

**THREE CHEERS FOR FEMALE  
WRITERS**

**BY**

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## INTRODUCTION

Before the nineteen-seventies, African Female Writers, and African Women as subjects of fiction did not receive adequate attention from critics of African Literature.

Femi Ojo-Ade, one of the few critics who are showing increasing interest in African women in literature, admits that, 'African literature is a male, - created, male-oriented, chavenistic art.'<sup>I</sup> Indeed, it is names of such male writers like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Mongo Beti, Leopold Senghor, Cyprian Ekwensi, and Sembene Ousmane to mention a few, who dominate any list of West African Literature. While on the list of critics of African Literature we find more males names such as Gerald Moore, Eustance Palmer, Oladele Taiwo, E. N. Obiechina, and Eldred Jones.

The limited participation of Women in written African Literature is surprising considering the well known fact that African Women were great participants in the art of literature when it was in the oral form. In traditional African Society oral literature in the forms of folktales, songs riddles and proverbs were used to entertain, and to inculcate the norms of society into people, especially young children. Since the Mother is closest to the child much of this task was left in the hands of women. But this is not to say that the oral art of literature was the exclusive monopoly of women. Both men and women were involved in the creative process, though there may have been specialization in certain genres according to gender.

In traditional societies, women did not only involve themselves in the narration of stories, they were also characters in the stories narrated. They had a lot of prominent roles to play as wives and Mothers and wise old women. They were witches and beautiful princesses, feared, and sought by men.

Opposed to this traditional view of Literature is the fact that women were not among the first set of People to achieve fame as African Writers. Neither were they given important roles to play in the Literature written by men. This can be blamed on the selection of males for formal education by the colonial administrations. Despite this attitude, a small number of women agitated for more African Women to get places in schools. It was from among these educated women that the first female African Writers emerged.

By 1964, the work of Ama Ata Aidoo had already appeared on the scene. While that of Flora Nwapa appeared in 1966, soon to be followed by the works of Efua Sutherland, Zulu Sofola, and Adoora Lily Ulasi. But the existence of these Female Writers is almost completely ignored by critics of African Literature.

The general belief among critics is that African Women could not have anything new to contribute to the creative world of Literature. Many critics assume that African Women want to merely keep up with their educated male counterparts, and also because in Europe Women are achieving fame as writers.

Critics of African Literature applied a critical criteria of the literary establishment which is European and male dominated in their evaluation of African Literature. Initially, even Female critics such as Molara Ogundipe-Leslie and Adeola James, utilized the same critical apparatus of approaching literary texts solely from the point of view of male experience. What interested both writers and critics were the thoughts and actions of male characters. Female characters were either ignored entirely or were considered of secondary importance.

#### Women and Writing:

In recent times, against considerable odds, female writing has increased in West Africa with the compelling additions of the works of Buchi Emecheta, Aiminata Sowfall, Zainab Alkali, and Mariama Ba.

This comes as a welcome change because for too long society has only listened to the voices of men. These female writers reject the image of women projected by most male writers.

Margret Attwood believes that female writers do not just see literature as a mirror of society but also as a map on which they point out their position and see where they are in relation to everything else.<sup>2</sup>

This is why Molara Ogundipe-Leslie acknowledged the fact that, the Female Writer has two major responsibilities. First, to "tell about being a woman" and to "tell reality from a woman's view, a woman's perspective".<sup>3</sup>

Female Writers are therefore trying to develop a literary style of their own which will be expressive of the Female experience.<sup>4</sup>

For a long time Female Writers were hindered by the limited roles society allowed women to play. And this was often demonstrated by the didactic moral works they wrote concerning their own sex. For instance, they wrote using such titles as 'The Women of England - their Social Duty and Domestic Habits; or Wife's Duty including Flora Nwapa's early titles such as Efuru and Idu.

This is because Female Writers did not have the education nor the social acceptance that would have encouraged them to explore issues which were not of domestic nature.

Indeed, it was considered unfeminine to be interested in economic and political issues.

Jane Austen was perhaps the first Female Writer to give an account of society from a woman's point of view. Her Novels followed a familiar pattern of female writing, that is, they are about courtship and marriage. However it is in her works that we find heroines who are credible women with the capacity to think for themselves, women with ambition, and the will to challenge men emotionally and intellectually for the improvement of their relationship.

The fact that a number of Female Writers have written good literary works is amazing considering the conditions they often have to work in. For example, in his memoirs, James Edward Austen-Leigh gives us an idea of how Jane Austen wrote her books:

How she was able to affect all this is surprising for she had no separate study to repair to, and most of the work must have been done in the general sitting room, subject to all kinds of casual interpretations. She was careful that her occupation should not be suspected by beyond her own family party.

Unlike the male writer who normally had access to a private room where he could write with complete concentration, the Female Writer has to make do with a public sitting room or the kitchen from where she could supervise the house work or receive visitors. Female Writers rarely enjoy the luxury of having a room of their own.

In this paper a lot of thought is given to the writings of Jane Austen, this is because she symbolizes the essence of the Female Writer in the manner she wrote her books and what she wrote in them.

In Austen's Novels, we see a dramatization of how marriage alliances are formed between the two often conflicting sexes. She was aware of the sanctity of the marriage institution. Marriage was the chief means of economic survival for women and thus marriage became the main justification of their existence.

One fault critics find with Jane Austen's work is that she lacked a sense of history, that even though the French revolution happened during her life time there is no mention of it in her works. It is true that we occasionally meet young military men in her ballroom scenes but that is as far as they army is mentioned. Neither did they talk of war because it was hardly considered a fitting subject for female ears on such occasions. It can be argued that living in her secluded village Austen did not feel the impact of the war.

Her scope was limited to her village because she had no opportunity to broaden her horizon with travel, nor is her knowledge of character more than what she saw displayed in drawing rooms.

Austen like Marriama Ba in So Long a Letter and scarlet Long is against the victimization of women in a partial society. Society is warned lest it awake the element of rebellion in women.

Jane Austen's prose is completely expressive of the calm flow of life in the village. Even where she discusses what the position of women is in her society there is no hint of bitterness. Perhaps it was not in her nature to want what she could not have by gentle remonstrance. However this not true of all female writers. The dissatisfaction many female writers felt with their personal lives is often reflected in their works. For instance, in Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre we find the narrative poetic and powerful conveying deeply felt emotions. The anger and bitterness Bronte felt is barely concealed in her work. Jane Eyre tells us that instead of making jellies with Mrs. Fairfax he would go to her room and look over the fields at the distant views.

I longed for a power of vision which might reach the busy world, towns, regions full of life I had heard of but never seen; that I desired more practical experience... than I possessed; more of intercourse with my kind of acquaintance with a variety of character than was here within reach... who blame me? Many no doubt, and I shall be called discontented. I could not help it, the restlessness was in my nature, it agitated me to pain sometimes... It is vain to say human beings ought to be satisfied with tranquillity, they must have action; and they will make it if they cannot find it. Millions are condemned to a stiller doom than mine, and millions are in silent revolt against their lot.

Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the messes of like which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and, a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer; and it is narrow minded in their more privileged fellow creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, playing on the piano or embroidery bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them or laugh at them if they seek to do more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.<sup>6</sup>

In powerful and poetic prose Bronte tells us exactly what she thinks of the limitations imposed on her as a woman as well as a writer.

Virginia Woolf once observed that such a writer like Charlotte Bronte who is very aware that she is a woman and who is also aware of the wrong done to her sex by societal norms, will never get her genius expressed whole and entire. She will get into a rage and her books will be deformed and twisted. She will write of herself where she should write of her characters.<sup>7</sup>

But the question is, whether the creative writer can run away from real life? The values and the experiences of life are often transferred into fiction thus literature acts as a reflection of society.

Early female writers were very much aware of the double standards in criticism frequently applied to their works.

The three Bronte Sisters were accused of writing ~~unwomanly~~ books, because they wrote of the deep dark side of human nature. In the preface to *Wuthering Heights*, Emily Bronte wrote book than say Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen. Since it is masculine values that prevail in real life, war even as a subject of fiction is regarded as more important than a novel on fashion and manners or of a young woman trying to find her place in society.

Even in the 20th century the good female writer is regarded with astonishment because she is still an unusual phenomenon. Any consideration of the quality of the work written by a woman will bear in mind the sex of the writer. Hence even the standards of criticism are adjusted to fit the sex of the writer.

The Bronte sisters were very much aware of this double standard in criticism. In the preface to the 1880 edition of Wuthering Heights Charlotte Bronte summed up the dilemma of the female writer, which is still true of present day literary criticism:

"Averse to personal publicity, we veiled our names under those of Currie, Ellis, and Action Bell. We did not like to declare ourselves women because without at that time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called 'feminine' - we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice, we had noticed how critics sometimes used for their chastisement the weapon of personality and for their reward a flattery which is not true praise."

Charlotte Bronte was not in revolt against the status quo. Her heroines like Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe in Villette sought economic independence as teachers. In Jane Eyre independence was more than a matter of status, it meant personal identity and self-respect. Jane Eyre enjoys her work at Thornfield Hall not because of the wages it brings her but because as she says to Rochester, "I have not been trampled on. I have not been petrified. I have not been buried with inferior minds and excluded from every glimpse of communion with what I reverence, with what I delight in, with an original, a vigorous and expanded mind."

We do not find male writing being restricted in this way, thus the quality we find here is of a different kind. Male writing is not preoccupied with the frustrations brought upon it by its sex. It is done confidently, proudly, with full freedom to stretch in whatever direction it is inclined, and no subject is taboo.



Before colonialism, the African Woman held a respected position in society. Her most important roles were that of wife and mother, but she was not totally cut off from the economic and political life of her community.

In the rural areas women were involved in trading activities, cloth weaving, pot - making and so on. Women were also responsible for looking after the family and doing the house work.

From many parts of Africa, we find examples of women who had great influence on the political activities of their people. For instance in West Africa, Women like Moremi of Ife, the Amazons of Dahomey, Queen Amina of Zaria made their presence felt in the government of their communities.

African Women were the principal victims of the encounter with the west. The establishment of colonial rule brought with it a change in attitudes towards the female sex.

The Missionaries, comparing African Women to their own, sought to relieve her of what they considered to be the heavy burden of her responsibilities. Thus women were limited to playing the roles of wives and mothers and were discouraged from participating in other aspects of communal life.

It is in the writings of Sembene Ousmane, Femi Osofisan and Ngagi that Woman is depicted as a complex being who is sometimes motivated by inner impulses which have nothing to do with her relationship with the male sex.

Sembene Ousmanes God's Bits of Wood we are presented with women like Ramatonlaye, the dignified elderly woman who has a large extended family to look after. There is Mame Sofi, a middle-aged out-spoken woman and **Dejayi** the leader of the market traders. All these women came together to organise a mass movement of women in a march to confront the colonial owners of the railway line. These

women support and rally one another, surmounting differences in language, poverty, and hunger in their commitment to a common cause. Men became aware of the latent power in women:

The men began to understand that if the times were bringing forth a new breed of men, they were also bringing forth a new breed of women.<sup>9</sup>

Male writers, like those just mentioned who involve female characters in political matters are few and they often espouse the cause of a socialist revolution.

Most of the task of using literature to uplift, inspire and encourage women is left in the hands of female writers. Female writers realise that though African Writers claim to write for the African audience, they are apparently not interested in the actions and thoughts of women.

It is left to female writers therefore to depict the travails of women characters with whom she shares a deep empathy.

The female writer is still a rare person in Africa. She belongs to the educated group with a professional job outside her home. She has read the works of Jane Austen, Virginia Woolf, Harriet B. Stowe e.t.c and has found out that women can write as well as men.

Even though the rural women are in the majority, the urban female, female writer writes comprehensively about women because while living in urban centres she is still close to the traditions of her people. Female writers are certainly influenced by the feminist movement and go all out to demand for a recognition of the rights of women, and also to show that the African woman has a personality of her own. They are concerned about the relationship between man and woman about the slave trade, colonialism and what neo-colonialism has done to the African People.

The novel, short story, and drama are the forms most favoured by female writers because they provide more space for the message they want to tell the world. A writer like Bessie Head explores the feelings of women in the oppressive conditions of life in Southern Africa. While Mariam Ba wants changes in the marriage system, Other writers like Aidoo are

concerned with the liberation of not only their sex but of all people from any social system which destroys the individual. The image of the African Woman as presented by male writers who partray her as playing a secondary but happily accepted role is seriously challenged by female writers who have found the courage and the will to speakout for their sisters and therefore deserve to be cheered on to greater achievements.

FOOT NOTES

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