

**GENDER ISSUES IN THE WORKS OF SOME SELESTED AFRICAN WRITERS**

By

**Abdulkadir Imam and Shehu Sikiru Adekunle****ABSTRACT**

*Gender issues have become factors in the social, economic, political, and religious development of the society. This paper reveals that the African setting is a patriarchal one, polygamous in nature, colonialized oppression through slavery, African women are selfless, hardworking and successful, also that separation between the genders brings freedom, but does not bring happiness. The paper has therefore shown that having either a patriarchal or matriarchal setting result to an unhappy or tragic end which leads us to the need for equality between the two genders.*

**INTRODUCTION**

Gender is a concept used in social sciences analysis to look at roles and activities of men and women. The focus of gender issues is not on biological differences between men and women but rather on their experiences as members of the society. Gender issues are like a tool in understanding and for learning more about the activities of men and women in society and the problems and opportunities that each faces in doing those activities. The position of male dominated society is supported by Femi Ojo-Ade (1998) when he established that:

“African Literature is a male created, male oriented chauvinistic art. Nigeria is regarded as male and this is a fact that thrust in myriad ways at the Nigerian women”.

In other worlds, gender performances are available to everyone but with them come constraints on who can perform which personae with impunity and this is when gender and sex come together not that they are the same. Gender does not simply unfold from the individual biology but from an individual predisposition to be a particular kind of person. It is not even an individual property. Gender is a social arrangement of individuals being assigned to certain roles as male or female.

**The Portraiture of Female Characters in Male Authored Texts**

Men all over the world see women as ignorant and react to them as if they were of no consequence. Africa writers have joined African men in presenting women as objects; some present them as individuals with minds of their own while some others are sympathetic in their portrayal of women. Most African male writers sometimes present women in African Literature or in their texts as viragos, slaves, reproductive machines, helpless victims and lately heroines.

In Achebe's earliest works, especially *Things Fall Apart* we can distinguish between masculine stories of men and feminine tales of animals that could talk. Women are believed to be weak and so the male ones are not allowed to sit with them in order not to have their minds polluted with feminine ideas. This can be seen when Akueke's bride price is to be paid. The

men do the negotiations. Similarly, in Achebe's works *Things Fall Apart*, wife battering is a common feature. Women love to take everything done to them in good faith and in actual sense women are made submissive in nature.

There have been several criticisms and accusations against Achebe of being a chauvinist. Indeed, it can be arguably stated that his earlier novels are realistic presentations of what was obtained in the past. But his more recent writings such as *Girls at War and Anthills of Savannah* present women in heroic lights.

G.D Killian (ed) *African writers on African writing* (1984) presents Elechi Amadi as one of the African's female sympathizers. He sees them as whores who are both faithless and helpless victims because they have been made what they are by the male dominated society. In one of his novels *Estrangement*; he sees women as breaking up the patriarchal shackles and achieving success in life through prostitution. In this novel, we have a male character who invariably wants to relegate women to the background.

More so, early works of Ngugi wa thiongo revealed him as a writer that attributes a lot of positive qualities to women. In his works, women are not submissive like Achebe's women. Some of them, like in Amadi's *Estrangement* may be prostitutes but definitely they are not helpless victims. They are in the forefronts of events and sometimes they even lead men. They are seen to be more tactical than male characters and with great sense of direction. Ngugi can be said to be one of the writers that paved the way for women writings, making them to believe in themselves.

Most male critics condemn women's writings to the margins of discourse thus, articulating that "when creative pursuits appear in women the product lacks excellence" (Umeh. 19). Women writers have defied male intimidation and are speaking out from their position as other. Feminist critics (women and men) have given volume and vitality to gender dialogue in critical space by giving vocality to female written novels. Also, the Nigeria women today want equality with men in everything. They are to resist oppression, autocracy, male chauvinism and aggressiveness as a whole. This is in sharp contrast to the past when women were relegated to the background. The quest for female emancipation from male subjugation is encapsulated in the saying that a nation's development can be judge by its treatment of its women.

### **Patriarchy and the Woman**

In the beginning according to the record in Genesis, God created the heavens and the earth with all that they contained. The summit of His creation was mankind, male and female. This statement is intended to account for the simple fact that mankind is both male and female. Also, the statement is intended to account for the chapter of the Holy Bible, Genesis which contains stories showing woman as having been conceived as a part of man, taken out of his side, while he (Adam) was unconscious:

“While man was asleep, he took one of the man’s ribs and closed up the place with flesh.” Then the God Made a woman from the rib, he had taken out of him, and He brought her to the man: The man said;”this is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called “woman”(21-22)

Qur’an 4: I, emphasized more on the creation of woman (Eve) from man (Adam):

“O mankind! Be dutiful to your lord, who created you from a single person (Adam) and from him (Adam) He created his wife (Hawau or Eve) and from both he created many men and women...” (156)

This is the myth which represents woman as an unconscious part of man, wholly secondary to him and the part that makes the whole without any living spirit or soul of her own. This myth illustrates an attitude which is fundamental in man’s view of woman. The issue of supremacy of man over the woman has been a controversial one over the years and the two holy books have play emphasis on the role played by the man in order to clear the controversy. Therefore, even though the Holy books seem to grant supremacy to man; nonetheless, the concept of love and equality is also constantly stressed for mutual benefits of the two. For one to have an impartial investigation into the relationship between man and woman, one has to rule out old assumptions of the superiority or the inferiority of one to the other.

Moreover, some people do not dispute the tremendous role carried out by man as the head of the family and the society; but it is the relegation against her that are vehemently opposed. In every society, the man is known to have dominion to struggle for bread, to fight off danger, to wrestle with a hostile environment in a way that a woman cannot do because woman as the name implies is believed to be a weaker sex who needs man’s protection. However, in this present day and even earlier, some women have proved capable of being able

to carry out functions usually associated only with men like lecturing and farming in fact there a popular an adage which says: “what a man can do, a woman can do it better”.

In a typical Igbo societal milieu, the word of a man is law and women exist only to serve his pleasure and obey his commands like in Yoruba and Hausa land. Men are the yardstick, the standard and the point of reference in our society. A woman’s achievement is measured in relation to her husband. For instance, in Ezeigbo’s *Trafficked* (2008) a woman who neglects or disrespects her husband will become destitute. Akachi also portrays the Igbo cultural outlook in the sense that she uses Adaeze (Nneoma’s mother) as a good example of a typical African woman.

He knew (Ogukwe Eke), of course that his wife, An energetic woman brought in more income than he did. But these things were not voiced, for a woman’s wealth belonged to her husband and she could lay no claim to it at anytime in her lifetime or even after her death (9). It is significant that the chorus of countrymen state that a woman without a child is a failed woman, but a woman without a male child is also regarded as a failed woman who cannot be buried in her husband’s house except her father’s house. For example in Buch: Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego was counted as a failed woman in Amatokwu’s house because she did not bear children and also her mother was not allowed to be buried in Agbadi’s house because she did not have male child and the one she had died few days after her mother, so Nnu ego is her only child.

### **Social Injustice: Women Trafficking in Akachi’s Trafficked**

Social injustice is a concept relating to the claim of unfairness or injustice of a society in its divisions of rewards and burdens and other incidental inequalities. This is distinct from justice in law which may or may not be considered moral in practice or form the concept of Justice within a coherent ideological system, which focuses on just process rather than an incidental inequality. Opposition to social injustice is increasingly becoming a platform of emerging political parties’ Social injustice arises when equals are treated unequally and unequal’s treated equally. Some authors have used literature to denounce or to satirize and castigate social injustice in their societies. Examples of such authors are Niyi Osundare, Jane Aisten, Charles Dickens, social injustices are done to many people in the society especially women and this is invariably caused by certain artificial barriers that prevent full social justice to them

Among the injustices done in our society especially to women is a woman or children trafficking. This is like enslavement because there is slight or no difference between trafficking and slavery, though slavery is a system under which people are treated as property and forced to work against their will from the time of their capture and deprived of the right to leave, to refuse to work or to demand compensation. On the other hand, human trafficking is the movement of people from place to place, within and across borders and through force, coercion or deception and a situation involving their economic and sexual exploitation’

Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo argued that the traditional generic integrity of the novel *Trafficked* is fundamentally radicalized and exploitative as a result of the novelist’s experimental approach resulting in what might tentatively be dubbed faction. The society adopted the olden day’s method of slavery which has been successfully eradicated and transformed to another form. Rather than to affect both genders (male and female), it is only the women and young girls that were exploited, forced or lured into the shady business through deception or blackmailing. The story of trafficked girls and women at the Oasis especially Efe and Nneoma in *Trafficked* was narrated for the reader to know. Efe was lured into the business through advertisement in the newspaper and she was taken to Italy and to Palermo where she was used as a prostitute without her consent. She said, when narrating the story to Nneoma that;

One day, I saw an advertisement in a news paper while I was on a visit to my cousin in Lagos. They asked young men and women who wished to Work abroad to come to a certain address to be interviewed... Quite a number of people were interviewed, some were rejected but I was selected, but none of the men who were interviewed was taken. We took an oath to work for the agency until we had paid our debts (Transport fare) We were taken to Italy and ended up in Palermo. I was sold to a woman called Madam Gold, a Nigerian (99)

And in Nneoma’s own case, the story is quite the same, she was lured through deception. A friend told her that some people had helped her secure a teaching appointment and that they will help her in securing a job. The issue of unemployment in Nigeria is also one of the problems assisting traffickers because the woman wants every means to earn money, so that they will not become a liability to their husbands and the traffickers were taking advantage of this opportunity to lure them into what they do not bargain for. Nneoma and her friend went to this people’s house and in no time they got passports and flight tickets ready for them. They were shown the pictures of the schools where they would be teaching and given appointment

letters to sign without them suspecting the trick. Unfortunately, they were taken to Italy, where they were sold to madam Dollars who uses them for prostitution and instead of giving them the money they made, she would collect the money from them and leave them penniless.

Trafficking women and children is a transnational organized crime, which seems to have defied the police, immigration authority and the Nigerian government (Newell, S. 1997). Women Rights Watch, a Nigerian non-governmental organization, reports that the various tortures that victims (especially girls) go through range from forced sex, slavery, insanity to murder. The traffickers further harass the girls' families in Nigeria through conspiracy of fear and silence heightening the difficulty in checking the crime. But it is the victims rather than the traffickers who are more often penalized by the media when these girls are deported from their destination country. They are further traumatized through the sensationalisation of the issue in the Nigeria media. They are displayed on national television and in the daily newspapers. The victims become the criminals. In practice, those involved in the trafficking of children and women have rarely been apprehended and successfully prosecuted.

In conclusion, the marginalization of African women with the accompanied subjugation of their gender has led to a series of literatures which today are geared towards a redefinition of African womanhood in correct perspective. The stereotypical portrayal of women as silent, passive beings has given way to new perspective, which portrays women as strong, articulate and as achievement oriented as Akachi Eeigbo has rightly observed. There is no doubt that the image of women in African literature has shifted from being a mere 'Object' to 'subject' as many writers especially women have given their female character 'agency'. There is a recognizable shift in women's writing and this is as a result of change in the materials or psychological conditions of women or in the vision of the newer women writers.

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