

Empowering The Doubly Marginalised African Women: A Study Of Women**Empowerment In African Writings In English.****Priyanka Kalita****priyanka.kalita91@gmail.com**

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Date: 21 November 2019.

Abstract: The discourse that ‘Woman is a victim’ becomes essentially the subject matter of numerous African narratives. Those depictions provide certain assessments of women’s life primarily focusing upon the subjugation and marginalization of the “second sex”. However dismantling such assertions, the contemporary writers attempt to lend power to the ‘powerless’. This is done perhaps to bring about a change in their doomed existence which is flubbed by the patriarchal stance. The doubly marginalized African women are subjected to extreme hardships in the name of colour and gender. Thus, amidst these privations the African women writers brings forth the articulations of women’s voice which are made up of thousand truths which were throughout veiled. Writers like Adichie, Emecheta, Mariama Ba provide their woman protagonist a vehicle to articulate their trauma and bring about a change in their vulnerable condition. These writers bestow certain liberty to the female protagonists and seek to empower them. Although numerous other ideas form the trajectory of women oppression, this paper shall explore the various modes of empowering the African women amidst oppression.

Keywords: double marginalization, education, self-realisation, New Woman.

1. INTRODUCTION

The gravity of women empowerment in the modern world becomes the primary concern for numerous thinkers, scholars and critics. It is a fundamental question in almost every society and

community. Literature as a mirror of society too imbibes these attitudes by subverting the earlier gender norms imposed upon women. The African writings in English like any other forms of writing were traditionally based on male-oriented modes of articulation and narration. Throughout ages women were conceived as subordinate to men on several grounds. They were thought to be intellectually, physically and psychologically weaker than man. It is on these prejudices that the society of past and even present to certain extent was structured. The societal norms which were structured by male chauvinistic society had hardly any space for women. Buchi Emecheta in *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) depicts the struggle of women while performing the gendered roles structured by man. The only role disposed to them was to perform within the domestic jurisdiction. It is within this secondary role that they saw their life function. This was true of every culture and society. However the issue of gender segregation becomes even worse in African context. Women in Africa were subjected to various mental and physical displacements in the name of several unauthorized customs and traditions. Apart from the male formulated customs and traditions, African women were exposed to discriminations on the grounds of not only gender but also colour. They became twice marginalized in the hands of the male hypocrite structures. However, these traumas of women were never voiced out as they were denied any platform to speak. These cultural and societal inflictions were imprinted only in the psyche of this subaltern deprived class. In the African history, the history of women's past seems to be submerged by masculinist heroism. The eminent African feminist critic Kolawole remarked that African women are subdued on several grounds like "Patriarchy, tradition, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism and gender imperialism, all combine to act against the African woman's self assertion." [1] (p. 25) These concerns were never acknowledged by the male writers. Even during the colonial process of Africa the trauma of women was hardly articulated. During the pre-

colonial period, women were politically, culturally and socially subjugated and this continued even during the colonial times when the situation became worse for women. However, these incidents remain absent from history and literature which convinces us that the ramifications of these changes never affected women. It is the overwhelming male biasness that dominated the core of African literature.

2. DISCUSSION

The gendered stereotypes that marked the African literature were however dismantled with the advent of numerous female writers who reacted against the machismo stance. Several woman writers began to write and narrate their experiences which were throughout veiled. Writing became a source of healing for them. Their subject matters revolved around the authentic portrayal of female experiences where they attempted to empower them. These upcoming female writers tend to demystify the discourses imposed by man upon woman. Many African woman writers deal with African feminism to evoke the urgency of women empowerment. In this regard mention has to be made about Mariamma Ba, the eminent African woman fiction writer who explores the sufferings of women and lends power to them to rise above their dominated state. In the process of empowering her female protagonists she extends certain remedies to achieve some means to empower oneself. Apart from her, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie another prominent Nigerian woman writer places her characters not as a submissive soul but as a woman who equally marks her place in the global world along with that of man. The racial gendered segregation becomes one of the essential themes in Adichie's novels. In the novel *Americanah*(2008) the character Ifemelu despite being exposed to racism in America, she finds means to empower herself. Her blog serves as one source through which she empowers other black women in America. Even in Mariamma Ba's *So Long A Letter* (1979) Ba asserts the

importance of education. She reiterates throughout that it is education which could uplift women. It is the self-realization which could foremost bring about a change in their condition. She emphasizes the significance of female bonding which helps them find solace amidst their life of hardship.

The significance of women empowerment in terms of development was largely felt by 1990. The term women's empowerment was first defined by the United Nations after the 4th World Conference on Women: Action for Equality, Development and Peace in Beijing in 1995 [2]. It is this awakening that triggered numerous organizations and institutions to work for the upliftment of women. The development of a country depends much on the empowerment of women. In this regard education is one medium which can help them rise above their marginalized identity. It is through education that they could resist to the oppressive forces. Adichie maintains that the primary source to empower women is to have financial stability. Leading an independent life becomes inconceivable for most of the women. It is primarily because of the financial reliance upon the husband that eventually becomes the reason why they could not voice out the oppression. However it is essentially education which entails financial security and therefore her novels deploy the importance of education for the welfare of women community. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu achieves her goal as she is determined to pursue her dreams in the male dominated world. This is possible as she was exposed to learning and schooling. Even Ba depicts the victimization of women but she goes further than it by negotiating and interrogating the system in which her characters are placed. She also extends a radical criticism of her society which hinders to empower women. It is the various systems of society which subordinates women. However Ramatolaye, the protagonist of *So Long A Letter* could lead an independent life because of her earning and education. She shows how education helped in liberating women.

These characters are basically the pioneers of the New African women. Ba gives them an agency to develop from their doomed state. She considers the act of writing to be associated with women empowerment. Empowerment lies in the ability to voice out against segregation and oppression. Ba presents the marginalized position of women in Senegalese society. However in her texts she dismantles the stereotypes and gives her female protagonist excessive power to change her situation. Women are always sidelined from the mainstream of history. The women writers like Adichie, Emecheta and Ba reiterates the plight of women. They articulate the anxiety that has been long suppressed.

Female bonding too serves to be a factor of empowering women. In a society where they are multiply marginalized on several grounds the only mode they find solace is in company of the other female characters in the novel. Their coming together helps them challenge patriarchy and overcome the atrocities. They create a space for themselves amidst the domestic atrocities. It is only when the women unite they could bring about a change in their state. The bonding between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou of *So Long a Letter*, helps them evolve from their sufferings in the respective life. Similarly in *Purple Hibiscus*(2003) by Adichie the women characters demarcate their boundary and eliminate the oppressive male autocrat. Beatrice responds back to the physical abuses but killing her tyrant husband and overthrowing patriarchy. History often excluded female stance and acknowledged solely the struggles of men since time immemorial. Amidst such a damned existence women have to take a stand in union to other women by supporting each other. The innermost self-realization becomes the foremost ingredient which will thereby lead to empowering one self. And it is this assertion which is made by the numerous contemporary female writers. They empower their characters by not showcasing them as mere victim but by helping themselves rise above their victimization. Education, female bonding, self

realization are few agencies which help them uplift themselves from their oppressive state. It is not an external factor which empowers them but the urge within to speak out and stand will help them mark their presence in the male dominated society. It is this ideology that is rooted in the African narratives by women writers. The novels like *Americanah*, *Purple Hibiscus*, *So Long a Letter* beautifully places what education has to offer to the female protagonists. Tradition will limit woman to the stereotype world but it is education which made them look beyond the four walls. Ifemelu because of her education she received the opportunity to venture a different world and understand the American worldview from a different perspective. Similarly Ramatolaye even after being abandoned by her husband she could give a life of comfort to her children and also to herself because of her education.

3. CONCLUSION

Thus an urgency to empower women is aroused in all the texts. A woman is the backbone of a nation. A society can develop when the women of that nation develops. Thus the empowerment of women becomes extremely indispensable for the welfare of a nation. Apart from government initiatives the urge to seek equality must emerge from within. It cannot be enforced unless it is deliberate. Thus in order to have this self realization, education plays a massive role. Education entails various positivities and this urgency is raised by the African writers. They lend power to the once 'powerless' who further emerge and find means to fight against the patriarchal manifestations.

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