



THE ROLE(S)/ IMAGES OF WOMEN: EXAMPLES OF SELECTED AGES IN LITERATURE.

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Abstract

There has been an increase in women's relegation to the background. Hence, the study investigates this in relation to their roles in the society as reflected in the various ages of literature examined in this research work. The outcome of this has been the exploitation of female vulnerabilities, a situation in which woman has always been easily regarded as a fallible human being. This perception has overtime put women in a very difficult position. The paper therefore, adopts, the theory of feminism which came into being as a result of the feeling that women are generally marginalized both in society and in literature. Concern is with the role the characters play in the texts. It looks at the effects of social and political changes upon women and how these changes restrict their artistic autonomy. It is believed that the study will be of Paramount importance as it contributes to knowledge by enhancing the understanding of readers towards the roles/ image of women in literature.

Keywords: Women, Ages, Relegation, Literature, image

Introduction

Literature is the voice of the people, the reflector of human activities both socially, religiously, economically and politically. This is because as Ngugi states in his book *Homecoming* (1972), that " Literature is given direction, shape and impetus by the society of its birth". Likewise Soyinka is of the opinion that every Literary work is first and foremost the experience of the people or society that gives its birth.

The study aims at discussing the role(s) of Women in the past throughout the Ages of Literature. The work focuses on Women in the Classical period, Medieval,

19th Century, 20th Century and looks briefly at the realities of African traditional Women.

Classical Period

In the Classical period, Women were perceived to be more as sexual objects than individuals. One would say that, Women's rights were very limited and they were not allowed to express much of their freedom. Within this time period, Women were blamed for Wars, destruction of towns, and the death of men. For example, in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, Women were bound to their homes and rearing Children. Men were entitled to anything they desired including Women. The decisions regarding all matters of the polis were decided by men and men were the ones responsible for protection of the polls.

The main character, *Lysistrata*, a strong Athenian Woman is powerful and an excellent, moving character. The other women that surround her are rather opposite, they seem to fit the mold of a stereotypical woman of the time - housebound and dutiful to their husbands.

Lysistrata, a woman with a great sense of individual responsibility, reveals her plan to take matters into her own hands and end the interminable Peloponnesian war between Athens and Sparta. She has convened a meeting of Women from various city States in Greece and, with support from the Spartan *Lampito*, she explains to the other women her plan: that they are to withhold sexual privileges from their menfolk as a means of forcing them to bring an end to the war.

The Play, in the end, has no message aside from the fact that sexual desire, the most base and human drive in us all, is what makes the world turn - not decision or complex military of peace actions. The fact that sex can be used to change the course of history is quiet silly, no matter what time period this is viewed in, but it works in the Play simply because the idea of Women being involved politically was a preposterous enough idea to warrant an equally preposterous conclusion. Aristophanes is showing both sides of women - the influential and the subservient. While *Lysistrata* is unquestionably the ring leader of the political movement, there are elements of her character that are more masculine than the other females we encounter, which serves to lend this tale some degree of credibility since male audiences of the time would have found the plot to be completely unbelievable if the main character that affected such change was a "typical" woman. Hence, Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* showcased how women were used as sex instruments by their husbands, which is animalistic to the personality of a womanhood.

Medieval Period

The women of the Medieval times were surprisingly a lot more candid and sexual than one might expect of an era where the ideal of femininity was Mary, the mother of Jesus. In actuality, the women in the Literature of the period, as well as the historical female figures seemed to be torn between the ordeal and the physical desires and domineering character that her antagonist, Eve, embodies.

Peasant women had many domestic responsibilities, including caring for children, preparing food, and tending livestock. During the busiest times of the year, such as the harvest, women often joined their husbands in the field to bring in the crops.

Original Sin

According to the Bible, Eve was created from Adam's rib and having eaten the forbidden fruit, was responsible for man's expulsion from paradise. In Medieval art, the responsibility of women for this 'Original Sin' is often emphasized by giving a female head to serpent who tempts Eve to disobey God. The story underlined the belief that women were inferior to men, and that they were morally weaker and likely to tempt men into sin.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the place of Women in society was often dictated by Biblical texts. The writings of the Apostle Paul, in particular emphasized men's authority over women, forbidden women from teaching, and instructing them to remain silent. This is reflected in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35:

Women should remain silent in the Church. They are allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. If they want to enquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home: for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.

(1 Corinthians 14:34-35).

Also, the book of 1 Timothy 2:11-14 says:

A woman should learn in quietness and in full submission. I do not Permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man: She must be silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve. And Adam was not the one deceived; it was the woman who was deceived and became a sinner. (1 Timothy 2:11-14).

However, the Virgin Mary was a contrast to this negative image: as the mother of Christ, she was the channel through which Christians might be saved. She was sometimes described as the second Eve; as she was seen to have made up for

Eve's sins. Mary was seen as the most powerful of all saints as well as strong model of chastity and motherhood.

Religious Roles of Women In Medieval Society

The women in Medieval societies were undoubtedly immersed in Christianity. Women played a lot of important religious roles in the society even though they couldn't exert much power due to their gender. They were looked upon as a godly image of piety, faith, and devotion before the English Reformation.

The main role of Women in the Middle age was to run the household and raise children. They were equally taught to be obedient to their husbands.

The Role(S) Of Women in The Nineteenth Century

According to the social norms of the time period, women in the 19th Century were expected to fulfill their duties as wives and mothers and be content in their existence as nothing more. Men and women were divided between the public and private sphere, and women were doomed to spend their lives solely in the domestic sphere. Not coincidentally, women who dared to enter the masculine public realm were viewed as something akin to prostitutes, the lowest level of society.

With that in mind for example, in Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," although John could be seen as the domineering villain of the story, he is simply a reflection of his society. The narrator's desire to have more in her life than John and her child does not correspond to social expectations. Moreover, her love of writing and creativity further distinguishes her from the idealized "Angel of the house" that is supposed to emulate. Gilma, herself rebelled against these Social expectations and, by leaving her first husband and moving to California to write was not deemed fit to belong in respectable society.

Women redefine their place in society by accepting an image of themselves which involved both home - centeredness and inferiority. Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem, "The Princess" states:

Man for the field and
Woman for the hearth
Man for the Sword and
For the needle Shee
Man with the head and
Woman with the heart
Man to command and
Woman to obey

The above poem shows us how Women are not taken into consideration in the society. Also, in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'urberville* published in 1891, showcases issues of sexual inequality in political, economic and Social life. Women continued to rank as second class citizens. Occasionally, it takes a quasi-religious dimensions. This on the whole, Victorian Writers were linked by a common concern for the gate of humanity in an industrial democratic society.

Hardy subtitled the novel *A Pure Woman* and focuses on the plight of the fallen woman, he uses the novel to present the double standards of Victorian society. The man as sexual sinner goes unpunished by that society. The Literature and even the painting of the Victorian period had often reflected upon the plight, the relative guilt and the likely date of the fallen woman.

Hardy repeatedly relates Tess's predicament to the known Victorian world and its harsh judgement of what was deemed sexual impropriety in women. Innocent in the eyes of nature, Tess has been made to break an accepted social law. By his presentation of Tess, he suggests that purity comes from lack of experience.

It can be noted that the novel is the personal tragedy of a heroic girl who is destroyed by hostile forces inherent in her society, forces which she little understands and certainly cannot control.

Alec is an embodiment of lust, not love. From the moment he sets his on Tess, he desires to take her to bed and carefully stalks her like a lion stalking his prey for three full months until he has his way with her. This character is central to the theme of Crime and Punishment. He is everything that Angel is not: proud, pretentious, sexually immoral and opportunistic. He loves to take undue advantage of Tess's helplessness and even goes out of his way to create such circumstances.

Alec exploits moments of danger for his own sexual gain, presenting Tess with danger in order to use her as a sexual conquest.

It is evident from these works that during this time Women were still in a subjugated role despite their desire to break free of societies' restrictions.

The Role(S) Of Women in The Twentieth Century

Women's role in Literature has evolved through history and had led women to develop into string independent roles. Modern Literature has served as an outlet and sounding board for Women's rights and feminist pioneers. Female writers have come to the fore front and provided today's readers with a vast array of ethnic and cultural perspectives. The unique voice of female minorities is a common theme in many coming of age novels that allows each writer to establish a separate identity for their characters and themselves. Women in modern Literature often include strong independent females juxtaposed by oppressed women to provide examples for young female readers and critique short comings

of our society. The emergence of the independent female novelist in America has allowed for a new evolution of the role of Women in Fictional Literature.

The Role (S) Of Women In Traditional African Society

In most part of Africa, the woman is traditionally and culturally relegated to the background. She is overshadowed by man as a wife, daughter, sister and even as a mother. As a daughter is given little or no importance at all in the home front. Her brothers if she has any enjoy more recognition, advantage and rights than her because it is assumed she would one day leave her father's home to build another man's home. Traditional African culture has overtime been criticized for favouring male superiority especially in matrimonial related issues.

This is exemplified in Tsitsi Dangaremba's Nervous Condition where we see Tambudzai, not sorry about the death of her brother because of the much freedom he enjoys as a male child. She says:

I was not sorry when my brother died...I shall not apologize but begin by recalling the facts as I remember them that led up to my brother's death, the events that put me in a position to write this account. For though the event of my brother's passing and the events of my story cannot be separated, my story is not after all about death but about my escape and Lucia's; about my mother's and Maiguru's entrapment; and about Nyasha's rebellion - Nyasha, far minded and isolated, my uncle's daughter, whose rebellion may not in the end have been successful. (NC.1)

The statement which is about a young man, her brother, is loaded with gender - related hierarchies and dualism that prescribe and ground women's entrapment as told in the novel. "I was not sorry when my brother died". This is an unbelievable statement proffered by an African woman. The first shock one has to get over is, how could she not be? How could she say such a thing? First of all, given our African extended family system that demands close family ties, no one in their right mind would say such profane thing. Secondly, this is an African woman talking about the death of her own brother, Nhamo, her only brother, and an only son and heir, essential to the continuity of the patrilineage. Yet Tambudzai is not being callous. Her statement is a blanket truth about what it means to grow up as a woman in her society. She recounts that:

The needs and sensibilities of women in my family were not considered a Priority, or even legitimate. That was why I was in Standard Three in the year that Nhamo died, instead of in Standard Five, as I should have been by that age (NC.12).

The fact that she is a gendered female excludes her from education, to the boy's comparative advantage. Tambudzai's education can be suspended or terminated just because she is a woman, since women's education is thought to be

purposeless. Women stay at home and men go to school. The essentializing linkage between men/education and women/ home is foregrounded in both Emecheta and Dangaremba, who critically show how their societies link intellectual advancement to men's biology and needs, while finding the same unnecessary for women. Feminine living depends on " natural" (unschooled) inclinations. These authors depict and criticize such either/ or, mind/ body dichotomies that have plagued women by repressing their strengths. Tambudzai's father, Jeremiah, rebukes his daughter's yearning for education:

*(M)y father called me aside to implore me to curb my unnatural inclinations: it was natural for me to stay at home and prepare for the homecoming (uncle's)
...He did not like to see me over absorbed in intellectual pursuits. He became very agitated after he found me several times reading the sheet of newspaper in which the bread from Magrosa had been wrapped as I waited for the sadza to thicken. He thought I was emulating my brother, that the things I read would fill my mind with impractical ideas, making me quite useless for the tasks of feminine living. (NC. 33-34).*

For Jeremiah, cooking, not intellectual pursuits, defines womanhood and feminine living. He views education as that which ruins women, distracting them from their gendered role. Contrary to what Jeremiah thinks and believes, Tambudzai tries to subvert this ideology by combining intellectual pursuits with cooking. She refuses an either/ or split by refusing to confine and define herself only in terms of domestic sphere (like her mother who asks her to " learn to carry her burdens with strength " (NC. 16), but to make both the spheres of home and school work for her. Combining cooking and reading is only one of several examples. When she is pulled out of school she asks for and obtains land from her grandmother (farming is woman's work) on which she grows " mealies" that she sells to pay for her education. As a woman, she strives to work with the tools that areve4s, and by so doing she redefines what is seen (especially through male eyes) in her society as a naturalized woman's place. In this social context, male/ female conflicts are grounded in what Tambudzai states is the " question of femaleness. Femaleness was opposed and inferior to maleness" (NC. 116).

Conclusion

The female image has been subsumed in the 'other' which is stereotypic marker of the dominant patriarchal manifestations. Within the patriarchal notions the female self must be oppressed; it must lose its originality or voice, in order to be absent in history or become a part of a whole for Social recognition. This is why feminists assert that the evolution of citizenship in both theory and practice reflects the male dominance of history and writing politics. Throughout its history, the definition of the concept in laws, and in practice has persistently

discriminated against women. Their contributions are normally within "Constituencies" with Co - wives, other women or their very Young children. Acholonou illustrates this situation in the case of the Igbo:

...Men and women exist side by side in two separate and complementary hierarchies, organizing themselves in gendered cults, clubs, associations, age grades with the Igbo call Otu or Nzuko. In case infiltration from any member of the opposite sex is seen as a taboo, or a profanation of the sacred rules of the gender relation within the Social structure (16).

An inter- gender relationship only happens during special occasion such as festivals, marriages and ceremonies or other such activities. Following this, in issues of political interest, women should not be seen, not to even being heard. To act contrary would be seen as rebellion and is punishable.

Finally, Gender inequality has made women to suffer unimaginable measure of voice from men within the confines of the home and through the structure and institutions of society and state. In Nigeria, for example, media establishments are turned mostly by governments (male controlled) while the privately owned ones are by Men. Thus, it is natural that they reflect the opinion and image of men more than that of women.

However, we would not have to agree that all male writers have been stereotypical in their portrayals of female characters. Writers like Ngugi, Ousmane, and Laguma have glorified womanhood in their writing. In their fictional works women have been given central roles to play. Such roles are so important that they are instrumental to the achievement of Independence and self - actualization. No wonder, as Taiwo rightly observes, when female writers start writing "some write in tot6 rejection of the image of Women projected by some male writers, others try to glorify the roles played by women in society and thereby help them realize their status" (34).

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