



A BACKGROUND TO THE AFRICAN WOMEN WRITINGS

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ABSTRACT

Literature of the erstwhile colonies written in English has come to occupy a very important position in the arena of world literature today. This illustrates the fact that the experience of being colonized by the British left an indelible mark on the consciousness of the colonized people, which they expressed, most often, in the English language. The impact of the colonial encounter has its positive aspects too, the outstanding literature written in English by non-natives users of English being one of them.

INTRODUCTION

In this connection, mention needs to be made of the African literature written in English, which has a pride of place in the post-colonial literatures. The colonizers convinced the natives that the British were better able to rule their country and cater to the welfare of the natives. The oppression perpetrated by them in the name of betterment of the common people, the discrimination that they practiced, and other aspects of the colonial history found expression in the African novels written during the twentieth century. The majority of writers in this country are men. But there are some exceptional voices of women. These women made themselves hear about the manner in which the colonial times altered their perceptions. It provided them with a language to use for expressing themselves. It also suggested to them themes through which they exercised their creative talents.

The African women writers of fiction today are rather exceptional in many ways. Despite vast differences in traditions and beliefs among African societies, women writers have questioned and defied prevailing traditions. Women writers in Africa have been fewer in number in the past and have published their novels and have received less critical attention than their male counterparts. But women's fiction, which is both emotionally compelling and

KRISHNAMURTI SANGITA K.

DR. ANNIE POTHEN

1Page



artistically perfect, does exist. Gradually today some African women have succeeded in finding publishers and interested readers as well as committed researchers. They have a role as agents of social change through literature. This being finally the aim of all serious literature, African women creative writers have now come to occupy the center stage of activity as far as any meaningful social evolution is concerned.

The women writers present a picture of the life of African women in an intimate and searching way through their fictional writing. Often they show their female protagonists as torn, confused, in a milieu of cross-cultural conflict. This was all due to the impact of colonialism, a rapid socio-economic change that took place on the Dark Continent. Colonial administration was imposed in the late nineteenth century to gain control of the African continent.

At that time, the status of women was held up for questioning. Colonialism was expected to emancipate oppressed women by raising their living and educational standards and freeing them from farm-labor and the oppression of their social customs.

Historically, African women artists have met the demands of social change in both traditional and modern contexts. Whether these artists remain central or marginal to society, they give shape to ideas that illuminate their own psychological, cultural, social and political situations as well as their assessment of global issues. Their works are enlivened with knowledge gained from women's personal experience. They present to the world an exciting new dimension in contemporary art. African women writers have certainly experienced a rapid increase and accelerating respect within and beyond the African continent.

The contribution of women writers to African literature has not been limited to the modern period. They have always played a considerable and crucial role as storytellers and performers in the oral tradition. In some West African communities, women as oral artists have been known to voice their society's experiences as a whole. Hence they have chosen to elaborate their perception of the woman's role and responsibilities. As a consequence, these women writers are deeply involved with the various aspects of women's experiences, which do not depend merely on the men's perception of their needs, but are based on the woman's awareness of them. This kind of involvement is most explicit in the works of women writers because through it they can protect themselves from the norms of patriarchy and establish an identity in terms of their relationship with men.

Women artists, apart from writers and storytellers, have had an important role in art production through Africa.

The marginal status of women artists is not completely a thing of the past. The primary compensation for the artist's marginal status and competitive life style is her 'freedom' to



choose materials, forms and themes to produce artwork. However a number of modern women artists have begun to develop a sizeable reputation in Africa, America and European countries, and almost in all parts of the globe where their works have a reach. This has established their reputation in the public eye and has done much to counter marginalization; in other words, one can see the growing popularity of African women artists as a positive act of appropriation.

Literature can be seen as an art form with its oral tradition belonging to the first category and twentieth century literary output conforming to the modern tenets. This modern literature by Black women novelists is an emerging trend influenced by the various changes taking place in society. The sixties and seventies of the twentieth century were very crucial decades for African women. The term ‘Black’ is used as a descriptive adjective for people of African origin and descent, came into popular usage during the period of the black power movements in US, UK and South Africa. Therefore Black women’s writing should be read as a series of boundary crossings and not as a fixed geographical, ethnic or nationally bound category of writing. In diasporic perspectives, this networking of the grounds of ‘Black’ women’s writing redefines identity away from the marginality. For instance, women of African origin have gone away from the restrictive societies into which they were born and settled abroad. They have formed a large, widespread Diaspora all over the world. Writing from this Diaspora, they still keep to the themes of the Africa, which they left behind. But they perceive it in an altered manner because their perception has changed after their exposure to the country of their adoption. Obviously, this is a major act of appropriation because it not only expands the boundaries of their margins but also serves as models for other marginalized women to emulate.

Marginality is not restricted to merely women and their position in patriarchy as the above description makes clear, but it is an invariable in the experience of women, especially black women. It can be seen as a recurrent theme emerging from the intellectual, academic and domestic spheres of experience depicted in the writings of black women. It can be noticed as being influenced by the economic, political and social changes that have been taking place in the postcolonial setting. Marginality is the result of the growing awareness of women, especially black women novelists, in the literary field, which has been the special outcome of postcolonial times.

The recent literature in Africa aims at exposing the specific determinations of race, class and gender. It points to those literatures that have been written from the margins of the cultural empire. These works are mainly characterized by the depiction of the confrontation of the margins with the center of the Imperial cultural power. They are vast in reach because they stretch to matters beyond their regional features. It is obvious that their emerging culture is not the culture of the past but a product of amalgamation of the past culture with their experience of colonization.



The immense popularity and prestige of African literature is an indication of the fact that colonization is not necessarily completely negative in its impact; one needs to acknowledge its powerful influence on the creative aspect of the colonized nations, too. On the negative side, there is an alienating process engendered by colonization, to name just one. But the alienating process of cultural colonization turned upon itself and helped to bring the marginalized black women to a status from which they could view their position and experience as uncentered and pluralistic. Without the impact of colonization, women may not have arrived at this changed perception or worked to do away with the margins within which their lives had been circumscribed for centuries.

Regardless of race and colour, women in ethnic groups began to reflect on their situation and use their voices to reframe personal experiences, questions arose about their loss of power and identity in matters dealing with themselves and their literary pursuits. They are speaking with compelling intensity. Modern writings, therefore, are revolutionary. Women no longer hesitate to tell the story of their lives, from birth to death as it is perceived through their eyes and interpreted through their own psyche. Freedom to express honestly what they see, feel and think is epitomized. Their art is refreshingly vivid and real. Literature has often been used as a vehicle to express a country's political, social, cultural and emotional attitudes. It is therefore not surprising that most African literature is an expression of the social and political upheaval that brought about monumental changes in the life and experiences of Africa in the recent times. The social change that Africa has been subjected to since its colonization are many. Some of these are cultural, political and missionary influences. Its present state of independence achieved after long struggle and its growing awareness of both national identity and the problems engendered by the achievement of independence, find expression in most African fiction.

Black women writers have been trying, with varying degrees of success, the craft of writing fiction and more specifically, the novel. This attempt has been ongoing for over a century despite the exigencies of race and gender using literature as the tool of their trade to bring out a picture of their experience of marginality encountered in different walks of life. As literature is one of the most important weapons in the hands of their creative self-expression because it opens various avenues of their inner personality to flower, women have chosen it to come to terms with marginality, fight it or transform it in a positive act of appropriation. The novels by such women are thus like windows of the mind through which the world can peep into their inner beings. This intimate closeness brings the world within in contact with the outside world and such a relationship helps to explore truth and beauty at its highest, in the process creating literature that is invested with remarkable perfection.

The novels written by African women fit into this description of literature. Through it the novelists are taking up the task of hammering out new values and pointing to ways of

KRISHNAMURTI SANGITA K.

DR. ANNIE POTHEN

4P a g e

reconstructing their societies. This has brought about a new dynamic literature in the field of women's writing. Earlier women writers had often chosen to write from static points, situated inside a domestic space looking out on the rest of the world. But today they are looking beyond the stationary setting and are concentrating on themes associated with the long tradition of their own domestic genres but widened with the ever-increasing awareness of women about the world beyond their domestic margins. The emerging trend is a literature celebrating the freedom of women by describing the hurdles to that freedom, which in other words, is marginality and appropriation.

In the field of African novelists and their works, one of the most significant trends is the emergence of the powerful voice of women. Highly accomplished artists have come to be included in this area, as for instance, Buchi Emecheta, Bessie Head, Ama Ata Aidoo, Flora Nwapa, Mariama Ba and Rebeka Njau, to name just a few. It is interesting to study the factors that are invested to a narrative by these talented women.

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