

Merchandising the Girl-Child: An Angle of Reading Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Ngugi Wa Mirii's *I Will Marry When I Want*, Efua Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa* and Sembene Ousmane's *Xala*

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Abstract: *This paper is intended to demonstrate the representation of the girl-child and her place in a Post-Colonial African poverty-stricken family as manifested in three distinct African novels, namely: Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Ngugi Wa Mirii's *I Will Marry When I Want*, Efua T. Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa* and Sembene Ousmane's *Xala*. The discussion reveals unequivocally that in African poor homes the female child is more or less perceived as the parents' property that can freely be merchandized usually for the benefit of the entire family. In such circumstances, the unfortunate female child hardly has any choice in her own marriage.*

Keywords: African Literature, Girl-child, Marriage, Objectification, Poverty, Property

Introduction

In many African cultures, especially among the poor, children are viewed as crucial to family survival itself in that they offer 'cheap labour' in the home (Howard, 2003). The need for the African child for the survival of the family becomes greater and more crucial in a poor home if the child happens to be a girl or female. This is because, the cheap labour she provides notwithstanding, the girl-child is perceived as a 'property' that can be battered or merchandized into marriage for the collective benefit of the family. In such a situation, the 'poor' young woman's contribution or choice in deciding who her husband must be becomes irrelevant, even though she is the most directly affected individual, as she may not be consulted adequately when the parents make the choice of husband for her and as well negotiate the marriage. This status of the young woman in particular, and the woman of Africa in general, is conspicuous in African literature. This paper is intended to demonstrate how this reality is portrayed in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's and Ngugi wa Mirii's *I Will Marry When I Want*, Sembene Ousmane's *Xala* and Efua Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa*.

The place of women in African societies and their representation in literature have been attacked in contemporary studies, often with feminist approach. According to Jadeja (2015), African literature, like most literature around the world, portray women in different ways. To her, "incomplete and inaccurate female characters littered early African works". (p. 1) Jadeja further indicates that generally, African female characters are depicted as "defined by their relationship to men as someone's daughter or wife, or mother, as shadowy figures who hover on the fringes of the plot, suckling infants, cooking, plaiting their hair they fall into a specific category of female stereotype of men appendages, and prostitutes or courtesans" (p. 1).

Feminist critics attribute such poor representation of the African woman in literature to two major factors: colonial influence on male writers and tradition of Africans themselves. For instance, Jadeja (2015) argues that, like other literatures, African literature was first written mainly by men. These men not only emanated from patriarchal societies but were educated by colonizers, who also, as it were, come from patriarchal societies. The influence of the colonizers was even stronger on the Francophone African writers. For they routinely portray their female character in the "stereotype of an oppressed and subjugated wife who has little if any say in shaping her destiny as changing the system that deprives and

oppresses her” (Jadeja, 2015 p. 1). Thus, the study of Women characters portrayed in African colonized literature reveals women “as passive mothers with neither personality nor character problems, accepting their condition and thus, exhibiting no spirit of revolt or freedom”. The female is presented as a “voiceless, resigned and docile woman”, (Ibid p. 2).

In an article titled, “Gender Narratives in African literature” (2006), Fonchingong accuses early male writers like Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi, Wole Soyinka, Ngugiwa Thiong’o and Cyprian Ekwensi as condoning patriarchy and as such deeply entrenching in “a macho conviviality and a one - dimensional and minimalised presentation of women who are demoted and assume peripheral roles” (p. 135). This unpleasant portrayal of the African women has been frowned at in Ruthven (1984. quoted. in Fonchingong, 2006) that women have been reduced to “mere objects of voyeuristic attention, only fit as portrayed through types and stereotypes, for the cinders and smoke of literature backyard” (p. 136, emphasis mine). Also, tradition and culture of many African societies have had a tremendous influence on the minimal representation of women in Africa literature. Strong-leek (2001 cited in Fonchingong, 2006) makes a case that women are indoctrinated to envision the world from a patriarchal perspective. Male writers therefore construct their plots and characters to suit patriarchal subjection of women in the society. This view reinforces Ruthven’s early submission that Chinua Achebe, in his early writing, presents his women characters as victims of a society regulated by cultural norms and traditional values (Fonchingong, 2006). This minimal position of the woman in Africa is thus reflected in Ngugi’s Kenyan society. His woman characters represent the downtrodden and the pariahs of his society. The following expressions in *I Will Marry When I Want* (1980) bear testimony to the marginal position of women:

Two women are two pots of poison.

Women cannot keep secrets

A women’s word is believed after the event. (Fonchingong, 2006).

The woman’s honour and dignity usually consist in her strict adherence to idealized norms. These idealized norms or traditional structures have become “the mountain on the back of an African woman” which she has subserviently “conceived, internalized and borne out” (Omolara, 1994, cited in Fonchingong, 2006). Omolara’s frantic observation has been re-informed by Teresa Meniru’s affirmation (1976. Quoted in Fonchingong, 2006, 139) that, “girls were introduced to domestic duties very early in life. They learn from their mother how to cook and keep the house. They are thus bound by tradition to assume the role of domestic servants”.

The woman, especially the girl-child or the young woman, to please society in the traditional way, is to be a servant and or ‘slave’ even in matters which directly concern her. African Traditional heroism for the woman is inherent in her subservience. Apparently, the African woman’s lot is that of support of patriarchy. In the words of Nayar (2008), the “Nationalist Struggle has almost never overthrow patriarchy in Asian or African countries. In Asia and African societies, women are ‘scarified’ in the larger interest of the nation”, (p. 122). Such marginalization and subordination of women, according to Hungwe and Hungwe (2010) are the result of African tradition of masculinity. It must be stated at this point that, in the subsequent discussion, attention is focused on each of the three girl-child characters or protagonists in the three respective texts for discussion: their portrayal in relation to their families, the economic conditions of their parents and, the role each plays in the arrangement of her intended marriage are highlighted.

In Ngugiwa Thiong'o and Ngugiwa Mirii's *I Will Marry When I Want*, Gathoni is a girl of about twenty years old, a daughter of Kiguunda and Wangeci, who has been denied formal education by her parents. She is worried for not being sent to school and interprets her lot to mean the parents' intention to enslave her. She informs us that what she wears is 'rags' (p. 313). Gathoni's parents are very poor: making ends meet is a great difficulty for the family. This condition is depicted in her father's words: "Today I get two

hundred shillings a month. And it can't even buy insecticide enough to kill a single bedbug" (p. 290). The place of Gathoni, in relation to her family, and its economic condition is summarized in her words:

Mother, why are you insulting me? Is that why you refused to send me to school, So that I may remain your slave and forever toil for you? Picking tea and coffee only for you to pocket the wages? All that so that you can get money to pay fees for your son! Do you want me to remain buried under these ashes? And on top of all that injury, you have to abuse me night and day? (pp. 286,287)

The second young woman in focus is N'Gone, a character in Sembene Ousmane's *Xala*. N'Gone is a pretty young woman of nineteen years living with her monogamous parents- Old Babacar (apensioner), who is her father, and Mam Fatou, her mother- as well as her siblings. She "had twice failed her elementary certificate;... and her parents could not afford to go on paying for her schooling" (p. 5) She is now, left to her fate: "If she cannot find a job.... It's Yalla's will" (p. 5). Her family is an impoverished one, as is said of the father, "he was finding it impossible to keep his large brood of seven children on his tiny quarterly pension (p. 6). She spends all her time going out to cinema and dances with young men. Her family feels a strong need for her to marry:

She will have to get married. We must find her a husband. She is at the right age. There have never been unmarried mothers in our family... Old Babacar, the head of the family... agreed with his wife's arguments ..." (pp 5, 6).

The third character of concern in this paper is Anansewa in *The Marriage of Ananse*, a play written by Efua Theodora Sutherland. Anansewa, a young woman, is enrolled on the E. P. Secretarial course by her father, George K. Ananse, with whom she lives. Nothing is heard about her mother, though Ananse's mother, Aya and his sister, Ekuwa have come from the village and are staying with them (Ananse and his daughter). From the outset of the play, in Act One, George K. Ananse cries out to whoever cares to listen and sympathize with him that life is indeed "a struggle" (p 9). Poverty and rain have beaten him. Nevertheless, he is saddled with the payment of Anansewa's school fees and her up-keeping. The father therefore desperately wants to marry Anansewa to a wealthy husband, who will finance the rest of her education and up-keeping. A critical observation of the three young women, Gathoni, N'Gone and Anansewa, dispassionately reveals that they suffer similar or common fate in the hand of their parents in their respective texts.

Firstly, they are all treated as "object" or "property" to be dispensed with for economic benefits or to be merchandised into marriage in time of necessity or for social recognition or so as to march others in society. In the case of Gathoni in *I Will Marry When I Want*, her mother, Wangeci, for example, persists in insisting that she marries, as though the parents are tired taking care of her. The urgency for her to get a husband appears to have overshadowed her invaluable domestic and economic support to the parents. Similarly, in *Xala*, N'Gone's mother insists that "she will have to get married. We must find her a husband. She is at the right age" (p. 5) and, her father concedes, as if the daughter has completely outstayed her usefulness in the family. Yet, this girl is only nineteen years. When the father is asked whether they (the parents) have anyone in mind, he says "... if N'Gone our daughter has a husband I'd be very happy..." (p. 6) and his wife interrupts, "Until today's sun not a single well-bred, serious, worthwhile man has been to this house. The only ones that come are the sort who don't have a pocket handkerchief and wear clothes only fit for a scarecrow" (p.6). The presupposition here is that though they are ready to part with their daughter, they no doubt prefer a husband who is financially worthy to be able to offer quite a substance.

In *The Marriage of Anansewa*, George Ananse anticipates a rich husband for his daughter, Anansewa and therefore chooses simultaneously, four wealthy chiefs for her prospective "husband"; His heart will go for the richest and the most generous. The truth is that each of the three poverty-stricken families perceives their daughter as a 'treasure to be battered away, for some gains.

Secondly, the parents in all the three texts have undoubtedly had their own interest ahead of the daughters they are giving out in marriage. In Ngugi and Ngugi's *I Will Marry When I Want*, both Njoki and Gicaamba, the 'wise people', warn the parents of Gathoni, who presume the anticipated visit by the Kiois to be centred on a marriage between their daughter and John Muuuuru, that rich families more often than not marry from their rich counterparts therefore the Kiguundas should not dream the purpose of the expected visit to be marriage—even the attitude of Kioi's son confirms the doubt of Njoki and Gicaamba. Yet Gathoni's parents look on when their daughter keeps following John Muuuuru and when Gathoni reports of her pregnancy and the boy's denial of responsibility, Wangeci quickly says:

Let's go to Kioi's place now.... Didn't he tell you that he wanted your house and his to become one? Let's go there now. And tell him. Let the children marry first.

In other words, Gathoni's parents desire to link with the rich family of the Kioi's and they see the daughter's association with the boy as a path-way and the pregnancy as the catalyst. Hence they defy caution and hasten to the Kioi's place only to be disappointed. Again, in *Xala*, N'Gone's parents have vested interest in the choice of husband they make for her. Mam Fatou appeals to Yay Bineta, "N'Gone is your daughter. You know so many people in N'Dakaru. People who could help us. Look how we live, like animals in a yard". (pp.6 and 7).

Also, when Mam Fatou expresses misgiving because of how speedy the process of the marriage moves, Yay Bineta outlines the benefits the whole family will derive from this marriage and then: "She agreed." (p. 9). This is a clear indication that the parents are concerned more of their collective benefit than the good of N'Gone. The same picture is portrayed in *The Marriage of Anansewa*. Ananse makes Anansewa believe that the 'project' he is embarking on is all for her own good. Yet, the audience is fully aware that it is he himself who wants to gain social fame and material comfort. The story-teller confides in the audience through the following crafty statements, "I am a father myself/ To tell you the truth/ I wish I had a little of his kind of cunning". Ananse is indeed selling his daughter into marriage for what he gains and not for what she necessarily obtains or meets in it.

Thirdly, each of the three characters is peripheral to the discussion of her (intended) marriage, in spite of Chimamanda Adichie's emphatic assertion that "the (African) woman is more than merely an object but (an individual) with her own desires". Are these young women 'objects', 'properties' or 'passive slaves' in the hands of their parents? In truth, none of them is adequately consulted or involved in the discussion of her marriage. The daughters are completely absent physically and socially when the parents are choosing husbands and negotiating marriages for them. Their presence or contribution is apparently irrelevant in both the choice of husband and the arrangement of their marriages. Their situation reinforces Jadeja's (2015) observation that the African female character is portrayed as the "voiceless, resigned and docile woman" in the periphery. (p. 1).

In *I Will Marry When I Want*, long before Gathoni gets pregnant, Kiguunda and Wangeci go to the Kioi's place and inform Kiois, "We have thought a great deal about the matter. And we came to the conclusion that we should not put obstacle to your larger purposes". They, the parents of Gathoni, certainly think the Kiois have the intention to marry Gathoni to their son and that is what they refer to as "larger purposes". Even though that is not the case, we know that the parents never discuss any such subject with the girl. The same scenario occurs in *Xala*. N'Gone is ignorant about the planning of her marriage. She is neither involved in the choice nor the planning. In fact, the reader pities N'Gone who is indifferently a stooge in the hand of Yay Bineta. No wonder she does not evince any zeal or enthusiasm throughout the wedding process. The narrator tells us "N'Gone, the child of national flags and hymns understood nothing of what they were saying. It is not a surprise then, that at the wedding, she becomes "much more a fetishistic object than a person. Her mother undresses her as if she were a lifeless mannequin. During the wedding celebration, she appears more like an advertisement in a bridal magazine..." (TV Multiversity, 2011).

In *The Marriage of Anansewa*, Ananse blackmails his daughter, Anansewa, by using the child-father relationship to make her cooperate with him. He makes her type letters whose purpose she has no idea of. He asks her to pose for several photographs. She knows little about the father's plan to send these photographs to slay the hearts of the four suitor-chiefs. At a point, Anansewa gets a hint of her father's scheme and she speaks out, "Oh, father is selling me. / he is selling me".

Besides the above observations in all the cases, the parents advertently use the daughter's proposed marriages as a means of escapism from poverty. Gathoni, N'Gone and Anansewa, in their respective texts, are represented as decoy by their parents for economic freedom. The parents are subsumed by the hope that their daughters' marriages will transform their social image and improve their economic condition. For instance, Anansewa's father, Mr. George K. Ananse desires a good car, a mansion, executive wears and the like for himself. He wants to be recognized in church through ostentatious giving – especially during Day-born monthly offering. Yay Bineta and N'Gone's mother, on their part, want to suck El Hadji's wealth and live in a villa and Wangeci and Kiguunda are hopeful of associating with the Ahab Kiois. They are all probably fed up with destitution and so must, at all course, enrich themselves through their daughters: their "only property that must not remain in their custody".

Finally, in all the three texts, the perceived suitors or husbands have unique objective for accepting the object of interest' as George puts it in *The Marriage of Anansewa*. This deepens the unpleasant sense of 'objectifying' the African woman. So, the female character is perceived as 'object' both in her parents' home and in her husband's. In *I Will Marry When I Want*, John Buhuuri uses the body of Gathoni to satisfy his emotional desire and jilts her just like a person discards an over-used- sandals. In the case of N'Gone in *Xala*, EL Hadji accepts N'Gone because "She is gentle. A drop of dew. She is ephemeral too. A pleasant harbour for the eyes (p.7). And, again, the narrator tells us El Hadji had to admit it,

"N'Gone had the savour of fresh fruit, which was something his wives had long since lost. He was drawn by her firm, supple body, her fresh breath... N'Gone seemed to him like a restful oasis in the middle of the desert. She was good for his pride too..." (p.8).

In Sutherland's *The Marriage of Anansewa*, Anansewa's case is the most pathetic of all. Only one suitor, the Chief-Who-is-Chief has 'human' reason for Anansewa – true love. The other three have, prior to meeting Anansewa, defined her role in their respective homes. The Chief of Akate, TogbeKlu IV will have Anansewa assist him in building his substantial business (p82), the Chief of Mines needs her to give enlightened training to his children born to him by his wives (p. 78) whilst the Chief of Sapaase will use Anansewa to put shame on a certain bitchy, ugly wife in the palace (p. 80). Ananse is selling Anansewa and the suitors must buy her to serve their need.

Conclusion

The need for the African child for the survival of the family becomes greater and more crucial in a poor home if the child happens to be a girl or female. This is because, the cheap labour she provides notwithstanding, the girl-child is perceived as a 'property' that can be battered or merchandized into marriage for the collective benefit of the family.

The place of women in African societies and their representation in literature have been attacked in contemporary studies, often with feminist approach. The discussion so far reveals how succinctly the three texts illustrate the fate of young women in the hands of their poor parents amidst patriarchal tradition in Africa.

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