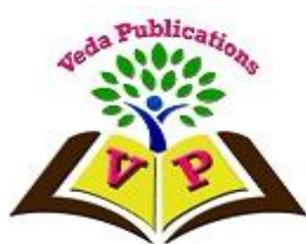




## DECONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IDENTITIES: A STUDY OF THE NOVELS OF NWAPA, EMECHETA AND ADICHIE

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### ABSTRACT

The privileging of man in African societies has involved an erasure of identities and subjectivities of many women, holding them to an assumption of female inferiority. To counter the injustice, African women writers have engaged in rhetorical and performative strategies designed to reconstitute the cultural erasure as they try to claim status as individuals. But in the process, various cultural expectations such as their maternal roles act as constant bottlenecks to return them back to their prescribed roles as subordinate beings. Consequently African women were viewed from a bio-essential lens in the narratives of both the racial colonialists and the early male authored African literature. This essentialist construction that subordinate and marginalize black women has been comprehensively confronted by the women writers of Africa, who delineate empowered black women rejecting and confronting the chauvinist gender stereotypes and social roles set by the patriarchal society modelled on the colonizing culture. This paper seeks to explore the representation of women characters upholding the feminist ideals in search of fulfilment in life and further attempts to examine the subtle ways in which women undertake acts of subversion and resistance to deconstruct the gender identities in the selected works of the Nigerian women writers- Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The body of work chosen for analysis has an immense cultural significance and offers rare insights in understanding contemporary African Women Writing. The thesis of study offers fresh insight that goes beyond the descriptions of how women are presented superseding this kind of criticism with more complex analysis of gender and women's oppression implicitly. This study is an attempt to understand the phenomenon of literature as a cultural formation.

**Keywords:** *Female bonding, Interlocking factors, New Female identity, New woman, Safe spaces.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The study of women in general and African women in particular contributed to the breadth and depth of knowledge and theorizing of African realities in a number of diverse ways. It has demonstrated the importance of women not simply as passive breeders but also as economic agents, as active in creating new developments, in resistance to and in collusion with oppression. The basic methods of feminist literary criticism challenge the male-centred outlook of authors and suggest that women in literature were historically presented as objects seen from a male perspective. Thus the secondary position of women in comparison with men is the product of gender norms of society which have valued males more than females, and ignores women's experiences.

African women writers often grapple with neo-colonialism, racism, misrule, poverty, gender bias, ethnic animosity, religious fundamentalism, famine and misrepresentation and in confronting these social challenges, they have created stories that seek to explore their unique condition. In a race-conscious society, the black women writers concur that it is their cardinal onus to undo the scenarios that subject women to gender and racial discrimination in order to entail a new life that will enhance an egalitarian society. They strive to demythologize the distorted constructions of the African women as slaves, matriarchs, mummies, lewd women, castrating bitches and second-class citizens. The black women writers have challenged the status quo in the cultural, political, and spiritual realms of their communities by using their craft to present women who defy traditional roles and resist strictures of oppression. A unique twist is rendered to the social constrictions that confine black women to rigid structures that blur their identity. The female protagonists delineated in women's writing emerge as liberated and empowered women by undoing their feminine and racial roles.

In an effort to answer the question based on deconstruction of gender identity in contemporary African women writing, this study focuses on rich, dynamic literary portraits of Black women to model qualities necessary for deconstructing the gender identity in a traditional

and culture-conscious society thereby empowering women to foster social change in contemporary African communities in general and Nigerian communities in particular. The selected works of Nigerian women writers chosen for the analysis in this paper give voice to women who had long been silenced and devalued- women who, according to Zora Neale Hurston (1990: 14) have 'the status of a mule'[1].

The act of doing feminine and racial roles differently underscores the fact that norms attached to an individual are not permanent and fixed; but are constructs. As a result, it can be implied that gender and race are not biologically determined but are the effects produced by the performance of various 'gender acts' and 'racial acts.' As enunciated by Judith Butler (2006: 192), an American philosopher, in her seminal work, *Gender Trouble*, "cultural evaluations falsely naturalises the gender roles"[2]. On similar lines, Janet Radcliff Richards (1997: 22) observes: "women suffer from systematic social injustice because of their sex"[3]. The patriarchal culture in Third World Countries like Africa proves to be androcentric and enforces marginalisation of women, which is inherent in their masculinist, hegemonic culture and upholds social injustice in oppressing women. As given by Judith Butler in her theory of performativity [4], gender is not a pre-discursive fixed identity but is a construct which can be 'done' or 'performed' within the heterosexual matrix (1997: 187). Consequently, categories such as 'feminine' and 'masculine' come into being when a body performs or 'does gender' in a stylized reiteration of conventions that eventually become naturalized and consolidated. According to her, individuals engage themselves in the repetition of the gender and racial norms out of fear of being insulted or attacked by society. Thus it is the culture of a particular society that determines the gender roles of men and women. Consequently, the women in African society, in the societies of all Third World countries for that matter, find it increasingly difficult, if not insoluble to "define their individuality and assert their freedom for equal opportunities as their male counterparts"[5] (Pauline Ada Uwakweh, 1997:47). Obviously, such subordination of women



resulted due to the illegitimate use of power by men. Contemporary women writers are striving to liberate women from such extreme exploitation and are successfully transforming the society through rewriting the gender norms and ultimately deconstructing the gender identities. In this paper an attempt has been made to analyse the Nigerian novels by selected women writers in their works to redefine a new female identity.

## 2. ANALYSIS OF DECONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IDENTITY IN SELECTED NOVELS

This paper examines the select narratives of the Nigerian women writers- Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, to show how these writers strive to rescue black women from the 'interlocking factors' viz. gender and race by undoing the norms attached to them and performing different roles that would liberate them from their dual oppression and raise the status of a woman in the African society. Their work is a protest against the victimization of Igbo women in Nigeria and by extension all societies. The writers satirize the demeaning images of women and the societal forces that shape their lives. Their bold and subversive texts celebrate a woman's independence and economic success. They redefine a new female identity that does not perform the gender and racial norms constructed by the patriarchal society. The writers coalesce to underscore that if women need liberation from outdated conventions, men also have to change and adapt to the concept of 'New woman'.

The writers, thus carve a new world for women in which they experience freedom from the marginalization imposed on them by patriarchy and colonialism. Many African female writers seek to expunge women's marginal position(s) and thus their texts are 'spaces of strength'[6] within and between which they fluctuate as opined by Nfah-Abbenyi (1997: 68). In line with this, D'Almeida (1994: 102) considers 'writing by women as a weapon' [7] to destroy the ideas that perpetuate subjugation and inequality.

While male readings indicate that the man is the point of reference in this society, Palmer (1983: 40) stresses that "as child bearers, women are pivotal to the literal survival of community and societal

norms"[8]. In *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), Emecheta provides a unique dimension that challenges the myth that motherhood is synonymous to female self-fulfilment [9.] The symbol of Nnu Ego, who labours all her life to nurture several children, finds them deserting her. Here, Emecheta lampoons the blatant yet often "stuck to" fact that childbirth brings joy to the mother and defines her self-fulfilment and position within her household and society. Emecheta and other female writers present the developmental nature of the female character through a varied exploration of the theme of female assertiveness in the various societal facets which enslave the female. Basically, their thematic message is that even in the face of an oppressive system of deep rooted norms and practices that foster female subordination, the female must strive to assert herself. 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" [10] (Obiageli and Otokunefor 1989: 120).

In *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), Emecheta traces gender inequality in the Igbo society as hinging on the tenets of the gender socialization process, customary and traditional practices. In that society, it was customary for girls to be forced into early marriage and the bride price is used in sending boys to school. This is illustrated in the novel where Adaku, the widow inherited by Nnaife declares that when the twins will reach the age of puberty, they will be forced into marriage so that the bride price obtained will be used in paying the fees of their brother. These illustrations reflect demeaning stereotypes depicting spheres of influence for men and women. The dichotomy of public/private certainly underscores the African patriarchal victimization of women. Women's voices were mostly squashed and they were projected more in the private domain while men operated in centred ground. Women never had much say in community matters and in most instances, they tacitly condoned



and were brainwashed into accepting their slavish status.

Flora Nwapa, a foremost female writer threads the same line in her novel *Efuru* (1996) [11]. The heroine *Efuru* is portrayed as a dignified and assertive woman in a continuous struggle to remedy her plight. Her decision to walk out of a marriage that had encumbered her with nothing short of misery against the rigid conventions of a traditional African society that considers divorce as a taboo is salutary. *Efuru* defies tradition by running away to get married without bride price. She rebels against doing framework and against staying indoors the customary three months after circumcision. Believing she is barren, she begins to engage in trade after her husband *Adizua*, like his father, becomes a vagabond. This is climaxed by her decision to worship *Ohamiri* the river goddess -symbolic to a pilgrimage, a return to the real essence of personhood. *Efuru* faces marriage as the true test of her life. In woman's life, marriage has become a closed-in arena, in which every married woman has to fight out her survival as an individual. The marriage paradox lies in the fact that it is both sublimating and subsuming.

The three great principles of Black African ethics are life, force and unity, because of which one's mother, the origin of life, is sacred and enjoys unlimited respect and veneration in African society. In such a system, novelists who privilege the mother and glorify her are thus only following tradition. *Emecheta*, in contrast, calls into question a mother's supremacy and shows with specific examples the ways in which a mother often abuses respect. *Emecheta* disapproves two societal givens that a woman must put her role as a mother above all else and that a mother can do no wrong. Her protagonist, *Kehinde*, in the novel of the same name [12], navigates her life within the patriarchally sanctioned space while covertly resisting it. *Kehinde*, as an educated Nigerian woman settled with her family in London finds herself caught in a delicate balancing act between showing respect for tradition while trying to forge an identity of her own. The fact that *Kehinde* is able to succeed on her own and raise her children in a very comfortable fashion indicates that

being a good mother does not mean sacrificing one's own self-respect and happiness. Whereas her earlier work, *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) illustrates that blind devotion to motherhood results in many problems for women and shows how *Nnu Ego* feels the doublebind as she forgets herself as a human being caught in the web of motherhood and wifehood responsibilities. Her miserable death at the end of the novel challenges the conventional construction of motherhood and speaks of the struggles and conflicts of women and the gender roles, it further speaks of women's struggles to gain independence from their subservient roles as wives and to gain a voice of their own.

The first novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) of contemporary Nigerian writer *Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie* implicitly explores the numerous societal structures through which women are oppressed [13]. She identifies patriarchy, domestic violence, religious fundamentalism, and general intolerance, as being responsible for unequal gender relations forming the basis of exploitation of women. *Purple Hibiscus* centres on an Igbo family living in the south-eastern part of Nigeria in the late twentieth century. Through the eyes of a fifteen-year-old female narrator, *Kambili Achike*, the reader discovers that her father, *Eugene*, is a staunch Catholic with a multifaceted personality that can only be captured in a series of paradoxes: an affluent businessman, he makes large donations to the local church but displays very little of this generosity towards his father, a follower of traditional Igbo religion whom he repeatedly refers to as a "heathen"; he speaks up against the Nigerian military dictatorship in the newspaper he publishes, but he frequently beats his wife *Beatrice* and his children, *Kambili* and *Jaja*, thereby brutally imposing his extremist religious views on them. *Kambili's* father, *Papa (Eugene Achike)* is a strict authoritarian whose strict adherence to Catholicism overshadows his paternal love. He punishes his wife, *Mama (Beatrice Achike)*, and his children when they fail to live up to his impossibly high standards. *Eugene's* religious fanaticism and overbearing hand results in imprisoning and weakening those whom he professes to love the most. In the end, the most decisive



actions come from the least expected sources and his life ends up in his wife's hands.

Adichie's writing is an effort to voice internal knowledge and needs of women in a way that challenges the status quo. She reworks earlier images of African women projected by patriarchal order and figures female characters as speaking subjects in her novel *Purple Hibiscus*. The African woman writer's goal is to redefine the woman's exercise of authority and seek entry into the public sphere since women's voices have been largely marginalized. Adichie surveys the identity of women as wives and highlights different forms of gender oppression linked to such identity. Women become wives through marriage whether monogamous or polygamous. Ogun-dipe-Leslie (1994: 36) identifies oppression at the matrimonial level as one of the mountains that keep the African women in subordination [14]. Adichie's novel therefore hit at the glaring inequalities so as to produce the required change likely to bring equity among husbands and wives. The character of Beatrice and Ifeoma in *Purple Hibiscus* is a case of women asserting their positions in their societies and challenging patriarchy with its several manifestations. Any system of oppression draws much of its strength from the submission of its victims, who accept their image and get paralyzed by a sense of helplessness. Characters in Adichie's novels are not submissive to exploitation but active in an effort to revolutionize their situation.

### **3. STRATEGIES EMPLOYED BY WOMEN WRITERS IN DECONSTRUCTING GENDER IDENTITY**

Forming groups to attain a purpose is the process by which traditional Africans acquired an energizing spirit as affirmed by the adage that "unity is strength". African communities presented a strong sense of communalism and the individual experience was better realized in a group. African women writing addresses simultaneously the need for African women to break the chain of gender of its stigma, and for both groups to rethink their involvement in an oppressive postcolonial class culture.

### **3.1. SUBVERTING OPPRESSIVE CULTURAL PRACTICES AND TRADITIONS**

The condition of women in African society is fraught with contradictions and oppositions, most arising out of the colonial domination of Africa, others intrinsic to the organizational structure of particular societies. A rigorous feminist approach to African society would therefore reveal a number of excesses in structure and situations which deny women equality. For example, genital mutilation, infertility as well as fertility, the lack of choice for young women, enforced silence, to cite only the most obvious, all contribute to women's oppression and ultimately their facelessness in the family in particular and in society in general.

African women are forced to submit to the necessity of conforming to the extremely imposed requirements of their masculine societies – like the one we find in the character of Nnu Ego, in *The Joys of Motherhood*, who yearns for liberation and for fulfilment as a woman, while still respecting the traditional concept of manliness. Living in bondage to men, but desiring to live freely and fully, they are bewildered by, or seethe with inner rage at their servitude to a structure of values matched to the needs of others.

### **3.2. ACHIEVING SELF-AWARENESS THROUGH BONDING AND SISTERHOOD**

African cultures, as interpreted by women, inscribe ways in which women reach forms of self-fulfillment in interaction with, or itself-aware of contradistinction to the experience of other closely related women, through 'Female Bonding' or 'Sisterhood'. In Adichie's novel, cases of women coming together to challenge the effects of patriarchy or to aid one another to overcome male-created misfortunes are notable. In *Purple Hibiscus* Ifeoma forms friendship with the sister-in-law, Beatrice, and attempts to pull her out of a violent marriage, so that, Beatrice can think independently and quit domestic abuse. Beatrice is close to Sisi, her maid servant and it is she who gets Mama the poison that kills Eugene. This is a case of a woman helping another woman to surmount oppression. After Eugene's death Sisi is married but spends a considerable amount of time instructing Okon, the



new family steward. The case of women joining hands to pursue a common goal in the novel of Adichie is praiseworthy since there is triumph in groups. Adichie appears to suggest women to come together because there is strength in numbers and there are higher chances of succeeding.

The different strategies Adichie adopts to accord women a voice in the face of the silencing structures are really admirable. Although other African female writers like Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta etc., have explored the gender issues, Adichie is a unique voice in the sense that her works are cast in wider human oppression and not necessarily exploitation confined to sexuality and gender. Her approach to subvert male oppression confirms that despite the struggles, women assert themselves in a world dominated by men through education and female solidarity and her novel suggests a social transformation by which the different forms of oppression, exploitation, exclusion and silencing that promote gender inequality can be confronted by women.

### 3.3. UNDOING GENDER NORMS

The New African Woman valorised in the works of the black women writers possesses traits usually ascribed to men. The African women portrayed are bold, courageous and determined who define their own space and contribute to the progress of the society; thereby deconstructing the false perception that such traits are gender specific. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler explains that "...what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body" (Preface 1999 xv) [15]. A person learns how to do certain norms and in turn display being that gender. For instance, slave masters forced women to be as "masculine" in the performance of the work like their men. They had to work in coal mines and in iron foundries. Thus, black women displayed masculine traits by performing masculine jobs thereby liberating themselves from the constructed female roles. By putting up a feminine behaviour and at the same time behaving masculine explores the level of performance of gender roles which can be

reversed. Butler sees gender as a behaviour which can not only be reversed but also rehearsed.

### 3.4. UNDOING RACIAL NORMS

Similarly, the racial categorization of an individual is not natural but is a product of colonization. Race is a social construct that divides population on the basis of physical characteristics and naturalizes the groupings to which it refers. Thus, race is a doing and not an ontological state of being. Women writers attempt to confront and reject the racial norms that label women as slaves and second-class citizens. The writers held the view that black women could be liberated from the racial discrimination by undoing the norms attached to their body. They have begun to realize that the categorization of individuals as black men and black women come into existence through the process of repetition and reiteration of various black acts and without these acts there would be no race at all.

### 3.5. RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF GENDER NORMS

The female characters delineated by Nwapa, Emecheta and Adichie are in sharp contrast with the stereotypical and mythical images of women portrayed by racial colonialists and the early male-authored African literature. They are women with revolutionary spirits who undo their feminine roles. The submissive roles a woman is expected to perform with regard to the traditional concepts of wifeness, motherhood, and daughterhood are vehemently rejected and subverted in the narratives of the women writers and a realistic picture of the role of women is celebrated. The idealization of the African woman as a married and nurturing mother which conceals her social reality has been explored and exploded by women writers. Women like Nwapa's Efuru move ahead in life in spite of being a barren woman. They puncture the concept of the canonized mother and give a realistic representation of African women and their experiences in the society. Female protagonists like Kehinde, Efuru, and Beatrice revolutionize the previously perceived notion of a woman exhibiting submissive feminine roles. The narratives of the third world women writers, thus defy the gendered constructions of war and nationalism. Their works underscore that women too have the potential to become "credible and serious



leaders" [16](Chand, 2005: 231) and can be just as useful to her country as a man in times of national crisis and reconstruction.

### 3.6. RECONCEPTUALIZATION OF RACIAL NORMS

The narratives of Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie not only portray female characters who see themselves beyond the roles of daughters, wives, and mothers but also delineate characters and situations which question and reverse racial discrimination experienced by both men and women. They search for security and freedom from slavery, not only for themselves but also for their families. The spread of education has brought about a tremendous change in the predicament of women. It has enabled them to refuse to be "locked into their exclusively female roles [17] (Davis, 2011: 6). This powerful tool has enabled women to realize their full potential and gain the confidence to undo their gender and racial roles.

Women in the Third World societies, views Kumar (2007:43), have gradually been able to "subvert and demythologize indigenous traditions, nationalist representations which seek to label women into subordination" [18] and marginalization. A female subject as Butler describes, is a fiction, a fabrication, and a construct. Butler extends Simone de Beauvoir's statement, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman" [19] (The Second Sex, 1997: 295), to suggest that a woman (the doer) is a term-in-process, a becoming, and a discursive construct. According to Butler, it is a concept that has been created by the colonialists and can be dismantled. Consequently, gender and race are notions that are assumed and performativity constituted. The repetition and reiteration of 'woman acts' and 'black acts' produce the subject black woman. As given by Butler's theory of performativity, it is possible to undo the gender and racial norms constructed by the patriarchal society through the reiteration of a new set of acts thereby empowering women. Similarly the narratives of the Nigerian women writers- Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie attempt to redefine the identity of the African woman by subverting and reconstructing gender and racial identity that marginalize them.

### 4. CONCLUSION

This study analysed with a view of exploring how the contemporary African women confront individual problems as the African society grapples with gender, class, ethic and other social inequalities and it concludes that it is high time for male and female African writers in the contemporary era to retrace their roots to provide a greater meaning to the interactions of the male and female in the search for a construction of a holistic African nation based on African cultural specificities. It is also the position of this paper that a robust and holistic approach to gender studies should be taken particularly as it relates to African cultural values and suggests that the literary genres should emphasize showcases of complementarity at the individual, familyandsocietal levels. It further opines that the cultural practices that are considered inimical to development like widowhood, polygamy, succession rites, incest, tribal conflicts, discrimination against the girl child, forced marriages, occult etc., should find stronger interrogation without any biases and prejudices in African writings.

The narratives taken up for analysis in this paper show the accounts of how women in African societies alter the dynamics of power through sustained efforts in crafting possibilities of redemption in spaces created in and disseminated by social practice. But irrespective of the kind of resistance the three writers (chosen for study) embrace, their overriding mission is to articulate the collective erasure of women fostered by their restrictive social-cultural mores. Through the various subversive strategies, the writers encourage their readers to re-examine both the patriarchal and postcolonial gendered ideologies. Their novels affirm a continuous challenge and resistance to the hegemonic power discourse in postcolonial Africa, particularly when they display liberating tools like "safe spaces" that empower women to speak and listen to each other. In that sense, the three writers I considered in my study are seen forging new paths as they recollect distorted women's past and commit to articulating and sharing a liberating women's future. Their gender sensitive writing propels good economy as asserted by Francis Enemuo [20] (1999, 226), and



this will fill the missing links and gaps by re-situating the role of men and the dignified place of the African woman in the African literary landscape in a globalizing world context.

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