the woman was portrayed in the image they dimmed fit. Ekwensi portrayed the woman as a prostitute in *Jagua Nana*. In all, they failed to see the power of women and portrayed her in utmost negativity and in total subordination to the man. It was only in *Anthills of the Savannah* that one saw a regression in this trend. As Nwapa (528) asserts, the name, *Nwanyibuife*-woman is something, given to the heroine and her portraiture as a liberated and powerful woman symbolizes a sudden awakening to the importance of women-being.

When female writers climbed the publishing ladder with Flora Nwapa as their pioneer, the trend changed for the women. Through her heroines, she boldly asserted that women are beings in their own right and should not be subordinated to the men. She debunked the myth of docility weaved around the women by the men and, gave them a spirit of independence and made them assertive and revolutionary forces to be reckoned with in their societies. Efuru and Idu are such heroines.

### **Feminism: A Critical Appraisal**

Feminism is an emergent ideological slant in literature which arose to tackle the problem of inequality of the genders and subjugation of the female gender. It is noteworthy, sadly though, that the female gender has not been favourably treated in all spheres of life, even in character portrayal in works of literature. Because the men dominated the literary scene, they transferred the patriarchal setting of the society to the world of literature. Thus, women were seen as docile and passive, without initiative or voice. In the African setting for instance, the woman was at the beck and call of the man, ever ready to answer lord and master to his calls, warm his bed and produce children for him. She had no independence, be it economic or otherwise. All these denominators led to a clamor for change in the scheme of things. M Blamah (2000) lends weight to the foregoing when he asserts that feminism is revolutionary, given that it is directed at changing the existing power relationship between men and women in the society. Feminism, thus, seeks to redress some of the cultural elements that impede the growth of the individual, the women especially.

There have been attempts at defining this concept. Feminism in Chukwuma's (1992, p.ix) assertion is a "*rejection of inferiority and a striving for recognition. It seeks to give the women a sense of self... Feminism is a reaction to such stereotype of women which deny them a positive identity*". Feminism as preached by the western world seems to be controversial as it sets out to dismantle everything male. That is why some people view feminism, erroneously though, as the battle of the sexes for supremacy. Feminism in the African context is at different polarity with the western brand.

The Africa version of feminism includes oppositions against all that impede the growth of women and militate against the woman's conscious efforts to help her individuality. The feminist trend in Africa is, therefore, geared toward debunking many myths surrounding the women. The feminist writer, through her works and character portrayal criticizes male dominance, subjugation and marginalization of the female with a view to wiping them out.

The aim of feminism is to melt and dissolve the burden of irrelevant customs and practices on the female gender and to create females that are revolutionary and who have become fully emancipated and liberated and who, by extension, can contribute to the advancement of the society. As has been noted earlier, western feminism could be termed the war of the sexes or dividing the gender (Davies 2007, p.564).

This paper, therefore, is not hinged on this version of radical feminism which is oppositional to men. Ogodipe-Leslie (547) asserts that feminism (African feminism) is not a reversal of gender roles or adversarial gender politics. Steady in Davies (2007, p.561) postulates that true feminism is an abnegation of male protection and a determination to be resourceful and self-relevant. This view holds that the woman has a role to play here because she has to assume a Messianic stance and through herself percept, liberate herself and define her freedom. This is the role the contemporary female writer has made obligatory. Thus, Davies (564) posits that true African feminism examines the African society for institutions which are of value to women and rejects those that are detriment to them. This is what Davies (566) calls / terms the "*balancing act theory*" which listed the imbalances to include traditional preference for sons, marginalization and subjugation of women at home and even in the work places. Thus, the critical approach to African feminism stipulates that texts cannot be studied in isolation from the society it emanates from. The study of Africa literature thus becomes the study of the African society. Since writers on the feministic leaning have become critical of the trends in literature, they have come to use their character depiction to fight such trends. Characters have been armed with the tool of revolution in a bid to dismantle male domination and destroy/ correct the stereotype images of women in literature. Subsequent sections will analyse how far this tool has been used and the results recorded.

### **Women and the Revolution Spirit as Depicted in Mariama Ba's *So Long A Letter***

The treatise on feminism has driven home the clamour for change in the scheme of things by feminist writers. Such writers create and encourage others to create characters of high noble standing and of extreme independence just to counter the earlier portraiture of women as dependent and subordinate to men, who have no existence without the men. The traditional African society upholds polygamy which is a tool for female domination. Ba in *So Long a Letter* attacks the domination of women by men in the society. Ba's approach in the work was to use character portrayal to attack the ills of her society. Two of her characters, Aissatou and Ramatoulaye become her sign posts for liberation. Both women face domination orchestrated by polygamy and both say no to

it. Aissatou becomes confrontational and abandons her marriage in a bid to assert herself and work toward her liberation. Her spirit of revolution flames up. Having endured humiliation from her husband's relatives because of her class: a gold smith's daughter married to a doctor prince, she bolts out when a co-wife arrives. Her marriage which was hitherto fraught with encumbrances from the possessive relatives in-law hits the rocks when her mother in-law brought young Nabou to her husband, Mawdo Ba, to marry. She leaves with her four sons to avoid marginalization and takes refuge in books. She studies in France and graduates from the School of Interpreters and becomes appointed into the Senegalese Embassy in the United States. She turns her back on those seeking light enjoyment and easy relationship (p.33). Aissatou rises above odds against her. Through education, she becomes emancipated and empowered, crushes the past beneath her heels and becomes the courageous pioneer of a new life. She is able to carve an identity for herself, that of a liberated woman. This leads to her empowerment and self-actualization. She even buys a car for Ramatoulaye.

Against Daba's advice, Ramatoulaye stays on in marriage after the arrival of Binetou, her, daughter's friend, but takes up the cause of her life. After being abandoned by Madou Fall, she takes up charge of running her home and taking care of her twelve children. She learns lessons of greatness, courage and perseverance. She experiences the inadequacies of public transport while her co-wife and her mother go in expensive cars. She trains her children who become her pride. Ramatoulaye becomes confrontational after her husband's death, rejects suitors like Tamsir, the brother in-law whom she told, "*Tamsir, purge yourself of your dreams of conquest. They have lasted forty days; I shall never be your wife*" (p. 58). In doing this, she kicks against the law of inheritance of wives by brothers in-law. She also speaks and debates with Daouda Dieng when she tells him "women should no longer be decorative accessories, objects to be moved about, and companions to be flattered or claimed with promises (p. 61).

Ba captures through her critical perspectives the state of her Senegalese society which mirrors the plight of the women especially the career woman within the ambit of polygamy sanctioned by customs and religion (Blamah, 2000, p. 124). But through her characterization, she castigates and dethrones such customs and religious practices that impede the growth and liberation of the woman. Thus, she lends her voice to the struggle for woman liberation empowerment and self-actualization which is a redirection of the society.

### **Women and the Revolution Spirit as Depicted in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked***

Adimora-Ezeigbo in *Trafficked* portrays two characters, Efe and Nneoma who are able to rise above the odds militating against them and assert their self-identity. In the end, they become empowered and actualized, proving that, one has the power to liberate and free oneself from the shackles and clutches of burdensome customs and practices. The novel opens with the deportation of sixteen trafficked young ladies of Nigerian extraction. Adimora-Ezeigbo calls one of them "*a waif without an identity*". These young women are forced into prostitution abroad with the pretence of taking them over there for gainful employment. Against their will, they are made to sell their bodies for money, slaving for their masters. Their travelling documents are taken from them to make them perpetually slaves. Their revolution spirit makes them to say no to such inhuman treatment and escape from their masters. Efe sees herself in the hands of Madam Gold who later sells her to another white man. She slaves for these people for good six years. Nneoma, on the other hand, sees herself with Madam Dollar who later sales her to Baron. One who reads Efe's story on pages 98-100 and Nneoma's story on pages 126-130 finds out that, they share similar experiences. In the main, they are subjected to a life of prostitution against their will and their womanhood devalued. Again, they change hands two times but are determined to free themselves from such oppression, hence Nneoma's stealing of Baron's money and later their escape, arrest and deportation. Their sojourn at the Oasis Youth Centre for Skills Development becomes fruitful due to their determination to rebuild themselves so as to carve their identity and empower themselves for self-actualization. Though their revolution never showed extreme outburst, they become unflinching in their resolve not to allow their past experiences shape their future. Through their self-percept, they strive to emancipate themselves and are able to fit into the society. Efe marries a man of her dreams while Nneoma, after seeing Ofomata at Chindo Okehi's office becomes hopeful that her marriage to Ofomata would work out. Suffice it then to say that, revolution is an indispensable ingredient for identity Assertion, Empowerment and Self Actualization.

### **Women and Revolution Spirit As Depicted In Chinua Achebe' *Anthills of the Savannah***

Achebe's portrayal of Beatrice in *Anthills of the Savannah* also brought to fore women and their revolutionary spirit which brought about their self-assertion. Beatrice revolted

against her parents, sisters and against the society who made her to think that being a girl signifies being worthless or useless to the society. She revolted through education. As feminist movements advocate, education is one major form of women emancipation. Through it, women have come to achieve success, partake in decision making processes that govern affairs which concern them. In this light, Beatrice was able to achieve meaningful revolution and self-empowerment through the acquisition of formal education. She attended school up to the university level and made excellent result as explicated thus:

*"Meanwhile, His Excellency was literally reciting my CV. Lou, this is one of the most brilliant daughters of this country, Beatrice Okoh. She is a senior Assistant Secretary in the ministry of Finance – the only person in the service, male or female, with a first-class honours in English. And not from a local University, but from Queen Mary College, University of London."*

p. 75

Indeed, as a form of revolution, Beatrice left her home where she saw herself as being alone in her world. She acquired education and achieved great success by making a first-class result in a prestigious university in a foreign land and taking up a paid job. Achebe acknowledges the fact that women can do it whenever they decide to take the bull by the horn. And that being in a foreign land cannot be a barrier to the extent they can go in achieving self-empowerment. He portrayed this as he says...*"Our Beatrice beat the English to their game. We're proud of her"*. (p.75). As earlier said, for the first time in his literary art, Achebe portrayed an emancipated women in the character of Beatrice unlike his previous portrayal of women in other novels as gossips and story tellers, women whose places are only at home, in the kitchen or in their husband's bedroom.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This paper noted that the feminist ideology espouses gender equity and seeks to dismantle practices that devalue and demean the woman. Thus, feminism becomes assertive as it gives women the effrontery to claim proper and better treatment in the society and even in the home front. It shakes with a view to dismantling the patriarchal foundation of the society. To achieve this, feminist writers have created characters that are heroic, through whose actions and perspectives marginalization and subjugation of the female gender are being dissolved. This paper therefore concludes that the journey of the feminist ideology in the African milieu has been fruitful given that light has come



to shine on several dark areas of the life of women. Feminist writers should be given credit for having used their revolutionary ideals to chart a better place for the women in the society. In line with the foregoing, more work needs to be done. It is in view of this that this paper makes the following recommendations.

- Since feminism is corrective in nature, female writers should not tow the line of imbalance portrayal of male characters in their work. The “balancing act theory” of Davies should be fully imbibed in the portraiture of characters, be they male or female.
- Feminism should not be seen as a fight for supremacy of/by the genders. Some female writers are very combatant that one feels they would want to do it with fists. They should understand that men portray the society as it is. Women writers should carry this obligatory task that will galvanize their fellow women into actions that will lead to their emancipation and actualization.
- The journey of the feminist ideology has been rewarding. Efforts should be made by feminist writers to call the attention of women to the gains of literacy because it is only literacy that will enlighten women, make them know the odds against them, and spur them into actions that will be spring-boards for the emancipation and empowerment of women of all races, creed and status.

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