



Analyses of Female Experiences in Two African Short Stories: The Feminist Theory Approach

Gloria E. Worugji , Stella I. Ekpe

CONTACT: Gloria E. Worugji, PhD, Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria,
E-Mail: ajieeleme@yahoo.com
Stella I. Ekpe, Prof., Department of English and Literary Studies, University of Calabar, Calabar, Nigeria,
E-Mail: stellaeke@yahoo.co.uk

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Abstract:

Many African societies are patriarchal, based on the supremacy of the male over the female. According to Mba (2009, p. 322), “emancipation of females is one of the greatest achievements of the women’s struggle globally”. As a continent, African culture accords a superior status to the male such that strength, freedom, independence, honour, courage and other positive attributes are ascribed to the male gender, while attributes of weakness, fear, dependence among others are ascribed to the female gender. Crimes of less magnitude are considered as “female” crimes and attract less stiff punishment. The killing of Ezeudu’s first son by Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* for example, is described as a female crime. On the nature of the crime, Achebe writes “the crime was of two kinds, male and female, Okonkwo committed the female because it had been inadvertent. He could return to the clan after some years” (p. 87). In this paper, the Feminist theory is used to examine the portraiture of females in two short stories by two African female writers. In this article, the family is categorise as a fundamental part of the social life of Africans, it attempts to expose the bias of African culture against the female in favour of the male, and consider how this social reality impacts negatively on the female psyche. The stories reveal that women themselves aggravate the situation by working against themselves. We conclude that female empowerment is a must for all females, and that just as governments are projecting education for all by the year 2020, the women’s movement should also target education for all females by the year 2020, because as the stories reveal, the educated female character fares better in the society than her less literate counterpart.

1. Introduction

Chimamanda Adichie and Bessie Head are African female writers who channel their energy towards the exposure and redefinition of the female’s image through their works. This paper is an appraisal of *The Arrangers of Marriage* in Chimamanda Adichie’s Collection of short stories entitled *The Thing Around Your Neck*, and Bessie Head’s *Snapshots of a Wedding* in *The Collector of Treasures and Other Botswana Village Tales*. The theory that will inform this paper, is the feminist theory as explicated by Bardwick, (1980, p. 5). This theory is used to address female experiences in the two short story collections by Adiche and Head. According to the source, feminism is a “... rejection of the life style created by strongly coercive norms that define and restrict what women are and can do”.



2. Synopsis of *Arrangers of marriage*

This short story portrays the craving for the American green card which many African males use in deceiving the females. The deceit, intrigue, scheming and despicable behaviours by Africans who engage in a rat race for the American green card is being scrutinised. The males struggle with identity and name change to be able to fit into the American society. In some instances; they lure their victims into questionable acts as revealed in the character of Ofodile.

2.1. Analysis of *Arrangers of marriage*

Adichie presents a young secondary school leaver, Chinaza Okafor, who is hurriedly given away in marriage by her foster parents to Ofodile Emeka Udenwa. Here we see the woman being manipulated by the society, especially when we recall that neither her consent nor her opinion was ever sought before or during the entire marriage process. Chukwuma (1999, p.80) attempts to give an insight into why patriarchy could succeed and may keep on succeeding in this manipulation of the female psyche in the domain of marriage when she asserts:

Marriage still remains the most greatly desired state of being for most young girls in every African society.

It has to be, for there is nothing else that bestows as much social status and social worth on a woman in a patriarchal society where her worth is predicated on male interests.

Ironically, Auntie Ada's statement in *Arrangers of Marriage*, is meant to be self-congratulatory for her success in finding a husband for Chinaza. It turns out rather to be an indictment on the patriarchy who has limited and restrained Chinaza from making her own choice on who to marry. In her words: "What have we not done for you? We raised you as our own and then we found you an *ezigbo di!* A doctor in America! It is like we won a lottery for you!" (p. 167). This statement comes from a tradition-ridden mind. It characterises older African women as sometimes partnering with patriarchy in its counter-productive manipulation of culture, and as constituting veritable stumbling blocks against the freedom of younger women. The young females of marriageable age ought to be allowed to make their choice in marriage and in other matters concerning their lives. The words of Auntie Ada are not commendable, considering the global call for female emancipation.

3. Synopsis of *Snapshots of a Wedding*

Bessie Head in her *Snapshots of a Wedding*, presents another issue on the supremacy of the male over the female. It portrays two teenage females, one with western education and the other without, both competing to satisfy a male. We also see jealousy and envious behaviour of aunties and relations exhibited. Older female relations in the story condemned the younger females, out of envy and ignorance in pretence of inculcating good manners to the younger females.

3.1. Analysis of *Snapshots of a Wedding*

Bessie Head in her *Snapshots of a Wedding*, presents men as supreme over the female. Commenting on the portrait of the African woman, Chukwuma (1999, p. 80) observes that the "...female character's trained ambition revolved around marriage and procreation. Her other female obligations changed further to cooking the family meals, honouring her husband's bed on invitation, and other items merging with the home environment peacefully". Interestingly, it is always another woman who would blow the whistle on the "bad" behaviour of a fellow woman. This is illustrated in the conversation by the older Aunts of Neo. "That girl has no manners! What's the good of education if it goes to someone's head so badly ...? Oh she is not a person" (p. 77). This is hate conversation. It is envious. Neo pays no heed to such talk knowing the motivation informing their conversation. Aunts are expected to be protective, but protection and nurture are lacking in their conversation.

It is not surprising that marriage is the focal point in both short stories. Both stories have a simple plot and a few characters. Head's *Snapshots of a Wedding* presents Kegoletile, an educated man who impregnates Neo, two months after completing her O'Levels. Within the same period, Marthata also gets impregnated by the same man Kegoletile. After the birth of the children, Kegoletile proposes to Neo, and agrees to pay R10.00



a month according to court order for the upkeep of Marthata and her baby. Kegoletile, the man has and exercises his right to choose. The decision to marry Neo and keep Mathata as mistress is his decision to mate. He is not put under any pressure whatsoever by the parents of either Neo or Mathatha. Tradition accords him the privilege, but it is not so for the woman.

The African woman's experience with patriarchy is one that has culminated in the invasion of her psyche. Sensitive African female literary artists draw from the environment, and permit the seriousness of their social vision to inform their themes. Therefore the writers, through their plot and character delineation reveal education empowerment as a major thematic preoccupation in their selected short stories.

4. Themes of education empowerment and others in *The Arrangers ... and Snapshots ...*

Feminism advocates the education and enlightenment of the female gender. This is because it is fundamental to the emancipation of the female gender and of entire communities from patriarchal norms and culture. This is what Bardwick means by a rejection of the life style created by strongly coercive norms that define and restrict what women are and can do" (p. 5). Ezeigbo (1999, p. 1) further stress that, "Feminism ... is ideologically designed to liberate and emancipate women worldwide from oppression, ignorance, poverty and self-immolation". This view becomes significant when we consider Badejo's (2012, p. 385) remark that "Women are the first teachers of the children" and further that "Kwame Nkrumah said it well: You train a man, you train an individual, but if you train a woman you have trained a nation". In Bessie Head's *Snapshots of a Wedding* Kegoletile chos Neo over Marthata as wife because Neo is educationally empowered. This action by Kegoletile sends a signal which the artist picks up craving and the indulgence of African young women to pass on the message that, when it comes to marriage, the men look for assets and not for liabilities.

In Adichie's *Arrangers of Marriage*, Chinaza affirms, "I had thanked them both for everything and finding me a husband ... I did not remind them that I wanted to take the JAMB exam again and try for the university" (170). In what could be interpreted as an emphasis on the need for education as a tool for the empowerment of women, (Okereke, 2013, p.261) submits that "Feminism is the calculated resistance of this oppressive dictatorial agenda of patriarchy by conscious women". The need for a holistic, formal and informal education for would-be brides and bridegrooms on the demands and realities of married life is highlighted in the seeming regretful comment by Chinaza "It started like a deep rumble in his throat, then ended on a high pitch, a sound like a lewd whistle. They did not warn you about things like this when they arranged your marriage" (p. 168). This quotation could be construed as a satirical comment on the society that would usually paint a glowing picture of married life, while remaining silent on the challenges that come with it.

There is also the theme of loss of identity in Adichie's *Arrangers of Marriage*. According to Nwachukwu-Agbada, "Leadership, poverty, religious bigotry, western predatory politics and African recklessness, loss of identity and poor perception of survival tactics in a world in which the African is the perpetual loser" (2009, pp.1-15), are the African concerns in the 21st century. The loss of identity is fore-grounded in this story when Ofodile tells us, "I'm not called Ofodile here by the way. I go by Dave" and he goes ahead to further affirm, "The last name I use here is different, too. Americans have a hard time with Udenwa, so I changed it"... "It's Bell" (172). Name and identity have much to do with Africans in America.

After Shirley's visit to Chinaza and Ofodile, we hear Ofodile tutoring Chinaza, "You should say 'Hi' to people here, not "You're welcome". To this Chinaza responds, "She is not my age mate". Ofodile the tutor only reminds Chinaza, "It doesn't work that way here. Everybody says, "hi". This orientation clashes with the African background and culture of the couple, especially as we already know that Shirley is an older woman who would ordinarily deserve more respect in the manner of greeting in the African setting and culture.

There is also a craving for the American green card which many African males use in deceiving the females. The deceit, intrigue, scheming and despicable acts by Africans as they engage in a rat race for the American green card is held up for scrutiny. Ofodile is a case in point here. In his words, "The American woman I married to get a green card is making trouble" (182). By way of providing an insight into the marriage, he goes on to tell us "It was just on paper. A lot of our people do that here. It's business ..."(183). Of course these actions also have their negative impact on the executors. The green card gives people an illusion of security by glossing over the intricacies of "pictorial marriage" and by extension "internet marriage," both of which are totally

deceptive. These are new realities that have flooded the modern African environment. Ofodile reveals, “I was happy when I saw your picture” revealing more about what internet marriage would erroneously emphasise. Many relationships springing from this source have produced horrific, indescribable experiences, and some of the actors have lost their lives in the process.

Head, in her *Snapshots of a Wedding* exposes the risk in pre-marital sex, while also insisting that men should take responsibility for their actions. Kegoletile is made to cater for Marthata and her baby even when he could not marry her. Interestingly, it is by means of a court order that the R10.00 allowance is secured for the upkeep of Marthata and her child. This positive injunction of the court is a pointer that vulnerable people like women and children can be protected through the legal systems if the judicial institutions are strengthened to do so. The injunction is also a challenge to women who have been assaulted, raped and abused not to keep quiet but to seek redress in the courts.

There is the objectification of the female gender in this short story. The female is culturally portrayed as an object for male satisfaction. She is the “senior errand girl” of the family. According to Udumukwu (2013, p. 88), female “... objectification manifests through the features of instrumentality and that of denial of autonomy”. Perhaps this is what gives impetus to Kegoletile’s maternal aunt who advises, “Daughter, you must carry water for your husband. Beware, that at all times, he is the owner of the house and must be obeyed” (148).

This advice is rooted in the patriarchal notion that the woman is an object, a servant and a near-slave who has neither voice nor choice in her matrimonial home. Ezeigbo (1999, p.15), observes that:

in many African societies, women were more or less decorative accessories to beautify or embellish the home in addition to their numerous roles as wives, mothers and child-rearers. They were not allowed to participate in decision making either at the family or community level. This objectification of the woman is what informs the roles and responsibilities for the woman and the man in marriage.

Hence, Neo is advised “Do not mind, if he stops now and then and talks to other ladies. Let him feel free ... and go as he likes...” (p. 79). Here promiscuity is preached and acceptable by the society for the man while, fidelity is preached to the woman in marriage and condemned.

There is the symbolic and metaphoric use of words in the story. For instance, water is used symbolically to show permanence and continuity while the statement, “Son, you must plough and supply us with corn each year” (79) has both literal and figurative implications. At the literal level it means that the bridegroom should be able to labour and feed the bride and her in-laws, but at the metaphorical level it is an expectation that the bridegroom, Kegoletile, will play his matrimonial role efficiently so that on a yearly basis, the union will produce its fruit(s) of child(ren).

The language of both stories is simple and easy to comprehend. In Adiche’s *The Arrangers of Marriage* written in English, local words are used: *ezi okwu* meaning “truth”; *biko* meaning “please”; *nno* meaning “welcome”; *ikeagwum* meaning “I am tired”. In doing this, Adichie injects some Africanness (local colour ie dialect) into the language.

5. Conclusion

Adichie and Head have, through their short stories, turned their searchlight on the family and on the public lives of Africans in the African and the African American societies. In drawing their themes from their social visions, they have fulfilled the role of literature which is both to instruct, educate and to entertain. Again, in their use of English language as a medium of communication, they have ensured, local colour and direct translations: “bending the English language” to achieve accessibility and ensure that their works reflect local colour.

The stories expose the reality of the female experience in the African environment, serving as a call to challenge the archaic tradition and culture which hinders the progress of females, especially in the contemporary times of global emancipation of women in all things and in the effort towards the development of a rounded female entity who is fully aware of her worth and her rights, and is ready to exercise both, with responsibility.

The Arrangers of Marriage and *Snapshots of a Wedding* wherein many societies women were often dependent on men for socio-economic security, education now affords them the opportunity “to enter the labour force on their own” thereby achieving a measure of “freedom or option” (Kerbo, 1996, p. 306).



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