



CONCEPTS OF MARGINALITY AND APPROPRIATION IN THE WRITINGS OF AFRICAN WOMEN WRITERS

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ABSTRACT

The experience of inequality in status, technically designed as marginality, among has been a part of the most poignant pictures drawn in fiction. Inequality generally creates divisions of high or low, privileged or underprivileged, with central or marginal status given to such people in the society/community of which these classes form a part. Such divisions are structures within which numerous atrocities are often perpetrated. It is usual for the former to keep the later parts of society under some kind of hold, restricting their normal activities of life. It is the lot of the underprivileged to be relegated to the fringes of all meaningful interaction-taking place around them and results in a sense of deprivation. From this the sufferer(s) acquire a sense of loss, maladjustment and directionless.

INTRODUCTION

The story of inequality in human society is not new to this generation or this century. Privileging a particular individual, group, class, race or gender has been the practice of the human species from time immemorial. This tradition is mainly based on the politics of power, that is to say, those who have some form of strength or power usually exercise it to suppress the less strong or the less powerful. Power can take many forms, some over such as the concept of the ruler and his inviolable sway over the rule or, more subtle forms as the power of the mind, psychology or conditioning where even an apparently weak person can exercise power over people stronger than him. This can be done just by following the pattern set up by social practices and social conditioning. This can be seen in the case of gender privileging, specially in such cases where sometimes men who are weak-willed by nature and dominated by other men, exercise their authority over the women in their lives just because the norms of certain societies assign them the role of the privileged gender whose right it is to oppress the so-called weaker sex.

As life became more technologically advanced, people had more time and inclination to think about life and its experiences, interpret their observations and activities, thus coming up with newer ways of looking at the human situation as a whole. In this process, the concept of marginality became glaringly obvious because at some point or the other, marginality was the content of the experience of almost all the people in the world. Either occupying the central



or the marginal space, each individual is aware of, consciously or unconsciously, that there are spaces in social life, which are relegated to the margins of existence, and these margins are almost always the result of some unfair practices or the other.

A wealth of post-colonial literature deals with the margins, which the colonizer forced on the races they had controlled for centuries all over the world. But within the colonies there was another subtle, age-old marginal practices that was gender oriented and which the male artists could not do complete justice to. When women came to the forefront of creative self-expression, making their thoughts and experiences available to a large body of readers, this aspect of the experience of women became well established.

Needless to say, the first act of self-expression by women, after their acknowledgement that their condition is marginal was a positive act of appropriation or at least a beginning of it. To be aware of inequality is the first step towards attempting to remove it. So women began writing with a view to bring about major social upheavals in order to help them move out of their confining margins and glide inch by inch to occupy the central space. This task of appropriation was not an easy one because the conditioning of centuries had made them blind to the possibility of change in their life and experiences. The first need, therefore, was not to change the actual situation as much as to change the mindset, which considered marginally of women as the most natural condition.

It is from this point of view that the writings of African women novelists acquire a special significance. In terms of feminist criticism the concept of marginality is used to refer to the relegation of women to margins as a result of typically gender oriented conditioning which is an inseparable part of patriarchy. The situation of women in family, society and in institutions such as marriage, government and public life is often marginal because they are kept away from the mainstream. In terms of religion, language, thought and work too, women have often been segregated from the mainstream and forced into the margins. From the point of view of women, this was mainly an evil resulting from forced ignorance, the moment they learnt to think independently for themselves they realized the position they were forced to confine themselves to and therefore began to make concerted efforts to free themselves from the restrictions of the margins and merge into the mainstream of human life and activity.

African women novelists who have given vivid portrayal to the “social and material reality” of their women specially through the experiences of their characters who come under the category of marginalization is indicative of the importance the concept has come to occupy in the later half of twentieth century when such women’s voices were more often heard and acknowledged.

Thus marginality is a concept which functions across disciplines and is not limited to any single dimension of human experience. Politics, sociology, anthropology, psychology,



philosophy and literature are all concerned with the various aspects of marginality. Gender is therefore, a major factor about marginality. The position of women in general who constitute the entire place of home, face many problems of environmental changes. They were initially denied the tools of self-expression in art and literature. They were often assigned a marginal status by virtue of both race and gender. Autobiographical writings by women all over the world, especially by Black women, are revelation of how speech was stifled in the times of oppression. When the printed word became available to women, their limited discourse expanded and they began to articulate issues of home and exile. Home is often portrayed as a place of alienation and displacement in such writings. The family is sometimes situated as a site of oppression for women. The mystified notions of home and family are purged of their romantic, idealized moorings, to speak of pain, movement, difficulty, learning and love in complex ways.

The strong expression on the subject are the novels where women speak about their own situation and do not depend on the male voice to defend them. This is more significant because however astute the male artist may be, he can not empathize fully with the situation of women in margins. So Nwapa Emecheta and Bessie Head together with other women artists all over the world have taken it upon themselves to give a more realistic picture of the perspective of women and other marginalized groups through their works. Though marginality is the major thrust in these novels, there is also a suggested solution at the way out of the situation. All the circumstances associated with marginality are dealt with and in each of these cases, literature especially, is the means through which the artist hopes to point out ways in which such discrimination can come to an end. This in other words, is the concept of appropriation.

Appropriation is a concept that explicates the ability of people to take things, which are suited to them and put it to the best use. In its negative connection, appropriation signifies taking slyly and in an underhand way, that is, misappropriating, often used in connection with public money, etc. But in the present analysis appropriation is a positive act including adaptability, transformation and renewal.

Search for happiness and finding it amid stern adversity is, therefore, the highest mark of appropriation. In the process, the very definition of happiness shifts from rigid, strongly conditioned conformist definitions to totally new, innovative ones.

The African Women novelists are concerned with the concept of marginality not merely as a negative, discriminatory process but also as a positive one though which genuine social transformation is affected. They have tried to use their story as a moral tract to increase the awareness of their readers about the evils of marginal status, which is accorded to some unfortunate individuals and groups, as well as suggest that marginality is the stepping-stone to better experiences in life. There is, in the novels, a strong belief that disadvantages do not



spell end of life, challenge is one way to better one's conditions of existence and the best use of opportunity can be made by only those who have the capacity to make the best use of this opportunity. For a person who has no challenges to face, life is almost a living death. There is nothing to strive towards and nothing to achieve. But for the marginal individual there are endless opportunities to fight with the existing situation and try to make it better.

In the context of diasporic writing African women novelists have made an indelible expressions. Their unheard voices and experiences have enabled them to vent their grievances through their writing. Freedom to express honestly is epitomized in African women writers. The rising trend in African literature is recognizing the freedom of women to express their constraints like marginality and appropriation. The black women express their daily experiences and articulate themselves to express the paradigms set by men and white society. Originally and creativity were cardinal qualities, which enabled them to be recognized globally. All the experiences are associated with marginality in which any form of discrimination can be put to an end. Hence the term 'appropriation' is an act of performing or doing something for one self, it can also be explained as setting aside some social, economic, political and cultural taboos, which were implemented, only for women.

The other side of the coin is that of a woman's personality who has been merely a tool in the social structure of patriarchy. They emphasize the aspects of inequality of opportunity between the sexes. The subservient woman has been replaced by her modern counterpart who is assertive, individual, claiming rights for her own living. The three writers Buchi Emecheta, Bessie Head and Flora Nwapa are the predominant voices in black literature. They are the most authentic female writers at the center with a stamping effect and response from the world. They have been acknowledged and recognized as well for their powerful themes and images as they present in their fictional world.

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