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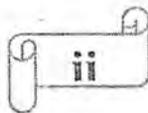
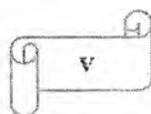


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RELIGIO-CULTURAL AND POETIC CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE SUBALTERN AFRICAN WOMAN

RAMONU SANUSI & WUMI OLAYINKA

Abstract

The colonial experience, particularly the introduction of Christianity and Islam in Africa, altered the African socio-cultural equation and ways of life. European and Arab missionaries diligently spread their religious beliefs which fused with some African cultural practices and subsequently determined the status of African women, in particular. Suffice it to say that colonialism, Christianity and Islam masculinised any territory upon which they inflicted themselves and dismantled the matriarchal system that mutually coexisted with patriarchy in some pre-colonial African societies. They also provided an ideological framework for the social roles of women, which subordinated them to their male counterparts. Besides, the poetic constructions of African women on the literary platform of Negritude largely contributed in reinforcing this subaltern image and secondary roles ascribed to African women, heightened by colonialism and promoted by new religious doctrines and practices. The textual representation of African women as mothers, in terms of their nurturing capabilities, placed them in an essentially problematic position, and conferred on them a purely domestic role. It is quite cheering to note, however, that this unhealthy subordination of the African woman is rapidly giving way to the notion of gender equity, founded on new religio-cultural principles, and facilitated by women's access to western education, modernization, and the systematic 'éboulement' or dismantling of the African patriarchal culture.

African literature is male-created, male-oriented, chauvinistic art. Male is the master; male constitutes majority. The fact is well documented in our colonial history. The white civilizer, as cunning as ever, carefully chose his black counterparts to run the affairs of the "Dark Continent." Woman is considered to be

a flower, not a worker. Woman is supposed to be relegated to the gilded cage; she is not the contributor to, the creator of, a civilization (OjoAde, 1983, p. 158).

Introduction

The colonization of Africa has created a number of binary oppositions namely colonizer/colonized, white/black, civilized/primitive, good/evil, centre/margin, advanced/retarded and adult/child among others, to the extent that we can hardly engage a literary text without using expressions such as subaltern, subject, minority, identity, race, class, gender, empire, colony, nation, in our discourse. Things are construed as existing in pairs and standing in polar opposition. Those binary oppositions determine who we are today as a people, as Africans, and how we manifest our subjectivity. In John Stuart Mill's essay entitled "On Liberty", the critic shows how the rise of a particular group, class, ideology or culture has resulted in 'subalternizing' or dominating another group or class. The arrival of the Europeans and Arabs in Africa, has without doubt, 'subalternized' Africans and particularly the African woman. According to Jameson (1986:76), subalternity is "the feelings of mental inferiority and habits of subservience and obedience which necessarily and structurally develop in situations of domination – most dramatically in the experience of colonized peoples." Colonialism, Christianity and Islam, among others, rendered the African woman not only irrelevant in the public sphere but also reduced to a *second class citizen*, a subaltern, that lives to serve the man, her superior, her master, her decision-maker and the owner of her soul. Patriarchal ethos, cultural and religious prescriptions constructed the woman such that she should only listen, obey and not query the man. Suffice it to say that within the context of the current postcolonial re-evaluation of binaries, feminism is concerned with the age-long man/woman binary and its gendered male/female derivative.

Religio-Cultural Constructions of the Subaltern African Women

The colonial experience, and particularly the introduction of Christianity and Islam, has affected every facet of the African life and disorganized African societies by disregarding certain important African cultural values. It also introduced new practices to the colonized people and determined our being as Africans. Christian missionaries forced Africans to embrace Christianity and made them to turn their backs on their customs and former ways of life. European and Arab missionaries diligently spread their religious beliefs and particularly the negative image of women. In a nutshell, imported religions and Africans' cultural practices have fused to determine the status of African women in African societies since the European and Arabs' infiltration of the continent. Colonialism masculinised any territory upon which it inflicted itself and dismantled the matriarchal system that coexisted with patriarchy in some pre-colonial African societies. In his article entitled "African Feminism/Western Feminism: Contradictory or Complementary," Sanusi (2010) submits that:

Prior to the arrival of Christianity and Islam in sub-Saharan Africa – that is in pre-colonial Africa, women played significant roles and were worshipped and respected by men in those societies. Hence, the more historically-minded African feminists relied mostly on Africa's past to formulate their feminist theories for their struggle... Similarly, there were many important goddesses among the Yoruba and Igbo of Nigeria and the Akans of Ghana (p. 187).

Religion also played a central role in sustaining certain kinds of social structures for it provided an ideological framework for the social roles of women. It is generally believed by a number of feminists that men interpreted both the Bible and the Koran to suit their agenda so that they could have control over women. Some point to the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden as critical because it was written that Eve seduced Adam into eating the forbidden fruit. Feminists believe that this alleged action, interpreted by

generations of Bible readers as “sinful”, led women to be viewed variously as “sinners” or “evil creatures”. Other feminists from the Muslim world trace the subordination of women to the traditionalist/conservative interpretations of the Koran. Mernissi (1975), for instance, focuses on the controversy between traditional and modern Muslims over the roles of women. In *Beyond the Veil*, she discusses how some Muslims use the Koran to support their belief in the relegation of women to the domestic sphere:

The desegregation of sexes violates Islam’s ideology on the woman’s position in the social order: the woman should be under the authority of fathers, brothers or husbands. Since she is considered by Allah to be a destructive element, she is to be spatially confined and excluded from matters other than those of the family. The woman’s access to non-domestic space is put under the control of males (p. xv).

Mernissi (1975) also holds that European Christian societies came to the same conclusion as the Muslim ones in their belief that women are destructive to the social order. The effect of the interpretation of the Bible and the Koran to serve a specific male agenda relegated women to the background, tending to deprive them of certain roles in the society, such as holding positions in mosques, churches, public or government spheres. Both Christian and Islamic religious theories, as interpreted by men and social institutions, seem to have been designed to curb women’s power. Indeed, as Mernissi (1975) points out, Islamic doctrines do not explicitly claim the inferiority of women: “On the contrary, the whole system is based on the assumption that woman is a powerful and dangerous being. All sexual institutions: polygamy, repudiation [and] sexual segregation can be perceived as a strategy for containing her power” (p. xvi). Since it was believed that woman was responsible for man’s expulsion from the Garden, she is not only regarded as having destroyed the peace of the paradise but is feared for being powerful; hence the need to portray her as destructive and contain her overwhelming power by various means.

Woman is further assumed to be inferior to man because it was written in the Bible that she was constructed from man's ribs. As Schipper (1987:23) notes, "the story of Genesis tells us in great detail how first man was created and then woman, how she was taken from him and is thus part of him". Schipper asserts as well that a similar patriarchal culture is to be found in the Koran: "Men are the managers of the affairs of women for that Allah has preferred in bounty one of them over the other" (*The Holy Koran*, Sura 4: p. 34). It can be argued that it is through Biblical and Koranic constructions of woman that her image in various societies has come to be negatively viewed. Many interpretations of the Bible and the Koran also stipulate that woman has to be submissive to her husband. The implications of these religious interpretations, which persist in many societies today, are that woman is reduced to a subordinate subject controlled by patriarchal powers. Such Biblical and Koranic representations of women have rendered African women inferior and subservient as evidenced in the writings of a majority of African authors. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994:67) notes: "African woman is discriminated against, excluded from real power, exploited at all levels and derided most of the time in the society. She is usually seen as the cause of whatever happens negatively in the country. The national scapegoat. The cause of the nation's decline." It is sad to note, as Ogundipe-Leslie further observes, that in sub-Saharan African societies, women are often considered demonic and are blamed for whatever goes wrong. This attitude toward women leads to their oppression which, in turn, serves to render them irrelevant in the society.

Any study on the subjugation of African women that ignores religious theories as propagated by preachers of these sacred books and their effects with regard to the domination of women by men religiously, socially, economically and politically, is incomplete. In James' (1990) *In Their Own Voices*, Buchi Emecheta asserts that African women suffered because they embraced Christianity and Islam, two religions that jeopardized their positions and helped to subordinate them. Herzberger-Fofana (2000) concurs as follows, noting the negative effects of Islam on the status of African women:

Introduite à partir du 10^e siècle en Afrique, l'islam a modifié le statut de la femme et donné la prééminence au système patriarcal. [...] Religion d'origine arabe, l'islam se fondant avec les rites traditionnelles, a donné naissance à un culte spécifique: "l'islam noir" qui s'est adapté aux réalités africaines, incorporant les pratiques animistes et les interférant au dogme religieux. (p. 145-146)

[Introduced in Africa in the 10th Century, Islam modified the status of woman and gave pre-eminence to patriarchal system. [...] A religion of Arab origin, it mixed up with traditional rites and gave birth to a specific cult: "Black Islam", which adapted itself to African realities, incorporating animist practices and infusing them with religious dogma].

(Our translation)

Islam, as Herzberger (2000) remarks, was mixed with traditional African practices, which gave birth to a new form of Islam that men firmly established in their traditional societies to relegate women. Furthermore, in certain societies in Africa today, some customs, traditions and beliefs persist that keep women under subjugation and make them feel inferior to their male counterparts. Some of these institutions include customs associated with marriage such as polygamy, bride price, arranged marriage, widowhood and female circumcision.

The Poetic Constructions of African Women

In the poetic works that have entered into the canon of African literature, the topic of colonialism is conspicuous because the colonial experience played a critical role in shaping the identity of most African societies and ways of life. Soon after African men tasted Western education, a number of them who became writers quickly realized how much their traditions were swept under the carpet by the colonizers and thus decided to uplift African cultural values to redress the wrong. During this entire process of

rehabilitating African customs, however, Negritude writers particularly depicted African women in their poems as docile and passive and glorified those negative qualities. The textual representation of women by men in the early phase of written African literatures played an important role in the subordination of women. The construction of the subaltern female in African poems traces its roots to the attitudes and beliefs that European and Arab missionaries passed down to African men. The colonial administrators and Arab missionaries in most colonized lands of Africa carefully selected men to assist them in their duties and influenced them to work for and support their male-dominated agendas. African men thus came to play a central role in all aspects of the society while women were systematically excluded. Herzberger-Fofana (2000) affirms that: "Seuls, les hommes qui constituaient la main d'œuvre utile aux besoins du colonisateur percevaient un salaire – les femmes étant exclues de la vie économique – selon l'idéologie occidentale. Cette transposition d'idéologie a été fatale pour la gent féminine" (p. 286). ["Only men, who constituted the colonizers' workforce, were receiving salary – women were excluded from economic life – according to Western ideology. That transposition of ideology was fatal to women folk" (our translation)].

Similarly, on the educational scene, African men were given the unique privilege of benefiting from Western education as colonial schools were opened to men first in the name of the civilizing mission but eventually to suit a specific male-oriented colonial agenda. The privilege accorded to the African man through colonial education has considerable implications for African literature because most of the early texts were by African men. African literature became a male enterprise. As Carole Boyce Davies in *Ngambika*, observes, European colonialism, as well as traditional attitudes to women, combined very successfully to exclude African women from the educational processes that prepared one for the craft of writing.

Some of the African men educated by European and Arab institutions and who became authors assimilated the attitudes of

foreign patriarchal cultures to depict the uneducated African women in very limited and traditional roles. They tended to glorify women in subaltern, domestic and maternal tasks. African male poets and writers such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, David Diop, Camara Laye and Abdoulaye Sadju glorify women and at the same time often portray them as mothers in terms of their nurturing capabilities. By doing so, they maintained women in an essentially powerless position. Senghor's "Femme Noire" ("Black Woman"), for instance, portrays the idealized African woman thus:

Femme noire

Femme nue, femme noire
Vêtue de ta couleur qui est vie, de ta forme
qui est beauté!
J'ai grandi à ton ombre; la douceur de tes
mains bandait mes yeux.
(...)
Femme nue, femme noire
Je chante ta beauté qui passe, forme que je
fixe dans l'Éternel
Avant que le Destin jaloux ne te réduise en
cendres pour
Nourrir les racines de ta vie. (16-17)

Black Woman

Naked woman, black woman
Clothed with your colour which is life, with your
form which is beauty!
In your shadow I have grown up; the gentleness of
your hands was laid over my eyes.
(...)
Naked woman, black woman,
I sing your beauty that passes, the form that I fix in
the Eternal

R. Sanusi & W. Olayinka: *Constructions of the Subaltern African Woman*

Before jealous Fate turns you to ashes to feed the
roots of life

Senghor, in this poem, depicts the African woman as a mother whose sole role is to rear and nurture children. He glorifies her beauty and her maternal role; however, his portrayal objectifies her and thus keeps her in a subaltern position. Going beyond the superficial interpretation of Senghor's "Femme Noire", the image of the female body he paints is equally that which is meant for exploration/penetration, exploitation, and degradation of the abundant natural resources which it (her body) possesses. This is evident in the lines below:

Terre promise, du haut d'un haut col calciné
Et beauté me foudroie en plein Coeur, comme l'éclair
d'un aigle.

Femme nue, femme obscure
Fruit mur à la chair ferme, sombres extases du vin noir,
Bouche qui fait lyrique ma bouche

[Land of promise, from height to height your sun-
scorched neck
And beauty strike (thunder strike) me down to my heart,
like the greased lightning of an eagle.

Naked woman, obscure woman
Ripe fruit with a firm skin, sombre/dark ecstasies of
black wine
A mouth that brings lyrics to my mouth].

(Our translation)

In tandem with this argument, Willis and Williams, cited by Augustine H. Asaah (2008:99), opine that "The female body especially bore the metaphorical weight of comparisons between women's fertility and the abundant riches of the conquered lands, 'penetration' into and 'conquest' of places like the "Dark Continent". The idealized representation of African woman by

Senghor is also echoed in David Diop's poem "Afrique," (Africa) dedicated to his mother:

Afrique

Afrique mon Afrique
Je ne t'ai jamais connue
Mais mon regard est plein de ton sang
Ton beau sang noir à travers les champs répandu
Le sang de ta sueur
La sueur de ton travail
Le travail de l'esclavage
L'esclavage de tes enfants. (23)

Africa

Africa my Africa
(...)
I have never seen you
But my gaze is full of your blood
Your black blood spilt over the fields
The blood of your sweat
The sweat of your toil
The toil as slavery.
The slavery of your children

Africa is regarded as his mother destroyed by colonialism. The image of woman here is that of an Africa humiliated and subjected to colonial domination. The poet who considers his mother as Africa therefore echoes her suffering and victimization. Similarly, the introductory poem "A ma mère" ("To my Mother") in Camara Laye's *L'Enfant noir* (*The African Child*) has been described by Adebayo (1996: 179) as a "maternal epic". This nostalgic remembrance of his childhood beside his sweet mother focuses on the woman's patience and resignation:

2. Sanusi & W. Olayinka: Constructions of the Subaltern African Woman

A ma mère

Femme noire, femme africaine, ô toi ma mère
je pense à toi...

O Dâman, ô ma mère, toi qui me portas sur le
dos, toi qui
m'allaitas, toi qui gouvernas mes premiers pas,
toi qui la
première m'ouvris les yeux aux prodiges de la
terre,
je pense à toi...

Femme des champs, femme des rivières, femme
du
grand fleuve, ô toi, ma mère, je pense à toi...

O toi Dâman, ô ma mère, toi qui essuyais mes
larmes, toi
qui me rejouissais le coeur, toi qui, patiemment
supportais
mes caprices, comme j'aimerais encore être près
de
toi, être enfant près de toi!

Femme simple, femme de la résignation, ô toi,
ma mère,
Je pense à toi... (pp. 7-8)

To My Mother

Black woman, woman of Africa, O my mother,
I am thinking of you...

O Daman, O my mother, you who bore me upon your
back,
you who gave me suck, you who watched over my first
faltering steps,

you who were the first to open my eyes to the wonders of
the earth,
I am thinking of you...

Woman of the fields, woman of the rivers, woman of the
great river-banks,
O you, my mother, I am thinking of you...

O you, Daman, O my mother, you who dried my tears,
you who filled my heart with laughter, you who patiently
bore
with all my many moods, how I should love to be beside
you once again,
to be a little child beside you!

Woman of great simplicity, woman of great resignation,
O my mother I am thinking of you...

Not only do these African male poets and writers subalternize female subjects in their writings, they also define women exclusively on the basis of their relationships to men and in terms of their maternal roles. Certainly the African women depicted by the poets are valued, idealized and glorified as sweet mothers and as nurturers of children. Their depictions show the patience, resignation and suffering of African women, all evidently considered positive values by the male authors. But these textual representations reflect social realities rooted in gender prejudice, with vast implications for political and other forms of inequalities within the society. These patient women are also those who suffer domination from oppressive husbands.

From these instances, it is obvious enough that the cause of African women has not been well served by the majority of African men in their writings. They treat, with bias and subjectivity, issues that deeply concern women such as childbearing, motherhood, the subordination of women to men. In Negritude literature, as Adebayo (1996: 178-193) observes, "the mother is an object of reverence and symbol of patience, long suffering and fecundity,

while Africa is conceived and eulogized sometimes in terms of a woman, a mother who is ravaged by years of colonial spoliation". Adebayo's remarks shed some light on the construction of the subaltern female personae. By chanting women's beauty in their poems the Negritude poets, particularly Senghor, maintain that women are not in bondage and thus need not be liberated. In *La parole aux Nègresses* Thiam (1978) takes these writers to task, by saying that rare are those among them who talk with objectivity. Thiam states that they do not preoccupy themselves much with women and, when they do, they only sing and glorify women's femininity and their sufferings. Herzberger-Fofana (2000) agrees with Thiam (1978), asserting that:

Parmi les différentes images que le poète [Senghor] et ceux du même mouvement littéraire exaltent, l'image de la mère occupe une place prépondérante. Personnage mythique ou imaginaire, la mère devient symbole du royaume de l'enfance et du paradis perdu. Aux heures de détresse, d'amertume elle est celle qui efface la souffrance et redonne l'espoir à l'exilé. Cette idéalisation et mystification de la femme africaine caractérisent les poètes mais également les romanciers de la même période. Ainsi Abdoulaye Sadju et Camara Laye offrent dans leurs romans un portrait semblable de la mère sublimée (p. 326).

[Among the different images that the poet (Senghor) and those of the same literary movement exalt, the image of the mother occupies an important place. A mythical or imaginary character, the mother becomes the symbol of the childhood kingdom and that of the lost paradise. In times of distress or bitterness, she is the one that erases suffering and gives hope to the exiled. That idealization and mystification of the African woman characterize those poets and novelists of the same period. Thus, Abdoulaye Sadju and Camara Laye in their novels, make a portrayal similar to that of the sublime mother.]

(Our translation)

Both Thiam (1978) and Herzberger-Fofana (2000) argue that this glorification of African women as idealized mothers, veils their subordination and exploitation. They insist further that to African male writers, this image of the mother symbolizes tradition and an often idealized native land.

Beyond Religio-cultural and Patriarchal Constructions of African Women

A process of change in the status quo inaugurated by feminist activists and writers is gradually transforming African women's subaltern status. In essence, African women seem to have yielded to Simone de Beauvoir's admonition to "escape, liberate herself, shape her own future, deny the myths that confine her" (Patricia Spack, cited by Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, 2002:10). No longer kept in oblivion, African women are now seen to assume roles and positions previously preserved and reserved for men. Nowadays, we have African women leaders who are either appointed or elected as heads of states such as Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia; ministers of government parastatals and chief executives of organizations. These women compete successfully with their male counterparts in those various challenging positions. Evelyn Mpoudi Ngollé affirmed this in an interview she granted David Ndachi Tagne in Yaoundé in August 1996:

...Dans l'ensemble, les femmes qui arrivent à ce niveau de responsabilité perdent tout complexe d'infériorité. Dans le domaine professionnel, elles s'expriment sans tenir compte du fait qu'elles sont femmes. Quand je suis dans le milieu professionnel, je ne parle pas en tant que femme. Je parle en tant que proviseur, tout simplement (<http://www.arts.uwa.edu.au/AFLIT/intDNTngolle.html>).

[...In general, women who attain this level of responsibility lose every form of inferiority complex. In the professional domain, they express themselves without

considering the fact that they are women. When I am in the professional milieu, I do not speak as woman. I simply speak as a school administrator.]

(Our translation)

These contemporary events are proofs that the *status quo ante* may no longer be valid, nor can it be tenaciously upheld, although, one may argue that there is still much to be desired in terms of eradication of female oppression. Nevertheless, male hegemony is a legacy that is fast giving way to gender equality. Buchbinder (1994:2) opines that the “masculine is what men in their immense variety do, just as the feminine is what women do, rather than what men and women are.” The rationale behind Buchbinder’s argument is that men should not necessarily be seen as masculine or superior because they carry the ‘pendulum’ neither should women be seen as feminine or inferior with all the connotations of socially constructed negatives of the binary opposites. Rather, as long as women are able to achieve what men can achieve, there should be no distinction in terms of roles, abilities and capabilities. Occasioned by modernization, education, Christianity, and the need to overcome subjugation and harsh economic demands, many women, literate or illiterate, have been able to transcend patriarchal limitations imposed on them (Ohale, 2008).

Male writers’ presentation of negative images of women only appears to be an attempt to buoy up their myopic views of women and pigeon-hole the latter (Ogundipe-Leslie, 2002). The new generation of African writers, a generation where feminist writers abound, have valiantly balanced “the tilt with respect to male and female characterization and is a reflection of the ingenuity and resolve of African women who endure countless restrictions and limitations. Over time, the female character in African literature has “evolved” from complacent to individualistic and assertive... This development in characterization in the African novel is not just a giant stride, it is a quantum leap” (Ohale, 2008:131). Furthermore, it is a re-echo and reiteration of the obvious in the African pre-colonial history that women do occupy important positions and the

fact that women are perfectly capable of rising above all forms of limitations placed on them within the context of male/female sexual politics, if provided with the opportunity and the conducive environment.

Indeed, the table is fast turning, and woman's destiny is no longer tied to her biology but to her ability to take her destiny in her own hands in order to overcome stultifying patriarchal practices and rise on the social ladder. As noted by Ogundipe-Leslie (2002:16), feminist novels aptly reflect the religio-cultural status of women in African societies because they portray an array of heroines who possess "professional and economic means to live without men." Although the notion of women living without men is gradually creeping into African societies, it is not yet wholeheartedly encouraged by tenets upheld by African socio-cultural and religious practices. Thus, the single, individualistic African woman still oscillates "helplessly between her allegiance to her culture – her African identity – and her aspiration for freedom and self-fulfillment" (Ogundipe-Leslie, 2002:17). Despite this, Calixthe Beyala, the radical and controversial African feminist in diaspora, votes for female separatism. Fatunde (2004) notes that Calixthe Beyala prefers

absolute autonomy of the woman vis-à-vis the man. She is in favour of Simone de Beauvoir's theory of the complete independence of women as the most viable alternative to their oppression. Most of Beyala's characters desire freedom, happiness and prosperity outside all forms of marital arrangement with men. Her characters permanently distrust men. Even where there seems to be a successful matrimonial home, death comes in to destroy such an arrangement (p. 72).

Calixthe Beyala is not the only one to be found in this category of champions of female separatism. In Nigeria, at least four feminist writers, Titilola Shoneyin, Promise Okekwe, Temilola Abioye, and Unoma Azuah, have called the bluff of orthodox African feminist writers by introducing lesbianism in their literary

works. This reflects a reality in contemporary Nigeria, which many are yet to realize or come to terms with. Confirming the sexual metamorphosis which the Nigerian society is experiencing, Aken Ova in a report cited by Azuah (2005), notes that the Nigerian

environment is very homophobic or at least appears to be. There is an outward expression of homophobia in the dominant culture, although among the general population, there is greater tolerance and understanding that the practices exist. It is difficult for gays and lesbians to come out and admit to others that they are gay, or lesbian or bisexual. They are therefore forced into heterosexual relationships. They marry to give a semblance of belonging to the widely accepted sexual orientation – heterosexuality – while they continue to meet with their same sex partners secretly (p. 132).

If homosexuality is a reality in Nigeria, then, it should be ‘assumed’ that it is also happening elsewhere in Africa, a sure indication that the African feminist movement may not be totally devoid of the traits of militancy found in Western feminism. It is at the same time a pointer to the fact that the religio-cultural factors which have always restricted women’s assertion of individual identity are fast losing their grips on women. Indeed, it is not uncommon today to find women, who have attained comfortable levels of economic independence, employ men as drivers, cleaners and stewards. At higher levels, women who are founders of organizations, engage services of male graduates on their payrolls.

A conservative feminist literary representation of this genre of upwardly mobile women can be found among Flora Nwapa’s female characters who attain material and economic success and independence through sheer hard work, focus and tenacity of purpose. Even though unlearned, Efurū, Idu, and Amaka, demonstrate intelligence, common sense and relentlessly follow a trajectory that leads them to success. In Omojala’s (1989:20) words, Nwapa’s heroines “tower over men in material and mental achievements. Men are often regarded as nothing more than

instruments for procreation.” There is now a growing number of African women church founders and leaders. The existence of female ‘matadors’ in pre-colonial and post-colonial African societies should also not be ignored when discussing issues bordering on female upward mobility. A notable Yoruba legend in this category is Queen Moremi Ajasoro of Ile-Ife who defied all the strategies of invincible Benin warriors of ancient times to save the people of Ile-Ife. History has it that she offered her son and only child, Oluorogbo, as sacrifice to the goddess of River Esimirin in order to discover the powers of the Benin invaders, with a view to overcoming them. She remains a historical illustration of what African women are capable of achieving for their respective communities, given the right enabling environment to do so.

Conclusion

African novelists of the second generation inherited a subalternized and domesticated image of African women from both the colonial system and the Négritude poets. A majority of African male texts depict women as inferior and subordinated to men so as to reveal the full authority that men have over women’s lives. The power exercised over the subordinated African women was imposed on them, with little no room left for them to partake in any decision affecting them, and with a view to perpetually silencing them. It should be equally borne in mind that even after independence, the condition of African women did not change much because independence failed to absorb, transform and accept women as individuals who might contribute to nation building. In politics, they remain marginalised, especially in societies where women are largely subjugated by Islamic dictates and Sharia laws. Religious rites confine them to housekeeping and prevent them in most cases from playing active roles in the society, in addition to being educationally handicapped. But things have begun to change for the better. The age-long patriarchal and religio-cultural systems of African societies are gradually giving way to more liberal socio-political systems founded on gender equity, as highlighted in some of the instances cited in this paper. African women’s progressive

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access to education continues to afford them the long-awaited opportunity to free themselves from oppression in order to fully express themselves. The fact that prominent male writers (such as Chinua Achebe), who previously treated women as mere objects, are now giving female characters leading roles in their later literary works, is a piacular development, and a clear indication that the African feminists are beginning to win the long, bitter war against oppression and discrimination.

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