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AFRICAN FEMINISTS TOWARDS THE POLITICS OF EMPOWERMENT

Meyre Ivone da SILVA¹

- RESUMO: Esta pesquisa objetiva analisar a literatura das mulheres africanas como uma forma de resistência às estruturas que oprimem as mulheres e impedem o desenvolvimento econômico no continente africano, ou seja, o autoritarismo do patriarcado africano, as influências da cultura ocidental e o neocolonialismo, trazendo à luz o tema de um movimento feminista africano que propõe a libertação da África e das mulheres africanas.
- PALAVRAS-CHAVE: estudos de gênero, literatura feminina africana, literatura pós-colonial.

For a long time African women writers have been invisible from what is characterized today as African literature or Postcolonial literature. Their works were excluded from African literary criticism, or the African literary canon. As Lloyd Brown states: “the women writers of Africa are the other voices, the unheard voices rarely discussed and seldom accorded space in the repetitive anthologies and the predictably male-oriented studies in this field” (BROWN, 1981, p. 3). Brown also points out that this “male-oriented” and exclusivist criticism on the part of Africans and other black Africanists has determined what constitutes African literature: “Those critics and anthologists have treated the African subject as an exclusively male product” (BROWN, 1981, p. 5). There are some reasons which contributed to the African women’s exclusion from the African literary canon. The first reason is the low number of African women writers when compared with their male counterparts. Brown attributes this imbalance to a truism in modern African history that women did not have the same educational opportunities, then fewer acquired literacy or university education that have been prerequisites for writing in European languages.

Carole Boyce Davis in her essay “Feminist Consciousness” also remarks on the African women’s role as subject to interconnected

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forms of oppression: to the racism of colonialism and to indigenous and foreign structures of domination. Davies points out that the colonial policies combined with indigenous attitudes contribute to denying African women access to education.

According to Davies, the early criticism of African literature was from European male academicians who used to do their evaluation through their western male-oriented point of view.

African women's voices have been unheard, thus the images of African woman in pre-colonial as well as in colonial periods were mostly presented by African men who were in charge to write the African literature and through their patriarchal view to tell their female counterparts experience. We should bear in mind that "much of this early literature deals with the social and political implications of colonialism and man's struggles within, and away from its confines. Women are usually made peripheral to all of that and function either as symbols or as instruments for the male hero's working out of his problems" (DAVIES, 1986, p. 3).

One of the most well-known works in Anglophone African literature is Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Achebe's story is set in the pre-colonial Africa and aims to tell the consequences of imperialism, from the disempowered's perspective; in this case, the African people. Achebe's hope was to restore the African people's dignity through the recreation of pre-colonial social, political, and religious institutions. Florence Stratton points out that if the aim of Achebe was to restore the humanity of African people as well as their dignity, the author succeeded only in relation to the restoration of the African man's dignity because he didn't have the same intention in relation to the African women. She writes:

The status of women in Umuofia is very low: They are mere objects articulated among their menfolk, willed for example, by a father to a son as part of an estate, or traded for a bag full of cowries . . . Women are systematically excluded from the political, economic, the judicial, and even the discourse life of the community. This is inculcated not only through the composition of the governing council of elders, the *ndichie*, or the membership of the powerful egwuegwu cult which is, in both cases, all male (STRATTON, 1994, p. 25).

Stratton points out that African women were excluded from

Achebe's reconstruction of African dignity in the pre-colonial times because they are represented as paralysed, mute, and objects of trade. Then, one of the tasks of African women writers is to refute works like Achebe's, and start to present "an alternative view of colonization and of African society, one which challenges underlying assumption that things could not fall apart for African women because they never had been and would be together" (STRATTON, 1994, p. 38).

The misrepresentation of African women in the male literature or their invisibility from the African literary canon has nothing peculiar because they have played relevant roles in the oral tradition.

In an article entitled "African Women and African Classics", Okell Oculli shows her preoccupation with the small number of African women writers. She argues that women have been the foundation of traditional African literature, and the role of African men in this world was as "consumers, enchanted listeners, and learners" (OCULLI, 1976, p. 7). She ends her essay challenging African women to "return to their historic position of power as the creators and carriers of classical literature of African descent" (OCULLI, 1976, p. 23).

Considering that Oculli wrote that article almost three decades ago it should be noted that in fact African women writers have already started gaining power in the literary arena. Such feminists as Ama Ata Aidoo, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie and others propose to reveal the inequalities of pre-colonial and post-colonial Africa.

Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, a Nigerian feminist writer believes that the commitments of the African women writer to the empowering of the African woman is to deconstruct the African woman stereotyped images and fight against several forms of oppression that women still suffer in Africa. The first relevant aspect towards a politics of empowerment for African women in Ogundipe-Leslie's view is the demystification of certain male stereotypes of the African woman as goddess or as Supreme Mother, self-sacrificing and suffering willingly and silently. An African woman is frequently seen as fertile mother of the nation, an image that African male writers have contributed to disseminating.

This mystification of African mothers is due to the importance of motherhood in Africa. This theme is of extreme relevance to African societies, so as a result, it will be present in most of the works by African women. Although motherhood is not an exclusive

concern of black women, it has been given a different relevance by black women and mainly by African women due to the imposition of mothering in Africa.

African people's ideas about African motherhood emanating from African societies have been quite different from the West. The concept of motherhood has been of central importance in the traditions of people of Africa. F. K. Buah in *A History of Ghana*, posits the importance of motherhood in African societies from a patriarchal point of view. According to him, a "fruitful" marriage should have children, if not it must be considered as a "non-blessed" marriage and most of the times the result of it could be divorce. In most African societies the woman that cannot have children, "the barren woman" is seen as evil. Instead, the woman who has many children acquires a higher status and is considered blessed. In African societies the mother is respected and mythologized, the woman generally acquires a higher status if she has children, preferably sons. Motherhood is a theme that is present in several of Aidoo's stories, she deals with this imposition of the African societies on African women.

In the Nigerian Igbo society, mothers and wives play contradictory roles, the man who worships his mother is the same one who despises his woman. A. P. Egejuru states, in her essay *Paradox of Womanbeing* that in Igbo cosmology the mother is compared to earth the woman's role as the giver of life. "Not only does a mother give birth to life, she nourishes the baby with her milk just as the earth does to all living things that she gives birth to" (EGEJURU, 1997, p. 13).

African patriarchy has relegated to African women the mythological role of mother, even the women who have fought in revolutions were cut out of the political arena or from full national participation after independence. According to Elleke Boehmer, despite the promises of national freedom, women were excluded from full national participation on an equal footing with men. She states that, "Mother Africa may have been declared free, but mothers of Africa remained manifestly oppressed" (BOHEMER, 1991, p. 7). In the nationalistic rhetoric, those nationalists claimed masculine identity as the norm and the woman as just the bearer of the sons of the nation with a valuable place in the construction of the nation. As the novelist Mariama Ba vehemently states:

The nostalgic songs dedicated to African mothers which express the anxieties of men concerning Mother Africa are no longer enough for us. The black woman in African literature must be given the dimension that her role in the liberation struggles next to men has proven to be hers, the dimension which coincides with her proven contribution to the economic development of our country (INNES, 1991, p. 130).

In this statement Mariama Ba refers to the Francophone Negritude Movement, whose president was Leopold Sedar Senghor, President of Senegal from 1960 till 1980. The Negritude school had its origin in a group of black students and intellectuals in Paris in the late thirties and early forties, a group which included the Martiniquan poet and politician Aimee Cesaire and also a Guyanan poet Leon Damas. In 1945 Senghor published his first volume of poetry which was a landmark in modern francophone African literature. According to Stratton, in presenting Negritude in his poetry, Senghor employs a “trope”: “the embodiment of Africa in the figure of a woman” (STRATTON, 1994, p. 39).

For Stratton, Senghor employs a Manichean-allegory in his Negritude poems, *i.e.*, the man-woman allegory, which represents dominance-subjection, mind-body, subject-object. She points out that when the male African author, a Western-educated intellectual, Senghor, turns his attention to the woman, he describes her lyrically as a young girl or a fertile mother, like the African landscape he discovers and explores. This is done along two different lines: first, there is the one of the idealized, romanticized pre-colonial culture; second, there is the more politically loaded nationalist line of the recapture of Mother Africa, the new nation. In both cases the relationship is based on possession. As she points out,

She is pure physicality, always beautiful and often naked. He is constituted as a writing subject, a producer of art and of socio-political visions; her status is that of an aesthetic/sexual object. She takes the form either of a young girl, nubile and erotic, or of a fecund nurturing mother. The poetry celebrates his intellect at the same time as it pays tribute to her body, which is frequently associated with the African landscape that is his to explore and discover. As embodying mother she gives the trope a name: the Mother Africa (STRATTON, 1994, p. 41).

The author is a male who represents the national subject while a feminized Africa becomes object of his gaze. He is the active subject, the new citizen, while she is the passive object, the nation.

Abiola Irele claims that *Femme Noire* is a hymn of praise to an African woman, but it is not an individual woman, it is a symbolic one. She is a kind of spiritual entity, she is the poet's mother and Africa itself. As Irele remarks, "The woman addressed is not an individual but a symbolic African woman, incarnating the enduring qualities of the race. She is woman as lover, who calls forth erotic feelings, as mother, who evokes filial sentiments, and as Africa itself, source of the race and its organic bond with the life of the universe" (IRELE, 1977, p. 99).

Stratton suggests that the Mother Africa trope also legitimizes the exclusion of African women from the literary tradition: "for the author, too, is identified as male. He is the subject-artist, she is the aesthetic object, the repository of his meaning" (STRATTON, 1994, p. 52). Thus, African women writers are refuting the trope of "Mother Africa" in order to assume their roles as subjects.

One of the main concerns of African women writers is to fight against some African traditions that still oppress women. According to Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, one of the most relevant forms of oppression is the African tradition that most times empowers the man and disempowers the woman. Within traditions, marriage has been very oppressive for African women. First the woman loses status by being married because in the indigenous systems, which are still at the base of the society, the woman as daughter or sister has greater status and more rights within her birth lineages. Within marriage, she becomes a possession; she is voiceless and often rightless in her husband's family except, in some groups, through what accrues to her through children (OGUNDIPE-LESLIE, 1994, p. 75).

Another traditional aspect discussed by Ogundipe-Leslie is the bride price. According to African traditions the African man who wanted to marry a woman should give her family compensation: dowry or the bridewealth. This material compensation given to the family could be in gifts, like bulls, cows, goats or in money. In Ogundipe-Leslie's opinion, "the bride price promotes the commodification of women" (OGUNDIPE-LESLIE, 1994, p. 211).

Taking into consideration the singularity of some situations in

Africa, as for example, some oppressive indigenous traditions and the history of colonization, the politics of empowerment for the contemporary African woman proposed by Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, Ama Ata Aidoo and other African feminist differ from the one proposed by the western feminists. In spite of the fact that African women recognize the relevance of western feminism in unveiling the disempowered situation of women under the patriarchal system, and although they acknowledge the influence of the feminist movement, they also perceive its limitations in coping with the reality of African women. Nevertheless, they propose an alternative movement which will take into consideration Africa's history of colonization and Imperialism, African traditions and the necessity of not separating oneself from the African male in the reconstruction of Africa.

African feminists recognize the necessity of constructing an oppositional thought in order to empower oppressed men and women or the whole oppressed society. African female writers remarks that African feminism is a movement that seeks the liberation of Africa from external powers.

African feminism should search for justice not only for African women but for African people. It is an inclusive movement which integrates the whole African people into the construction of the African continent. It takes into account needs and goals that arise from the particular realities of women's lives in African societies and the necessity of a reconstruction of Africa. Phaniel Egejuru and Ketu Katrak in their book *Womanbeing and African Literature* have the following to say: "Women's issues constitute important aspects of working towards a most just and humane future for African society" (EGEJURU; KATRAK, 1997, p. 9). Nevertheless, this is a discussion that goes beyond gender and proposes a deconstruction of western ideology, and a resistance to imperialism and/or neo-imperialism.

Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie in her book *Re-Creating Ourselves* makes a brief summary of African feminists concerns. She comments that African women have six mountains on their back and it is important to get rid of them. Those metaphorical mountains represent the situations that contribute to the African woman's subjugation. Her proposal in this work is to show the need of African women to move those mountains which means to overcome oppression. Paraphrasing Mao-Tse Tung, Ogundipe-Leslie describes the

mountains that African women are carrying on their back: “The first one is oppression from outside (colonialism and neo-colonialism); the second one is from traditional structures; the third one is her backwardness; the fourth is man; the fifth is her color; her race; and the sixth is herself” (OGUNDIPE-LESLIE, 1994, p. 28). In considering the first mountain as oppression, Leslie explains how colonialism reinforced and introduced other forms of oppression towards the African woman. As she remarks: “The colonialism systems negatively encouraged or brought to the fore the traditional ideologies of the patriarchy of male superiority which originally existed in African societies. Thus colonialism has brought out the basic sexist tendencies in precapitalist Africa. It has calcified existing ones and introduced others” (OGUNDIPE-LESLIE, 1994, p. 30). The heritage of tradition, the second mountain, was brought from the past. She posits that from this traditional past comes the notion that the man has the power to control the woman's body. Due to this control the woman was imposed to practices like genital mutilation. As she states: “Some men also argue that genital mutilation was not wicked or sadistic since it was a societal or parental effort to do the best they thought fit for their daughters” (OGUNDIPE-LESLIE, 1994, p. 35). In terms of the other mountains Leslie provides a brief explanation: the third is the backwardness of the African woman which has its cause in colonialism and neo-colonialism and it comes through the poverty and ignorance introduced by the systems. The fourth mountain is the African men that have occupied a position of superiority over women for centuries. Her race is stated as the fifth mountain because it is considered as an important issue for African people that have to fight against racist ideology that is impregnated in the New World order. Nevertheless for Ogundipe-Leslie, the most important mountain is the sixth one; herself. The author remarks on the feeling of inferiority that was impregnated in African woman through the ideologies of patriarchy and gender. As she points out,

Women are shackled by their own negative self-image, by centuries of the interiorization of the ideologies of patriarchy and gender hierarchy. Their own reactions to objectives problems therefore are often self-defeating and self-crippling. Woman reacts with fear, dependency complexes and attitudes to please and cajole where more self-assertive actions are needed (OGUNDIPE-LESLIE,

1994, p. 36).

Carole Boyce-Davies provides a summary of the concerns of African women writers. She argues that a genuine African feminism should firstly recognize the necessity of a common struggle with African men in order to reconstruct Africa. She states that their movement is not “antagonistic to men but it challenges them to be aware of certain silent aspects of women’s subjugation” (DAVIES, 1986, p. 9). The second aspect for an African feminist consciousness is to recognize that there are/were some inequalities in African societies and the colonialism introduced others. The third aspect should be the recognition that African societies are ancient societies, then African women’s issues should be analysed historically. The fourth aspect should be the analysis of African societies, retaining what is of value to African women and rejecting those aspects that work to their detriment.

The politics of empowerment for African women proposed by the African feminists is a movement which searches for the full participation of African women in African societies’ issues because they defend that there will be no liberation for Africa without women’s liberation.

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- *ABSTRACT: This research aims at analysing literature produced by African women as means of resistance to those structures oppressing women and hindering the economical development in the African continent, i.e. the authoritarianism of African patriarchy, the influences of Western culture and the neocolonialism, bringing forward the theme of an African feminist movement which proposes the liberation of Africa and African women.*
- *KEYWORDS: Gender studies, african women’s literature, post-colonial literature.*

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