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Abiodun Olayiwola e Adekunle Olowonmi

Mothering Children in Africa: Interrogating single parenthood in African literature

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- 1 Perhaps, it is fitting to begin this discourse by stating that reality in African cosmological view is steeped in African metaphysics or ontology which “does not see things as separate but ontologically linked with each other” (Nwakaeze-Ogugua, 2007, p. 1032). It is this thought-flow that informs the tapestry of African cultural and traditional embroidery. Tucked away in the inner fold of this socio-cultural over-decorated fabric, however, the African traditional view of womanhood configures the social construction of African woman and the role-participant carved for her in her society. In view of this, in virtually every place and time, two words have been employed to denote and qualify the African woman: marriage and maternity. That is, womanhood in Africa can only be attained through motherhood. Therefore, Adebayo (1996) asserts that “the myth of the omnipresent nurturing mother is everywhere pervasive because of the reproduction service a woman performs in the society...” (p. 178). Viewed from this angle, if a woman is married and bears no child (male child in particular), she is not yet “a real mature woman” (Romito, 1997, p. 184, as quoted in Ewrierhoma, 2007, p. 318). Considered within the same line of thought, Davies (1986) had averred that:

In many African societies, *motherhood defines womanhood*. Motherhood, then, is crucial to woman's status in African society. To marry and mother a child (a son preferably), entitles a woman to more respect from her husband's kinsmen for she can now be addressed as 'mother of...' (emphasis in the text) (As quoted in Eviweihoma, 2007, p. 318).

- 2 Obviously, the West, as we know, has carved for itself a niche of sovereign subjectivity through a cultural representation which sees the Other as inferior. This idea of subject is modern, and has been a venue for criticisms and deconstructions for over two decades. Viewed in the light of postcolonial theory, led by Edward Said and other labourers of similar temperament, modern African literature interrogates colonial ideology along the path of “interaction between imperial culture and the complex indigenous cultural practices” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1995, apud Holla, 1997); such interrogation is often presented as a drama in two acts. The first act is defined as involving repudiation of bias, corporeal desires and exotic views of the Other. The second act is characterized by self-reflection that attempts to reclaim and revise indigenous cultural practices. Locating African women's writing within the confines of the second act, most of these creative productions came out of African women's pens to challenge and change the years of monolithic adulation, stereotypic representation and theorization of motherhood in the patently deleterious patriarchal idiom. Tellingly, such texts lie in the interior recess of the “stress and psychic disequilibrium” (Adesanmi, 1996, p. 203) of paragliding cultural falsehood and paradoxes which construct woman as conscious textualization of maternal ambivalences. One thing is sure in the rich seam of earlier texts (most of them Negritude Literature) that adulate mothers; they are all weaved in the fine linen of patriarchy whose “whim is legitimized by the immutable codes of a phallogocentric ancestry” (p. 204).
- 3 Chukwuma (2000) observing some of the “feminine issues” confronting women as enacted in the works of such literary “foremothers” like Nwapa, Ba, Emecheta, Okoye, Alkali etc., claims that “there is [...] a hierarchy in the problems of women and marriage...” (p. 107). These, according to this scholar, include “the choice of marriage”, “childlessness” and “marital infidelity of husbands”. Yet, Chukwuma (2000) misses a very significant point by omitting the challenge which single parenting/parenthood and its attendant socio-economic burden places on women in the modern African society. Recognizing this omission and the implications of the new condition of socio-cultural and economic challenges that some women now face, in the 21st century Africa, this paper makes single parenthood by women its focus of investigation, among other salient feminine issues. It considers the subject of single parenthood and its social disequilibrium as largely part of the “complex interactions and influences” (Kolawole, 2000,

p. 115) that have shaped modern African woman's sensibility and literary scholarship. Thus, its thematic intensity is enthralling as well as troubling. Through textual analysis, this essay examines the representation of African women as they battle with the cleavages of single parenthood within the reality of modern day power relations that created such experiences. Rather than paying a ritual bow to intellectual rigour, as much ink has already been split over theories or leanings in women-centred discourses that in particular "essentialized motherhood" and speak of "maternal subjectivities" (Jeremiah, 2006, pp. 22, 25), this paper, through textual readings, tries to create space for a paradigm shift, which locates the imbalances of global trade and the burdens of debt servicing as the bane of gender politics in the postcolonial Africa.

Interrogating the "mother-figure": Mariama Ba's *So long a Letter* and Amma Darko's *The Housemaid*

4 The point which this discourse will keep in sight is the recognition of texts as an authentic representation of reality. This is why female writers, and their critics have regard for texts that border on the world of gender relation. As such, in dominant literary texts throughout history, more importantly in Africa, the male has been promoted as superior to the female. Male writers, within the carapace of imaginative text, have projected their own biases and cultural reality as a sovereign reality, overshadowing potentialities and views of the other. For a long time, this thunderous view was the only voice in the wilderness, speaking to itself, pretending as if it is possible to clap with one hand; thus encouraging the perpetuation of unbalanced perspective. For instance, the role of women in text and context has been one area of constant altercation between male and female writers, and even in the view of Ekwierhoma (2007), "a perennial problem in dramatic [literary] analysis" (p. 4). In their writings, male writers have rendered a catalogue of women characters as daughters, wives, courtesans or prostitutes and as mothers, with roles and characterisation that configure various degrees of their hem lining status. With increase in writers and literary critics in the fellowship of sisterhood, there have been shifts in perspectives, fluidity in refocusing angle shots in discursive practice through feminist criticism, suggesting ample opportunities for broader and wider embrace of women as partners and subjects. Giving strength of character to her kind, Chukwuma (2000), however, amplifies the matter in rhetorical format thus: "Can any being ever take the place of another? Can a male writer feel the depths of a woman's consciousness, sensibilities, femininity, impulses and indeed her weaknesses?" (p. 101). Looking at the activities of African female writers, Oyewole and Olowonmi (2011) observe that "the drumbeat of the past, fashioned and authored by men was single-faced and biased; women are tired of dancing and giving accolades to strange sound which had tucked them into a long solitary nightmarish misrepresentation" (pp. 141-142).

5 Having pulled down the patriarchal mast, through new readings, recent thematic concerns in women's writings have made a significant symbolic detour which invariably recast women and the "debate about African womanhood" (Bungaro, 2006, p. 92) in plurality of views. Breaking off from the conformation of surrogate living articulated through mythic norms of wifehood and motherhood, which creates ambiguity in the perception of roles that characterized the portrayal of woman character and her dilemma in earlier texts, African women writers have increased the level of dominance of female characters. In recasting their stories, writers

offer us a concentrated vision of the female experience. That is, the artist ensures that women play crucial roles in the unfolding of plot and in our appreciation of the story. Put in a position of importance, the female protagonist often displays her mettle in terms of her initiative and dynamism. If she acts within the urban sector, she is dynamic and politicised, often transcending the limiting roles which characterise her attributes in fiction written by male novelists" (Chukukere, 1995, p. 10).

6 Several female writers, in their attempt to creating a balanced portrayal, as Chukukere (*ibid.*) underscores, have courageously presented female characters whose inherent weaknesses have located them in the realm of victimhood that encouraged their repression or self-effacement, and/or, an anathema in the household of red tent, within the latitude of social norms. Furthermore, in critical spotlight, recently, African female critics engage in discursive practice through an ensemble of positions, views, opinions, etc., in which, according to Kolawole (2000) "outstanding women writers across the continent [...] draw out [...] diversity of

position” (p. 37), claiming that Adeola James, [Obioma Nnaemeka, etc.] have put “varieties of attitude side by side [that] emphasize [...] dialogic nature of [...] concepts whether the writer overtly defines it or reveals it in theory or praxis” (*ibid.*). Attesting to this, Nnaemeka (1997), in her introduction to a critical text she edited, declares, “in its narration of woman, identity, and nation, this book navigates the contours of the category woman/mother as the “other” in past and current debates in the orature, literatures, and mother tongues of Africa” (p. 1). Adorned in multicoloured tapestry of critics who offer fervent viewpoints and positions on challenges confronting woman in Africa and her representation in texts, Nnaemeka holds that the essays articulate

the complexities and ambiguities of African literature, in general, and creative writing by African women in particular, thereby calling into question some of the existing feminist studies of African literature that insist on straitjacketing the complex web of issues raised in literary works into *oppositional* binaries, such as traditional/modern, male/female, agent/victim, when the works themselves and the reality from which they evolve disrupt such binaries; when the central arguments of the works and their appeal [...] rest on the authors’ insistence on border crossings, gray areas and the ambiguous interstices of the binaries where woman is both benevolent and malevolent with powers that are healing *and* lethal [...], both traditional and modern [...], both victim *and* agent [...], both goddess and whore [...], “soft but stern” [...]; in short just human” (p. 3).

7 Therefore, through textual interrogation and negotiation, the African woman has become the subject who declares and asserts her identity as a rational woman, with human consciousness, caught in the reductionist web of patriarchal ideology. This is the idea to which this paper intends to pursue the urge for paradigm shift which confirms the curve of the present discourse within the larger space of class and race that demands for a new testament of social change that is all embracing to replace the old order. It is within the patriarchal ideology that this paper investigates the ambivalences that construct motherhood or “mother-figure” in the narrative texts under our search light.

8 Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter*, though a novella is nonetheless a large canvas that projects cultural crucible or socio-political change. This idea conforms to Gayle Green’s claim that:

all narrative is concerned with change, there is something in the impulse to narrate that is related to the impulse to liberate... Narrative recollects in order for there to be an escape from representation, in order for there to be change or progress (as quoted in Kolawole, 2000, p. 154).

9 *So Long a Letter* is a textual pantheon, rendered in a full technicolor of female characters who are representative of the Senegalese social life. The women exhibit the socio-economic conditions of post-independence Senegal (Curry, 2008). The social conditions that keep the female characters together in the texts is the interwoven debilitating complex cultural nexus that conforms them to the traditional roles carved for them; that of ghostly introspective self-effacement and circumspection. Ramatoulaye reveals it thus: “in our different ways, we suffered the social constraints and heavy burden of custom...” (p. 19). And their reaction to it is based on their influences, their location in a “psychological ghetto of mental torture and social disorder, where women (*sic*) is a slave and a beast of prey...” (Ojo-Ade 1982, p. 73) Such trademark becomes a discursive template for the patent ambivalences that appropriate “a catalysm for self-discovery, self-assertion and a holistic redefinition of African womanhood...” (Uko, 2006, p. 92).

10 Thus, Ramatoulaye, the heroine of the novel, Aunt Nabou, Aissatou, Binetou, “Young Nabou” and the nameless Lady Mother-in-law are all culturally marooned figures who react and respond differently to the roles they feel their social space creates for them besides their own desires, dreams, expectations and thoughts. Aunt Nabou has background; she has influence and she exercises it to her satisfaction in full regalia of patriarchal dominance. Aunt Nabou disapproves of her son’s (Mawdo’s) marriage to Aissatou despite the fact that the latter (Aissatou) gives her “all the respect due to a queen... especially if her hand closed over the banknote...” (p. 19), yet she hatchets a plan to prepare her niece (Nabou) as an alternative delicacy for her son. Curry (2008) claims that Aunt Nabou “... takes under her wing young Nabou, the daughter of her brother Farba Diouf... Aunt Nabou spends the latter years of her life raising her niece... (she) raises young Nabou according to traditional guidelines...” (p. 120) as a mother figure. Thus, the portraiture of a mother as epitomized in Aunt Nabou is “mother as culture receptacle, as the dignified wife...” (Adebayo, 1996, p. 185), which is basically a societal construct. In a sense, motherhood, from the view point of most African

male writers, according to Adebayo (1996), is “patience, resignation, labour, self-denial and suffering all of which are enormously considered positive values by which woman must be judged (p. 181). Locating Ramatoulaye within this gender minefield and manipulating her to revolt against her hegemonic construct for a new social order, projects strongly Mariama Ba’s gender inclination and feminist ideology; and as Kolawole (2000) writes of Dangarembga, literature to her is “as much a vehicle for collective cultural restoration as it is a channel for gender realization, and both are inseparable...” (p. 155). The novelist seems to agree with the view that “patriarchy has inexorably fettered African womankind.... (through) cultural normative patterns” (Opara, 1996, p. 153).

11 Ramatoulaye is a strong single parent in the universe of the novel. She accentuates the quest for emancipation from the old order. Thus, she reveals the evil machination of mistresses and mothers-in-law thereby, stretching taut the possibility of collaborative quest for female bonding. Besides, Ramatoulaye in the mother figure is an imposing character; this character trait comes to play in her approach to the cycle of crisis that engulfs Arame, Yacine, Dieynaba – and the impregnated Aissatou; and in the latitude she gives her daughters to express themselves because, according to her, she wants them to discover “... in a healthy way, without feelings of guilt, secretiveness or degradation” (p. 77). Ramatoulaye’s “mother-figure” is as accommodating as it is liberating. Thus, the confessional style which Ba uses for the development of the novel accentuates the deep psychological effect of secret sharing. It further establishes the feminist view of man as the predator aided by greedy and selfish women (Opara, 1996, p. 158).

12 Maternal ambivalences which female texts have come to investigate continue in *So Long a Letter*, as we notice the negative roles of Binetou’s mother, Lady Mother-in-law. Aunt Nabou’s ambivalences are equally noticeable. She is rich, pompous as well as traditional. Yet, her interest in the education of her niece, together with her strong sense of conservatism, creates her adroit character. Thus, making young Nabou to receive modern education counterbalances “her acute awareness that she should also receive a traditional upbringing...” (Curry, 2008, p. 121). In furtherance of this, she reproaches and resents Aissatou for being too educated and therefore to have had influence on her son. She says “school turns our girls into devils who lure our men away from the right path” (p. 17).

13 The twosome, Binetou and Young Nabou are pawns in the hands of their mother and surrogate mother respectively. Their “beloved” mothers, because they know that they are wet behind the ears, exploit their inexperience, naïveté and passivity to make them victims of their own over-bloated ego (Aunt Nabou) and greed (Binetou’s mother). Binetou’s mother, Lady Mother-in-law, is nameless; this makes her symbolic codification much more suggestive and troubling. Mariama Ba, through her characterization, reveals the socio-economic system that shapes her cunning, greed and desired upward social mobility. She is thus, a representative of a large army of accomplices in the patriarchal order and a herd of black sheep in the female fold whose panting after the good things-of-life circumscribes their position. Hence, her poor condition before her daughter marries Modou is that she lives in a neighbourhood “where survival was more concerned with putting the pot on the boil than with education” (p. 48). Furthermore, her house is described as “her unsteady hut, with zinc walls covered with magazine pages where pin-ups and advertisements were placed side by side” (p. 49). Binetou’s mother is a senior wife in a polygamous marriage and her husband neglects her. But her daughter’s marriage to Modou changes her “social status overnight” (Curry, 2008, p. 122).

14 Young Nabou’s precarious situation is even more disturbing. She is a pawn first carved in the patriarchal order that discountenances the “girl’s views, wishes and preferences” (Chukwuma, 2000) as well as an object of “selfish utilitarianism” (p. 107) – a lengthened shadow of male bigotry which suffocates everybody. Young Nabou is reduced to a commodity, garnished for vendetta. Aunt Nabou’s intoxicated background as bearing “a glorious name in Sine: Diouf. She is a descendant of Bour-sine... she believed firmly that blood carried with it virtues, and nodding her head, she would repeat that humble-birth would always show in a person’s bearing...” (p. 26) locates her in the old order that encourages the “credo of male supremacy” (Ibitokun, 1995). Thus she cannot live with the stigma of her only son marrying

to a daughter of a “goldsmith”. Mariama Ba’s view of Aunt Nabou in an offhand sarcasm and light-humour thus: “Mawdo’s mother, a princess, could not recognize herself in the sons of a goldsmith’s daughter” (p. 30) adds vigour to her strong resentment of women’s oppression and subjugation even in the hand of fellow women.

15 The issue of mothers that have gone haywire continues in Abondio Josette Deselercs’ *Kouassi Koko, Ma Mère*. Sophie, Kouassi Koko’s daughter, is the unfortunate object of self utilitarianism. She is a product of a brief fling between an African Mother (Kouassi Koko) in the former French colonial territories where French nationals fathered children through African concubines whom they later abandon as half-caste when returning to their country (France). Such objects of exotic pleasures often found themselves using their raw cunning and natural instincts to escape from threatening poverty that might impinged on their lives. Finding herself in this awkward situation, Sophie’s mother, Kouassi Koko, cleverly hatches a plan of fostering Sophie to another French man, Desnoirets, under a seal of gentleman agreement that upon her attainment of puberty, he would marry her. Upon Kouassi Koko’s suspicion of Desnoirets’ reneging on the deal, she embarks on unholy and deleterious scheming in order to enforce an unnatural union; she subjects Sophie to reckless psychological torture that is further aggravated when Julien, Desnoirets’ son, falls in love with her, to the extent that the father and the son are set against each other. The text, full of deft animal imagery, conjures before us “a mother who is a devourer who holds tenaciously to her daughter’s destiny, pulling and pushing her physically and psychologically” (Adebayo, 1996, p. 187).

16 The redolence of a profiteering mother is also pursued vigorously in *The Housemaid*. Darko’s narration pictures greed, competition and rat-race after materialism to the detriment of tested humanistic values. Efi, a ten year old girl, is at the centre of a selfish and wicked web of conspiracy, blackmail, corruption, greed and controversy. Efi is sculptured in the semiotic of adult manipulation and deceit. She is the housemaid of the story. Her parents cannot provide for her and her “cockroach-like” siblings in the village of Kataso. A distant relation (Tika), who feels that she needs to “right” the wrong done the extended family by her scandalous and vicious mother, came looking for a member of the family she can raise in order to annul the guilt. Tika’s attempt at restitution, however, precipitates the worst form of evil, the capacity to indulge in needless vendetta under superstitious cloak.

17 Darko, in *The Housemaid*, investigates another dimension by which we understand socio-economic challenges confronting the African continent and her people (women in particular). The textual universe creates a new opening in gender ideology, which Bungaro (2006) describes thus:

African woman writers today are not only showing that perfect motherhood does not exist in women’s novels because it does not exist in real life but are self-consciously rejecting proliferating images that suggest otherwise (p. 68).

18 Thus, the development of mother-daughter plot and single parenting are part of the challenges of the postcolonial societies. Through the novelist’s exploration of mother-daughter relationship, we identify some of the ambiguities attached to such relationships; an attempt to issue a caveat that illustrates absence of “perfect motherhood”. The interface in these ambiguities in the universe of *The Housemaid* can be visualized thus: Bibio and Mami Korkor, Efi, her mother and the grandmother, Tika and Sekyiwa. The scenario pictured in these demarcations is the daughter’s repulsion toward the mother (Bungaro, 2006, p. 70). Furthermore, the outcome is that “the mother is represented as a failure” (p. 70). Bibio first gives us the inkling of a battered relationship between mother and daughter. She is frustrated with the life she is consigned to live. Thus, she is alienated and disenchanted with social norms; and the mother that has accepted such an existence. The dialogue that exists between Bibio and Mami Korkor is revealing:

Bibio: I have been standing here waiting and waiting why? Didn’t you want to return home today? (p. 10).

19 The young girl by this affront denies her mother the courtesy one expects from a girl of her age in Africa. But Bibio only accentuates her indecorous affront when she accuses her mother of lateness and she proceeds to demand for 200 Cedis for a bar of soap. At this, the mother shouted back at her.

Mami Korkor: Soap for what?

- 20 From her response to her mother, we are led into how the whole family is connected to a wide web of seemingly complex and intricate scandal – “the gruesome, decaying corpse of a newborn baby girl” (p. 4). Bibio’s reasons for her demand for money to buy soap from her mother only aggravates Mami Korkor’s rage and fury, for Bibio contravening her instruction not to allow her younger brothers to go on the dunghill to scavenge again. But the reproach of Mami Korkor further ballooned Bibio’s anger, making her to ask her mother thus: “which of the two boys did I bring into the world?” (p. 11). Bibio continues to rev and vent her frustration on her mother. She sarcastically mouths:

Too bad, you should have sent me to school to learn some manners then. But since you rather let me stay home to play mother to you and your friend’s sons – boys I’m only three years older than – where else can I learn my manners but in the streets? (p. 11).

- 21 To Bibio, however, motherhood is an institution that annihilates women and she is all out to reject that institution, thus she seems to agree with Allen’s (1984) argument that:

A mother is she whose body is used as a resource to produce man and the world of man... Motherhood is dangerous to women because it continues the structure within which females must be women and mothers, and, conversely, because it denies to female the creation of a subjectivity and world that is open and free (as quoted in Grimshaw, 1986, p. 14).

- 22 This is a repudiation of motherhood. An institution Bibio feels encouraged and sustained the oppression of women. She does not want to continue with such practices. Thus, her contempt towards her mother becomes a heavy indictment of society and the traditional order. Her repudiation is a big blow to patriarchy because, according to Allen (1984), to become a mother at all is to capitulate to patriarchy as

identification with any single aspect of motherhood is an identification with every aspect of the motherhood continuum, for no single exists as separate from the whole of its context (As quoted in Grimshaw, 1986, p. 14).

- 23 In the verbal exchange between Bibio and Mami Korkor, the mother therefore becomes “target of aggression” (Bungaro, 2006, p. 71). In the same vein, we are inclined to argue that Darko’s imaginative impulse deconstructs “societal construct that sets motherhood and procreation as the woman’s major sources of fulfilment” (Uko, 2006, p. 86). Furthermore, Bibio’s hostility towards her mother, in the main, is a form of “disalienation” from the life she is consigned to live as a result of her mother’s mistake; because as she asks:

Why after making Nereley with him, when you realized how irresponsible he was, did you go ahead to make Akai, me and Nii Boi as well? (p. 11).

- 24 Bibio’s rage is couched in her desire for a role model to cling to which she does not see in her mother because of her inability to fire deadly shots at the system that oppresses her and creates absence of nuggets of life that can give her hope. She feels her mother’s disappointment and her mother’s humiliation has a domino effect on her life.

- 25 Another attempt at interrogating the “mother-figure” is the complex nexus that exists between Sekyiwa and Tika on the one hand, and the confluence of Efiya, her mother and grandmother, Tika and Sekyiwa on the other. Between Sekyiwa and her daughter is the furtherance of Darko’s vision of mothers as failures. Sekyiwa is carved in the niche of a calculating, illiterate mother. Also, Efiya the housemaid of the novel is a pawn in the hands of her parents (mother and grandmother) in their negotiation for a better socio-economic deal. Efiya’s condition conforms to Laing’s argument that “all parental relationships were oppressive, were violence masquerading as love” (in Grimshaw, 1986, p. 13). Efiya’s parent’s greed, perversion and corruption attest to the scholar’s submission.

- 26 What Tika-Sekyiwa appears to indicate in *The Housemaid* in connection to the subject of our discourse cannot be allowed to miss our critical lens. Tika is the only daughter of Sekyiwa, whose failure as a mother finds relationship entailment with Tika’s misery later in life. Tika completes her secondary education, a failure, but the full financial backing which her mother gives her later sets her up in business. Thereby, Sekyiwa’s influence on her daughter is in no mean measure, as she (Sekyiwa) values money and the attraction which it fetches more than integrity. Tika however goes in the foot-path of her mother, using the rough-and-ready of her feminine endowments to expand her business and wealth base. She seems to ride roughshod

over the storm of business challenges when the bubble bursts. She is pregnant for one of her numerous rascals and rakes. Sekiywa is happy about this development. It entices her, no doubt, as she longs to have a grandchild. Conversely, Tika is not ready to keep the pregnancy and her mother was unable to talk her out of aborting it. Here is Sekiywa, solicitous of her daughter's understanding: "Tika please, I urge you, keep this pregnancy... I am desperate for a grandchild. So I am still begging you. Please reconsider aborting this baby..." (pp. 26-27). But Tika has her own plans; different from that of her mother. She does not want to tread the path which her mother trod. It is a worn-out path. She has her own idea and, like young Bibio, such ideas repudiate the ideology that engenders their social construction. Sekiywa needs a grandchild in order to be a fulfilled woman in the figure that her family has carved and she is ready to make sacrifice for this desire as she promises "We'll care for it together... I've cut down on my business activities and be there for this child" (p. 26). But mother and daughter have been too materialistic, thus, Sekiywa is not a role model for Tika to emulate. Reminisces of what her mother was to her father continue to haunt her. Underlying Sekiywa's moral bankruptcy is her sustained, but failed attempts to buy the love and forgiveness of her daughter.

- 27 Sekiywa's "mother-figure" role in this novel is a negative one. Tika, the novelist says: "did not want to become like her mother" (p. 26). Whereas, Sekiywa wants to "fulfill traditional duties of maternity" (Bungaro, 2006, p. 73). She gets off on the wrong foot, thus she fails in her role as a mother. Sekiywa's portraiture in the novel finds illustrations in Friedan's view of a mother:

whose maternal behaviour is motivated by the seeking of emotional and material recompense from the buffets which life has dealt her own ego and must take it out of her child (as quoted in Adebayo, 1996, p. 190).

- 28 Thus, Aunt Nabou, Lady Mother-in-law, Sekiywa, Efia's mother, Ebeyein and other women, who exhibited unpleasant characteristics, are abominable. Their stories, as counter-discourse, are also told in the "context of a changing world" (Bungaro, 2006, p. 69).

Dilemmas of single parenting in Clutches of Widowhood and Beyond Nightmare

- 29 We have hinted above that modern literary discourse within African contemporary realities should transcend that limited confines of ideological postulations to reflect current trends of socio-cultural and economic forces. It is against this backdrop that we wish to reflect on the thematic character of Felicia Onyewadume's *Clutches of Widowhood* and Ben Binebai's *Beyond Nightmare*.
- 30 In her play *Clutches of Widowhood*, Onyewadume investigates meaningfully the biting issue of widowhood within the Igbo cultural sphere and the crippling challenges that often attend it. In a rather graphic and emphatic sense, it captures the pains and anguish suffered by Lilian, the surviving wife of late Obiajulu Juwe, and the mother of his two female children, Nkechi and Isioma. The death of her husband, no doubt, opens the floodgate of the family to the influence of the existing repressive tradition and other cultural mis-normals that were forced into it in a bid to garnish the appetite of some societal miscreants, who hide under the cloak of tradition to satisfy selfish interest.
- 31 As custom demands, Lilian is expected by the Umuadas, the gatekeepers of tradition, to openly and loudly mourn her husband's death every waking morning for a period of seven days. Lilian, however, sees this as a gruesome and torturous act that is meant to aggravate the already daunting pain occasioned by her husband's demise. She is thus subjected to a myriad of dehumanizing physical and mental humiliations in the name of tradition. Incidentally, all these inhuman treatments meted out to Lilian in the play are in consonance with the submission of Olapegba and Chovwen (2006, pp. 836-837) on the prevalent widowhood cultural practices among the Igbo people of Anambra State in Eastern Nigeria. This obviously reveals that the play is not an excursion into fantasy but a true portrayal of happenings in contemporary African societies. These widowhood practices identified above include confinement, defacement, disinheritance, mourning period, ritual cleansing, dethronement of the concerned widow as well as oath taking to prove her innocence. Worse still, Lilian's late husband's brother, Isiche's, merchandising evil in the name of tradition, skilfully perfects plans to inherit his

late elder brother's property without saving a thought for the well-being of the deceased's surviving wife and children. His cultural claim is that though "your girls are your husband's children, yes but they can't bear his name for long. Once they are married that's the end. They don't belong here".

32 While the thrust of this paper is not to dwell on the pains of widowhood, it behoves on us to submit that Juwe's death certainly robes Lilian with certain encumbrances of a single mother as she is expected to brace up and saddle herself with the fatherly responsibilities bequeathed to her by the sudden departure of her husband. Apart from battling with the socio-cultural cleavages of fulfilling the excruciating demands of widowhood, she has also suddenly ascended the pedestal of the breadwinner, role model and "father"-figure. Her case is further traumatized by the lustful overtures of her husband's family members, who are less concerned about her welfare and the future of her children, but the booties of her husband's death.

33 As she confronts the hegemonic powers of tradition, Lilian also finds herself steeped in the muddy waters of foreign culture to which her two daughters have been exposed. While it is commendable that they have been rebranded by Western education and thus frown at every form of tradition that denies them of their rightful position, they have also imported this foreign culture wholesale without any recourse to the prevailing socio-cultural realities. Hence, aside from battling with the possibility of raising enough funds to sponsor her children's education abroad, Lilian also faces a more demanding responsibility of nurturing these children in a morally acceptable manner within the present Nigerian social reality (as presented in the universe of the text).

34 Ben Binebai's *Beyond Nightmare* investigates an unpopular terrain by questioning the viability of the feminist ideology in Africa, noting that women have never been so relegated as depicted in most feminist writings. The character of Ebeyein, the chief-mother of Aghoro kingdom, reveals the important roles which women play in most African traditional societies, either as queens, chiefs and women leaders of some sort. The play graphically enacts the story of Ebeyein, "who wishes to hide under the umbrella of women's rights and gender liberation to feather her nest and that of her offspring" (Adelugba, 2007) by scheming to dethrone Pere Ingbobai, the royal Majesty of Aghoro. Through her insidious machination, Ingobai's daughter, Princess Otutu, is abducted by a supposedly wild monster, who demands that the king must dance naked and abdicate his throne as a ransom for redeeming his lost daughter. The king would have acceded to this dehumanizing demand but for the timely intervention of two of his chiefs, Olotu and Tonkepa, who advocate war as the reasonable solution. With this preliminary loss, Ebeyein then enjoins her son, Seibiri, to take up the challenge of rescuing the princess. Having graduated in his mother's school of mischief and treachery, Seibiri proceeds to execute a scheme that eventually brings about his and his mother's shame and relegation.

35 In this play, we are thus situated in a negative world of a mother who, instead of moulding her son along acceptable social values, turns him into a social miscreant. The text does not suggest in any way that Seibiri has such destructive intents until his mother schooled him into doing it. It is a well established fact that there exists a bond of love and affinity between African women and their children (Littlefield, 2007, p. 57) and since most women have abandoned the cult of true motherhood, it is now commonplace to find archetypes of Ebeyein in contemporary African societies, who have become negative agents of change. Our position in this paper is that while it is incontestable that change is inevitable, such change should be positively driven in pursuance of societal peace and harmony; and not for personal or self-induced aggrandizement.

36 Viewed within the discourse of single parenthood, therefore, the play thus presents to us the image of a mother who, instead of performing her social role of being a model and a symbol of societal ethos to her son, employs her privileged position to dissuade Seibiri from undergoing "conformations" necessary for effective social cohesion and integration. As further enthused by Littlefield (2007), "motherhood suggests a unique relationship between mother and child, one which is seen as the basic requirement for child development. Mothers nurse their children, provide love, affection, and guidance, and shape primary development" (p. 54). Mothers are therefore at the prime centre of societal development. Ostensibly, Ebeyein

succeeds in infecting her son Seibiri with the evil dose of treachery and treason by convincing him that such an act is neither devilish nor anti-social through the following words wrapped in the deceitful embroidery of motherly affection:

37 Seibiri easily consents since his mother, being an experienced and revered chief of the community, has always been his role model, (considering that the play does not suggest he has a father). It is evident, from Movement Two of the play, that Seibiri has been tutored by his mother on how to cunningly win the princess; he must have also known that the supposed monster is an accomplice in this satanic mission. This informs his un-usual calm in the midst of pervading turmoil necessitated by the search. While Alaska and Adidi, his fellow search party members, are disturbed as they search endlessly for the invisible monster, which is dreaded by all, Seibiri's conspiratorial calm suggests he is aware of the captor and the princess' whereabouts. He certainly does not intend to make any deal with the monster but to ensure the death of his fellow men while he goes home with the priceless princess, under the guise of having rescued her from the clutches of death. However, Alaska eventually overpowers the monster and rescues the princess.

Ebeyein:

Seibiri, you shall be a

Beneficiary of history if you

Take on the venture

Of rescuing the Princess from captivity.

Go and come with the princess, Son

The skies will rejoice with us,

For you shall be her husband and the

Crowned prince of Letu Province.

38 The wheels of Seibiri's criminality thus shift from the initial resolve to lure Alaska and Adidi to their death through an array of calculated distractions that weakens them psychologically as they confront the monster to his physically assaulting and killing Alaska. But unfortunately, though unknown to the audience, Alaska only fainted. Seibiri however goes home with the princess, claiming to have rescued her. The playwright also adds a new dramatic twist when we are made to discover through Tuku, Ebeyein's daughter, of her missing husband who eventually turns out to be the monster harassing the kingdom. Viewed through the binoculars of Nigeria's political scenario, the issue of "hostage taking" that has characterized the Niger Delta, causing untold hardship and excruciating pains for Nigerians, could be seen as a clandestine arrangement of some political juggernauts who, though
39 lurking around the corridors of power, utilize such venture for personal benefits. Hence, the "monsters" are certainly our inventions and they enjoy the political backing of the powers-that-be. They are also mothered by the crux of socio-economic criminalities that have pervaded Nigeria's modern socio-political arena.

Conclusion

40 This essay critically examines the vexed question of feminism and its African varieties against the background of issues relating to motherhood, parenting and womanhood. There is no doubting the fact that the increase in single parenting in Africa which has made women to combine the dual roles of fatherhood and motherhood requires critical attention of both literary writers and critics. In this treatise, we critically examine the effects, negative or positive, of this turn in parenting on children who eventually become the grass that suffers in the titanic duel of two elephants.

41 Our scholarly itinerary in this paper is neither an attempt to haul condemnation on mothers nor to make profane the institution of motherhood. In fact, our discourse here and the imaginative impulse of the writers under our critical lens and others yet to be examined only "reveal the contours and modulations of self-writing" (Uko, 2006, p. 93). Nonetheless, according to Adebayo (1996, p. 190):

It is debased motherhood, the profiteering mother, domineering in hard, arbitrary and devious manner and using her daughter as a revenge and a smokescreen for her own lack of fulfillment in marriage.

- 42 that is being condemned. For instance, Ramatoulaye is carved in the figure that combines patriarchal ideals with clear visions, values and pragmatism, unlike Kouasi Koko, who sacrifices her daughter's wellbeing and self fulfillment on the altar of perfidious pecuniary gains. Ramatoulaye feels fulfilled that Daba's (her daughter) marriage is a realization of the shadow and dreams of her own chimeric marital bliss. The paper also joins some of the authors to uncover the ineffectiveness of legislation and social services in dealing with the growing problem of single mothers and employment in Africa (Bungaro, 2006, p. 72). More pungently, the paper enjoins African mothers to be role models, societal conscience, performing such roles that will engender social/cultural harmony within the changing social order.

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Resumos

The issue of motherhood in African women's writings has transcended the façade of binary oppositions created by radical "Western" feminists who pitch women against men in their campaign for gender equality or, worse still, belittle or show disdain for the men-folk. The approach of African women writers takes issue with the collapse of social inequalities and its potentially disastrous implications. This essay examines the representations of African women in their struggle against the divisive impact of single parenthood in the present economic crisis and their lack of power to cope with the challenges that this crisis poses. By means of a critical and evaluative textual analysis, the essay looks at how contemporary fictional writing succeeds in representing this diffuse social reality.

Maternidade em África: Interrogando a monoparentalidade na literatura africana

A forma como as escritoras africanas abordam o assunto da maternidade transcende as oposições binárias de fachada criadas pelas feministas radicais do Ocidente e que colocam as mulheres contra os homens numa tentativa de luta pela igualdade dos sexos, ou, pior ainda, subalternizando ou desdenhando o papel dos homens. As teses das escritoras africanas vão mais longe ao interrogarem o colapso das desigualdades sociais e os resultados eventualmente desastrosos que daí podem derivar. Este ensaio analisa as representações das mulheres africanas na sua luta com as clivagens da monoparentalidade no actual contexto de crise económica e de ausência de poder para fazer face aos desafios que esta crise coloca. Através de uma exegese textual crítica e avaliativa, este artigo analisa a forma como a ficção contemporânea consegue representar essa difusa realidade social.

Entradas no índice

Keywords : feminism, single parenthood, African literature, womanhood, widowhood

Palavras-chave : feminismo, monoparentalidade, literatura africana, feminilidade, viuvez

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