

A WOMANIST APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF FASSINOUS MODUKPE RÊVE BRISÉ AND ENFANT D'AUTRUI, FILLE DE PERSONNE

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Abstract

The question of gender seems to be a topic of discussion in modern literary works by African writers; male and female. This study, using the feminist/ womanist theories examines the womanist traits in two of Adelaide Fassinou's novels: *Modukpè, le rêve brisé* and *Enfant d'Autrui, Fille de Personne*. The characters who are victims of oppression did not completely make a clean break with their husbands (patriarchy) because they felt they still needed them and this is what womanism advocates-man and woman complimenting each other in the bid to eradicate oppression in all ramifications.

Introduction

Gender dissonance seems to be a current issue in modern literary works by African writers. Both male and female writers tend to write in defense of their gender, hence most male authors seem to discriminate against female characters while female authors do same against male characters in their respective works. This is usually done by assigning roles and qualities that either enhance or belittle the character depending on the author's perspective or approach to gender issues. Examples of male texts where female are belittled are Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* where the women are practically invisible (Okonkwo's wives) and *No Longer at Ease* where Clara, the heroine is portrayed an outcast (Osu caste). As for female texts where men are belittled, we have Calixthe Beyala's *C'est le Soleil qui m'a Brulé* where Betty, a prostitute and mother of Ateba (the protagonist) controls her numerous male friends. Another example is Beyala's *Maman a un Amant*, where M'am becomes the bread winner of the Taore's family.

Consequently, critics of literary works appear to see gender issues as synonymous with feminism which most of them see as a battle for supremacy between male and his female counterpart. Meanwhile, contemporary issues around us reveal that feminism, encompasses all issues related to gender. Hence, gender dissonance could be said to be more than the so called battle for supremacy. In this work, we hope to look at the feminist/womanist traits in *Modukpe le rêve brisé* and *Enfant d' Autrui, Fille de Personne* by Adelaide Fassinou, a female writer from the Republic of Bénin

Feminism

In an attempt to explain what Feminism is all about, West (1982) and Humm (1995) agree that attempting to define the term poses some form of difficulty. However, Humm surmises that all feminists share a "woman-centred

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perspective". As for Redmond (2006) and Wikipedia (2007) Feminism is concerned with the experiences of women and is focused on the liberation of women from a perceived subordination to men. While Encarta Dictionary (2006) insists that it is the movement committed to securing and defending rights and opportunities for women that are equal to those of men.

As a philosophy and movement, feminism in the modern sense is often dated to the Enlightenment with such thinkers as Lady Mary Montagu and the Matquis de Condoreet Championing Women's education. (Redmond, 2006). Redmond further claimed that in Middleburg (a city in the South of Dutch Republic), the first scientific society for women was founded in the year 1785. Journals for women, which focused on issues like science became popular during this period.

In its own contribution to the origin of feminism, The World Book Encyclopedia posits that *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792) of Mary Wollstonecraft is one of the first works that can unambiguously be called feminist. Kirby et al (2000), affirm that Wollstonecraft's work which at the time amounted to little than a revolutionary statement attracted ferocious criticism from the British Conservative establishment. But her ideas were welcomed by supporters of the revolution in France, even though most did little to practically advance the cause.

According to Ogini (1996), feminism became pronounced in Europe and America around 1800 at a time when women were regarded as inferior to men and this was documented in law. Ogini further states that only the few rich ones were accorded voting rights and they were barred from professional carriers. The years 1800-1900 brought about remarkable changes in the status of women who then won a good number of rights for themselves including legal and economic rights. The suffragettes/suffragists (the militant ones) fought desperately for their rights resulting in granting of voting rights to women in 1920 thereby making the two sexes politically equal in the West.

Historically, feminist thought and activity can be divided into two waves. The first wave, which began in about 1800 and lasted until the 1930s, was largely concerned with gaining equal rights between women and men. The second wave, which began in the late 1960s, has continued to fight for equality but has also developed a range of theories and approaches that stress the difference between women and men and that draw attention to the specific needs of women (Microsoft Encarta 2006).

In the light of this discussion, Adebayo (1996) observes that, in literature and criticism, feminism, is asserting, describing and documenting women's experiences.

Feminist Writing

Feminist writing especially bring to limelight some aspects of women's conditions and denounces the negative experiences such as rape

Between 1960s and 1980s, period which represent the first phase of feminism, African Feminism was involved in documenting some negative aspects of both African and imported cultural and religious practices which retard the African woman's full development. These are levirate, inhuman widowhood rites and practices, forced and child marriages, female circumcision, infibulation, polygamy, and unequal access to education among others.

Womanism

Since inception, feminism has failed to cater for the peculiarities of black females and other women of colour. Though it's advocate claim to cater for the needs of women globally, In actual fact, it concentrated on the needs of middle class white women in Britain and America. In the writings of white feminists, Hooks identified racism, claiming that in these writings, it was as if black and lower class women did not exist. In a bid to evolve a theory that caters for the needs of black women, the term "womanism" was coined by Alice Walker..

In her search for a term that is peculiar to the African Woman, Hudson Kleems (1991) came up with the idea of Africana-womanism.

Important Issues Discussed In Womanist Writings include cases of racism, sexism and classist issues. One major difference between womanism and feminism is that the womanist writer believes in working together with their menfolk for they are of the opinion that emancipation of the black woman is in attainable without the emancipation of the black race. Therefore, to them, racist and classist oppression is accorded more attention than sexist oppression. Also, family relationship and motherhood are given prominent place in womanist writings. Womanists celebrate motherhood insisting that mothers be treated with more respect while feminism on the other hand view motherhood as placing limitations on women.

Women from Africa and other third world countries embraced womanism because it is an ideology that defines their experience. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi also used the term to describe African female experience. She also posits the theory of African womanism which according to her treat female experieces that are peculiar to the African woman such as in-law problems, older women oppressing co-wives/younger wives and lack of solidarity among women. Some Africans still identify with feminism not seeing it as an import from abroad which caters only for the realities of the white woman. They are Ama Ata-Aidoo, Abena Busis and Aduke Adebayo among others. While some are still looking for a term that is completely indigenously African and, which will take care of our cultural realities, Achonolu posists the concept of motherism as an African alternative to feminism, since according to her, motherhood is central to African female experience.

Modukpè, le rève brisé
SYNOPSIS

(Adelaide Fassinou)

With the aid of the auto-biographical style and fictional form, Adelaide Fassinou recounts the experience of mother and daughter who are victims of patriarchal deceitfulness. Modukpè, the heroine lives in a society where the culture and the law are in favor of men. Twice she falls victim of patriarchal deceitfulness. Robert, the first man in her life abandons her when she becomes pregnant for him. More than a decade after, she marries Freddy a medical doctor and delivers a baby girl. Since she has just a child for Freddy, he engages in extra-marital relationship. Dukpè gets wind of the affair when her rival becomes pregnant for Freddy's third child after giving birth to two sons.

Dukpè's mother becomes a victim of patriarchal deceitfulness because of her naivety. Before going into marriage with Dukpè's father, she believes he is single until she becomes pregnant for her first child. Jean Paul's (Dukpè's father) first wife returns from the village to assert her authority as the first wife.

Different types of oppression abound in this novel. Such as; psychological, verbal, mental, physical and cultural.

Psychological Oppression

In spite of the fact that Mother and daughter detest polygamy, they accept what befall them as their destiny. We hear Dukpè's mother lament when recounting her experience to her daughter.

...il ne m'avait pas dit qu'il était marié! S'il avait avoué dès le départ, j'aurais mis beaucoup de distance entre nous, et jamais je n'aurais été sa seconde épouse. Lorsque j'appris la nouvelle, c'était trop tard ; j'attendais déjà mon fils aîné (13)

...he never told me that he was married ! If he had confessed right from the beginning, I would have put a great distance between us, and never, would I have been his second wife. When I got the information, it was too late; I was already expecting my eldest son.

(Translation is ours).

Dukpè also laments when Freddy continues to stay away from home and spend more time with his second wife: "A mon âge, où irai – je encore.... Je suis chez moi, et l'autre habite là où Freddy l' a mise"... (117)

"At my age where will I go again... I am in my house and the other lives where Freddy placed her"

(Translation is ours)

Dukpè, though unhappy, decides to come to terms with the sharing pattern associated with polygamy:

Il avait éloigné de moi, car il était toujours fourré chez l'autre, Mélanie bien sur...Maintenant, il avait instauré le système de « tours » comme cela se pratique dans les foyers musulmans polygames. Mais nous n'étions pas musulmans, Freddy, Mélanie et moi; pourtant il m'avait fait comprendre que de plus en plus, cela se passe ainsi dans plusieurs ménages de nos jours. Et puis; la première épouse, usée par la vicissitudes du temps comme je l'étais, devait faire preuve d'ouverture d'esprit et d'accepter de partager plus ouvertement son époux avec une autre (125)

He had stayed away from me, for he always stuck to the other's house, Mélanie of course... Now he had instituted the 'turns' system as practiced in polygamous Muslim homes. But we were not Muslims, Freddy, Melanie and I; nevertheless, he had made me understand again and again that, that is the practice today in several homes. And besides; the first wife, worn out by the vicissitudes of time like I was, must be open minded and accept to share her husband freely with another.

(Translation is ours).

Verbal Oppression

In page 48, when Dukpè tells Robert that she is pregnant for him, the latter retorts: "Tu vas me faire le plaisir de sauter rapidement cette grossesse" "You are going to do me the favour of removing that pregnancy fast" When Dukpè's mother sends for Robert to ascertain his paternity of Dukpè's pregnancy, Robert describes Dukpè thus:

« ...fille dévoyée qui ne pensait qu'à envoyer en l'air » ne prenait pas ses études au sérieux et donnait l'impression d'avoir découvert un mari tout fait qui s'occupera plus tard d'elle et la fera vivre une vie de bourgeoisie oisive (86).

"...a delinquent who only thought of idling away" who didn't take her studies seriously and gave the impression of having found a ready made husband who will later take care of her and make her live an idle bourgeois life"

Mental Oppression

Five years after the delivery of Sèdolo (Dukpè's son), Robert reappears to claim paternity of the child. To make Dukpè release the boy to his father, her mother says: "Un garçon a besoin de son père... un enfant a besoin de ses deux parents... mais un garçon a surtout besoin de son père pour l'initier à sa vie d'homme" (95 – 98)"A boy needs his father... a child needs both parents... but a boy especially needs his father in order to initiate him into a man's life".(Translation is ours)

Dukpè refuses to be mentally brain washed by her mother and disagrees with her philosophy that women are wagon pushed by men:

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Je n'étais pas d'accord avec cette vision des choses... Mais comment faire comprendre à cette vieille femme que, si elle a été un wagon arrimé à un train qui la poussait, aujourd' hui, moi, je suis le train ou plutôt le wagon de tête qui pousse ma vie. Comment lui faire accepter l'idée que, aujourd' hui, nous les femmes ne voulons pas être de wagon qu'on pousse, ni du bétail qu'on y entrepose.(104)

I disagreed with that manner of reasoning... But how do I make this old woman understand that, if she has been a wagon stowed to a train that drove it, today, I am the train or rather the principal wagon driving my life. How can I bring her to come to terms with the fact that, today, women neither want to be wagons driven by people any longer, nor cattle stored therein (Translation is ours)

Physical Oppression

When Robert denies responsibility of Dukpè's pregnancy, his attitude infuriates Yabo, Dukpè's younger sister who insults Robert in return. The infuriated Robert rewards Yabo with a slap. (73). Dukpè pays Robert a visit to plead with him to accept responsibility of her pregnancy but Robert rapes her in return.

Cultural Oppression

When Dukpè finally releases her son to his father (Robert) to live with him and his family in Europe, she writes to the latter:

...Depuis le temps que tu réclame la garde de cet enfant, huit années sont passées...Tu le voulais auprès de toi, car la loi t'y autorise à cet age, m'avais- tu fait comprendre. La loi ! la Loi ! Est-ce que tu lui a raconté un peu notre histoire, à cette loi dont tu réclames le secours aujourd' hui ?

...It is already eight years ago since you demanded custody of this child... you made me understand that you wanted him to be with you, because he had attained the age in which the law authorizes you to claim him. The law! The law! Have you told the law a little about us, that is, that law in which you seek refuge today? Robert uses the culture and legal law to get what he wants from Dukpè, that is, the custody of the child he once rejected.

Enfant D'autrui Fille De Personne

Synopsis

Fassinou recounts the experience and treatment of women in a patriarchal society. She exposes and condemns man's masochistic and egoistic nature in his relationship with women.

The nature of oppression noticeable in this novel include verbal, Economic, psychological and physical among others. There are also examples of motherhood and solidarity among women.

Verbal Oppression

This is evident in the utterances of Ananou's farther in-law at the point of getting married to his son Hodou:

Rien que des mâles,... Tu nous feras la fille lorsque je t'en donnerai l'ordre. Si tu as la malchance de ne fabriquer que des femelles à mon enfant, je te renverrai comme une malpropre. (11)

Only male children, ... you will only give us a female child when I order you to do so. If you are unlucky to produce only female children for my son, I will send you packing

(Translation is ours)

Economic Oppression

Hodou Rogatien, a rich land owner/ farmer has all his children working in the family land and living with him in the same compound. This includes his married male children. When Ananou advices that the male children with families be given plots of land in order to be less dependent on their father, the later will not hear of it and considers the suggestion as a sacrilege.

Hodou Rogatien avait appelé a témoin tous les dieux de la collectivité en disant que sa femme voulait hâter sa mort, puisqu'elle préconisait le partage du patrimoine ancestrale de son vivant...Pour Hodou Rogatien, il n'était pas question de libérer son troupeau de mâles sur lequel il veillait, comme un bon patriarche souveille sa descendance (12)

Houdou Rogatien had called all the gods of the community as witnesses, saying that his wife wanted to hasten his death, since she advocated the sharing of the ancestral inheritance in his life time... For Hodou Rogatien, he will not succumb to the idea of liberating his flock of male children on whom he watched over, like a good patriarch watches over his descendance.

Psychological Oppression

Cica and koko (a medical student from her village) love each other and hope to get married after their university education.

Since Cica is against pre- marital sex, Koko enters into a relationship with Emma a colleague at the medical school who offers her body freely to him. Cica learns of the affair and is heart broken. This almost breaks her relationship with Koko. When Koko makes up his mind to break with Emma, the latter attempts suicide and undergoes treatment at the teaching hospital (110 – 118)

Physical Oppression

This summarizes the unpleasant experience of Dodji an orphan, who lives in the village with her grand mother. One of her grand mother's sons (a

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father of six) who visit his old mother monthly rapes Dodji at age twelve and continues to assault her sexually until she becomes pregnant. He gives her some drugs to abort the pregnancy and this almost cost her life. (163 – 164)

Solidarity Among Women

Cica visits Emma in the hospital after her suicide attempt. They become friends and Cica speak in favour of female solidarity:

Pourquoi nous femmes devons-nous tant souffrir par la faute des hommes? Après moi, c'est maintenant ton tour... Ah ! les hommes, ils n'ont vraiment plus rien dans le coeur !

Why most women suffer so much because of men's fault ? After me, it's now your turn... Ah! Men they are really heartless

Motherhood

Ananou exhibits traits of motherhood when she adopts two orphans from the village and gives them what they lack-motherly love. She does the same for Kemi, her apprentice who resides with her.

Conclusion

The two selected novels of Fassinou, that is, *Modukpè, le rêve brisé* and *Enfant d' Autrui, Fille de Personne* have been carefully chosen because of the way the author treat issues that are of paramount concern to womanism and African womanism.

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