



GENDER AND RACIAL ISSUES IN MARIAMA BA, NADINE GORDIMER, BUCHI EMECHETA'S SELECTED NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

This paper dwells on the analysis of famous selected African women writers Mariama Ba a Senegalese woman, Nadine Gordimer a South African writer, Buchi Emecheta is a Nigerian novelist, with a view to bringing out the issues of gender identity and racial issues as thematically presented in the work. In this work author explored how African women writers subvert racial issues and gender relations by relocating feminist theories in an African literary context. Concerning the two themes selected author writings contends that a critical reading of fictionalized theories reveals that African women not only fluctuate between and within subject positions, but can redefine and reconstruct racial, cultural and historical difference in ways that undermine binary oppositions. These three primary texts also explore the ways in which African women lives are affected by other issues, such as colonialism and economic factors, and this study discusses this. An analysis of these novels reveals that the interconnectedness of racial, class and gender issues exacerbates the oppression of many African women, thereby lessening the opportunities for them to attain self-realization. This study goes on to investigate whether there are possibilities of empowerment for the women in the primary texts, and examining the reasons why some women fail to transcend their situations of oppression.

Key words: Gender and Racial Issues, Mariama Ba novel *So Long a Letter*, Nadine Gordimer novel *Burger's Daughter*, Buchi Emecheta's *Second-Class Citizen*

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Indigenous South African literature effectively began in the late 19th century and became fairly copious in the 20th century. Much of the work by persons born in South Africa was limited in its viewpoint; often these writers only dimly apprehended the aspirations, perceptions, and traditions of South Africans belonging to a people other than their own (1). A person or individual is known by his or her identity though various aspects

such as name of the person, country, class, culture, religion, way of lifestyle, gender, profession etc. With the help of these aspects; an individual is identified in the society. However, when the individual faces struggle in living his life, he is unable to identify himself with the country or culture he is living with. Perhaps in contrast to the centrality and popularity of some African writers including Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Bâ, and Nadine Gordimer

seems to have been consigned to a restricted critical visibility. The authors Nadine Gordimer, Bessie Head, Mariama Ba, Buchi Emecheta, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Assia Djebar, and Ama Ata Aidoo, all of whom appear on the Lindfors list and/or Africa's 100 Best Books of the 20th century. An influential and highly original writer was Mariama Bâ (Senegal, 1929-1981) who explored gender relations, power and inequality, women's struggle for education, and how these issues were framed by African and religious beliefs. Another powerful writer is Buchi Emecheta (Nigeria, 1944 –) who set the stage for younger female African writers. Her book, *Second Class Citizen* exposed the difficulties of an African adapting to a life in London, where she eventually settled.

Mariama Bâ has come to be regarded as one of the most original writers to have emerged from West Africa. Her first novel, *So Long a Letter* (1981), uses the raw material of her own life to create a narrative which, owing to its resonance with the experience of other African women, is widely acknowledged as a seminal feminist text. A discussion of *So Long a Letter* by the West African woman writer, Mariama Ba is used as a basis for highlighting the empowering and disempowering effects of particular types of education for women in the traditional African- Muslim context of Senegal. An examination of this issue in the novella would seem to indicate that the marginalization of Muslim women in this and other countries could be alleviated by a religious education which would investigate the difference between Islamic principles and cultural practices. "*So Long a Letter* may then be read as semi-biographical depiction of the life of a woman living in the specific socio-cultural milieu of a particular time of her country's history."

An internet search for "*So Long A Letter* in gender courses" revealed more than 960,000 results. Although this is not proof that the novel is taught in that number of courses, it shows that it is viewed as a statement on gender struggles in Africa. Based on the idea of a global sisterhood whereby all women have the same plights and aspirations, the novel is embraced by most students in gender courses. Lisa Williams'(1997) students found parallels between their lives and Ramatoulaye's.

While *So Long a Letter* is concerned with the lives of two women in postcolonial Senegal, this novel spoke to the needs and struggles of the women in my class. As members of the first generation in each of their families to attend college, these students faced tremendous obstacles to gain an education. Some were single mothers working at demeaning jobs during the day and attending school at night. (142)

Another point of note is that even though the women in Mariama Bâ's story were Muslims they were all against polygamy. Regarding Ramatoulaye, one finds it difficult if it was the second marriage that made her bitter or her husband's treatment. In all three scenarios of polygamy (Ramatoulaye and Modou; Aissatou and Mawdo; and Jacqueline and Samba Diack) the husband's treatment of the first wives, after taking on another wife, was appalling resulting in emotional distress, divorce and nervous breakdown and subsequent death, respectively, for all the women involved.

Using climatic and geological metaphors that rings of 'tropical storms' and 'earthquake' respectively, Ramatoulaye provided a fitting end to her final transformation when she confirmed that she is not

[I]ndifferent to the irreversible currents of women's liberation that are lashing the world. This commotion that is shaking up every aspect of our lives reveals and illustrates our abilities. [93]

emphasizing again the equality between the two genders. This statement defines or summarises all the major issues Ramatoulaye discussed in her letter.

Nadine Gordimer, the South African writer and political activist, was a woman deeply disturbed by the racial issues and inequalities prevalent in her country which moved her to create a body of work dealing with the issues that permeated the very fabric of the South African society. She was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1991 for being a writer "who through her magnificent epic writing has - in the words of Alfred Nobel - been of very great benefit to humanity". Gordimer's writing dealt with moral and racial issues, particularly apartheid in

South Africa. *The Lying Days* (1953) to her first attempt to focus on the growing anti-apartheid movement and the multiracialism of the Drum set of Can Themba, Lewis Nkosi, and others. Under that regime, works such as *Burger's Daughter* and *July's People*. In her first published novel *The Lying Days* (1953), Gordimer charts the growing political awareness of a young white woman, Helen, towards small-town life and South African racial division. Her second novel, *A World of Strangers* (1958), shows the first fruitful but often frightening encounters between white and black people in the heady days of Sophiatown. By the time of *The Late Bourgeois World* (1966), Gordimer is dealing directly with the effects of the black liberation movement on white South Africans, showing the divided soul of the white liberal in a morally ambivalent situation. *The Conservationist* (1974) pits Afrikaner land hunger against the indigenous population in an often phantasmagoric narrative. *Burger's Daughter* (1979) depicts the involvement of radical white activists in the liberation struggle. *July's People* (1981), perhaps Gordimer's most powerful novel, projects into the future the final collapse of white supremacy and what that might mean for white and black people on an intimate level. Her other works (and her short stories are regarded as among her finest work) deal with issues such as love across the colour line and, more recently, the emergence of South Africa into a democracy after the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 - a society still dealing with a myriad contradictions.

Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter* published in 1979 for the first time in United Kingdom is an historical novel. Gordimer, in this novel, laid more emphasis on handling of anti-apartheid activism in South Africa. It is a novel about white anti-apartheid activist in South Africa seeking to overthrow the South African government. It is Gordimer's most political and the most moving novel. The review in *The New York Review of Books* described the style of writing as 'elegant', 'fastidious' and belonging to a 'cultivated upper class'. Gordimer, in this novel, portrayed the impingement of political developments on personal lives of people in a transitional society. "It is a remarkable aspect of Gordimer's writing that in her yearning for a multi-

racial South Africa, she is courageous stashed attitudes would promptly and peremptorily discuss. Also, she is fulfilling her cultural task of showing that resistance to white domination comes not only from blacks but from whites as well. Both are finding ways of working beyond separatism to renewed vision of a culture unfragmented by apartheid."

Gordimer's *July's People* reveal complex relationship between actual processes of social transformation and corresponding transmutation of literary discourse. *July's People* is Gordimer's much controversial novel. The story of the novel revolves around the revolution in South Africa and the inevitable violence it generates. The servant named July is ironically named after the Man Friday in *Robinson Crusoe*. Along with apartheid, some other major themes handled by Gordimer in this novel are Racial equality, Power and Money.

Among the most important female authors to emerge from postcolonial Africa, Nigerian-born Buchi Emecheta is distinguished for her vivid descriptions of female subordination and conflicting cultural values in modern Africa. Her best-known novels, including *Second-Class Citizen* (1974), *The Bride Price* (1976), and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979), expose the injustice of traditional, male-oriented African social customs that relegate women to a life of child-bearing, servitude, and victimization

In almost all her novels we find that Emecheta's heroines surmount all their difficulties in life and emerge a winner. Her prototype Adah in *Second Class Citizen* and *In the Ditch*, can be seen to exert her indomitable will and self-determination in order to break out of fetters posed by a racial environment and psychological female dependency. The final birth of her novel is symbolic in that she has put down all restrictive forces and is forming a new self for herself. As Iyer states: —Adah emerges from her trials a prouder and wiser woman, potentially a *mélange* of progressive African and western cultural modes, increasingly free from the reactionary baggage of both cultures and embarking on a journey of transcendence and the self-definition (32).

The general trend of African womanist criticism has been to evolve an agenda with a

commitment towards the survival and wholeness of the entire people--male and female. Ogunyemi expounds on it:

Black womanism is a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideal of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womandom. It concerns itself as much with the black sexual power tussle as with the world power structures that subjugate the blacks...its aim is the dynamism of wholeness and self-healing that one sees in the positive, integrative endings of womanist novels. (Womanism72)

Womanism is a movement towards harmony and progress. Though it is a liberative movement focused on women of colour, it also aims the essential wholeness of any race--white or black. As a move towards gender equality too, it follows a tolerant ideology in that it promotes the uplift of both male and female. While progress of women is the agenda, the male of the species is also encouraged to come out of the chauvinistic stereotype. The womanist novels though similar to feminist works, are characterized by their own distinctive features as we have seen in Emecheta's case.

We can conclude that womanism arose as an answer to the plea of the woman of colour in order to address issues that white feminist movement glossed over, especially those issues imperative to the daily life experience of the woman of colour. Racism that the black woman encountered in their collectivity with the white sisters led to the formation of black feminism and womanism. Therefore the liberation of the woman of colour of the Third World from the multiple oppression forces of race, class and gender is the ultimate political need of the hour. The black women's lived experiences depict the validity of the contribution of the past, present and future in their resistance against gender and race constructs. Womanism thereby proclaims the woman of colour as having a history of great complexity and value which promotes their identity as celebratory in the modern world.

Emecheta Widely recognized as a leading female voice in contemporary African literature, Emecheta has attracted international attention for her compelling depiction of the female experience in African society and, in particular, her native Nigeria. Along with Bessie Head, Ama Ata Aidoo, and fellow

Nigerian Flora Nwapa, Emecheta is credited with establishing an important female presence in the previously male-dominated literature of modern Africa. Salman Rushdie has argued that the nostalgia prevalent in British culture less than a decade after *Second-Class Citizen's* publication worked to filter cultural memory of state racism and misogyny. A 1980s spate of screen versions of fiction detailing Britain's imperial apex precipitates Rushdie's argument that the populist style of these adaptations is symptomatic of a broader imperialist nostalgia: "there can be little doubt that in Britain today the refurbishment of the Empire's tarnished image is under way . . . exemplified by the huge success of these fictions, [which] is the artistic counterpart of the rise of conservative ideologies in modern Britain" (91-2). If Rushdie is correct in his contention that such cultural productions cater to a nostalgia induced by Britain's proverbial post imperial hangover, then the issue becomes how fiction might more responsibly represent the past. One way of countering the "Raj revivalism" that Rushdie inveighs against would be to dismiss it altogether as Owen Hatherley does in his reading of "austerity nostalgia." But rather than see it as an index of cultural forgetting, Jennifer Wenzel's concept of "anti-imperialist nostalgia" (7) presents another way to refract nostalgia away from such conservative ends.¹⁹ Wenzel warns against dismissing cultural archives of colonialism tout court, articulating instead a nuanced ethics of reinterpreting such documentation for political purposes:

[a]nti-imperialist nostalgia is a longing for what never was, yet a longing that is fully cognizant that its object of desire is one of the 'ways it could have gone' but did not. This cognizance involves a confrontation with the forces that obstructed that lost future, a confrontation that has the potential to 'immunize' . . . one from or mobilize resistance to similar forces in the present. (16)

This formulation provides a means of critically re-reading the past in order to make it serve as a resource for present political problems, a recapitulation that transforms nostalgia into a powerful tool of historical critique. Wenzel echoes

the evenhandedness of Brown's effort to critique identity politics without dismissing the substance of its various constituent appeals; moving past the melancholia of wounded attachments, anti-imperialist nostalgia seeks out latent critical utility in the kind of political projects often thought of as minor, tarnished, or unfinished. For an anti-imperialist nostalgic interpretation of the welfare state's legacy, displaying the necessary "cognizance" involves attending to the very real discordances between the welfare state's theoretical promise to provide a social safety net for all, and the sobering reality of its structural discriminations on the bases of race and gender.

Second-Class Citizen suggests by extension that only by making difference a central legislative priority can a remodeled welfare state avoid reproducing the burdens on migrant women like Adah that it would ideally alleviate.

CONCLUSION

From the reading of African women writer's novels it brings out the complexities of gender politics, problematizing both the universal and particular aspects of women's oppression. Africans are receivers as well as makers of theory. Cultural tenets associated with social and sexual relationships should be considered in understanding texts by women writers of Africa and the contradictory gender roles they may depict. The issues involved are not usually separated, but problematized as different facets of women's struggle against patriarchal oppression. African women writers reinscribe other African women's protests through fiction. Since the women for whom they speak are already fully aware of their predicament, they use writing to demand social changes through concerted efforts

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