

# Appropriating Womanist Theory: A Deconstructionist Reading of Women's Identity in *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Purple Hibiscus*

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**Abstract**—Gender politics has been playing a consequential role in Africa since the pre-colonial era and it saw a pessimistic escalation in gender identities even in colonial South Africa. Different generational women authors took the task of amending the distorted likeness of women as “second class citizens” by evoking gender discriminations which attempt to design women as marginalized folk. Casting of women into sexist roles of daughters, wives, and mothers by African male authorship and preserving the role of women as submissive to norms and customs, male scholarship created male persona as the subject of the narrative while relegating women and children as meek and dependent. This research paper would seek to analyze women authors not as the perpetrators but the creators of female subjectivity by challenging male generated binaries and patriarchal ethics. Present work would examine the novels of two Nigerian women authors, Buchi Emecheta and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie through careful contextualization. Present paper would also investigate and contribute in the comparative study of their works taking the journey towards autonomy and self-identification of women disposition. The paper as such would commit itself towards the concept of “African Womanism” and Womanist desirability of female autonomy and personal fulfillment. Hence, the research paper would employ Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi’s idea of “African Womanism” as an accommodationist “humanistic feminism”. Novels, with differing Womanist aspirations, would be scrutinized within this framework of Womanist theory and would seek to comment on the commitment of the two Nigerian Womanist writers in order to ferret out whether the female characters find a voice for themselves or fail to vocalize as self-sufficient unconventional entity.

## 1. Introduction

Gender politics of identity in Africa has always been a breeding ground for ideological and discursive contestations. The construction of female identities in colonial period proved to be essentialist and negative in character. Early, postcolonial African literature seeks to deploy such characterization of essentialism and gender binaries in their works, ironically, to represent African womanhood, both challenged by the first

generation African women writers. However, with an interesting shift, second generation African women writers took the task of amending the distorted tropes of womanhood of the previous era by introducing them to the forefront. The resurgence of such subject matter accentuates the continuing challenge of culture in the formation of gendered identities in relation to the development of society. Like many patriarchal societies, Africa too faces impediments in the development of female essence; hence contribute to their tragic underdevelopment by crippling their identity and voice. In the long-established African traditions, it is an accepted fact that women are devalued and considered “second class citizens”. They are relegated to the background simply because they are considered inferior to men. Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* states that women are constructed by men as passive and inconsequential objects and “this has resulted in the perpetuation of female self-effacement and self-erasure which have insidiously demeaned womanhood for a long time” (Ezeigbo, 26)<sup>[1]</sup>. In the description of male-centered discourses, male writers present women as “tragic heroines unable to speak from their subaltern position” (Kolawole, 228)<sup>[2]</sup>. This gender distinction often creates women marginalization and inevitably, male authors cast all women in sexist roles of daughters, mothers and wives submissive to the norms and conventions of the society that restrict them. Mary Kolawole contends that “Generally, African women are presented as a subaltern group in the margin of society, docile, and accepting the multiple levels of subjugation gracefully<sup>[3]</sup>.” This, undoubtedly, prejudiced stand against African women must have been the triggering spark that made Nigerian women writers realize their responsibility as a woman to reconstruct women identity in a male dominated society. Their fiction tend to recreate an image that establishes itself as no less than a cry against the devalued position of woman in

Nigerian literature. This valiant and uncontested attempt to reconstruct female image in postmodern Nigeria aims at creating a suitable and deferential place for women and their realities. According to OmolaraOgundipe-Leslie, “the woman writer has two responsibilities: first to tell about being a woman; secondly, to describe reality from a woman’s view, a woman’s perspective<sup>[4]</sup>.” The women writers of Africa who are the prime focus of this research paper are not the perpetrators but the creators, whose creativity strive for a more egalitarian conducive society and culture, where they challenge the male generated binaries and patriarchal ethics. Despite being overlooked for a number of reasons, the literary culture flowing from them is not only innovative but eclectic and insightful. The present work would examine the texts of two different generational Nigerian women authors; BuchiEmecheta and ChimamandaNgoziAdichie by approaching the texts through close reading and careful contextualizing to analyze the place of convergence or divergence from the point of view of the female character appraisal and identification. The present research paper would contribute in the comparative investigation of the works of two Nigerian women writers belonging to two different generations, in an attempt to establish that traditional criticism is not the only way to approach a text. However, the hidden layers need to be brought to surface and materialized by looking into the dynamics of the secondary characters that equally participate in the thematic development of the texts as well as highlight the considerable changes that Nigerian women have gone through these years of subjugation and submission under the hierarchy of patriarchal social system. The comparative assessment of the two authors is perceived as moving towards the single objective, that is the commitment towards African Womanism. The major furnishing factor in this research paper would also be to realize whether the female protagonists in the texts under question show growth, fulfillment and self-realization in their life’s journey by questioning the social structure or simply, by conforming to it hence becoming one of a confederate in elevating male sovereignty.

## 2. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi’s African Womanism

African feminism has emerged as a response to what has been referred to by FilominaChioma Steady as “the dominant voice of the feminist movement” which “has been that of the white female” (Davies, 1)<sup>[5]</sup>. It is responsive to the needs of Black African women and must therefore take into account the independence from the patriarchal structures that have been created to execute manifold oppressions on women. It must be “free of the shackles of Western romantic illusions” because the African woman lives for many things. More interestingly, “African feminism, unlike Western feminism does not negate men, rather it accommodates men. Men are central to their lives and so their continuous presence is assured” (Maduka, 10)<sup>[6]</sup>. African Womanism is a more inclusive brand of feminism and this interpretation clearly highlights the voids in the western feminist ideology that fails to theorize African

female hardships and the aspects of their struggle. They fall short in recognizing the oppressive character of economy, politics and race enslaving women. Because of its dedication to the total liberation of human society, Steady refers to the African feminism as “humanistic feminism”<sup>[7]</sup>. The women ethics like self-reliance and social organization help them encourage themselves to undergo another struggle against African men in demolishing the hierarchical social order that exploited and relegated their existence. It is not separationistic and antagonistic towards men as radical feminism is. African feminist thought, by highlighting the oppressive plight of African women, complement each other and is echoed by Womanism, an approach towards handling women’s oppression. Ogunyemi’s womanist theory captures the essence of Womanism in the following argument:

Womanism is black centred; it is accommodationist. It believes in the freedom and independence of women like feminism; unlike radical feminism, it wants meaningful union between black women and black men and black children and will see to it that men begin to change from their sexist stand (65)<sup>[8]</sup>.

Ogunyemi professes that a womanist writer discovers the reality of incorporating racial, cultural, national, economic, political considerations along with her awareness of sexual issues in her philosophy. African Womanism calls on a holistic approach towards patriarchy and female subjugation and rejects the primacy on sexism as the main focus of female struggle against male domination. Ogunyemi concedes that a womanist means a woman who is committed to the survival and wholeness of the entire people, male and female. The philosophy of African Womanism celebrates black roots, and the ideology behind black life. Womanist writers illustrate their concern for the family, not for the Western nuclear family, but for the black extended family. Polygamy in womanist novels is shown in a positive light because it is the demand of culture and is put above all sexual politics. The dynamism associated with such polygamous societies becomes a major source for womanist novelists. Sometimes, bad men are eradicated in womanist novels so that men and women can live together harmoniously. Also, ostracism and ethnicism rather than sexism cause the development of the strong woman (Ogunyemi, 75-76)<sup>[9]</sup>. In addition, womanist writers prefer to tell of life as it is, sometimes of life as it is thought to be and rarely of life as it ought to be. Womanist novelists therefore concern themselves with the ethics of surviving rather than the aesthetics of living (Amartey, 17)<sup>[10]</sup>.

Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* and Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* would comparatively be analyzed within the framework of Ogunyemi’s Womanist theory with an aim to figure out the commitment of the two black African Womanist writers and find out whether their female characters, in their efforts to harmonize and prioritize the survival of men, women and children, find a voice for themselves and achieve fulfillment in terms of personal independence.

### 3. Understanding Womanist Theory in *the Joys of Motherhood*

My discussion of the womanist articulations in *The Joys of Motherhood* would commence with a look at the audacious but conforming womanist character Ona, Nnu Ego's mother. The technique of flashback reveals the concern of rebellious and arrogant women who receive much respect from the men of the village, whereas, submissive women receive no respect of men in the same society. Women like Ona, who refused to give into male dominance or bow under male authority had the appreciation and awe of men. She comes across as a "priceless jewel" within a womanist framework that calls for challenge and aberration to male dominance even though she does not fulfill the later calling. She is identified by her society as a bad woman who openly treated men, whom everybody worshiped, with disdain. She turns down Agbadi's offer of a handsome bride prize, hence refusing to be commodified by Agbadi, a symbol of male dictatorship. Ironically, she concedes to her father's wish to remain unmarried as well as his wish for Ona to provide him with an heir, a male child. Despite her adamant character, Ona accedes to the demands of the two men because of the baby she carries. Her father, Umunna's desire for the male child is not separate from the patriarchal system that privileges male over female offspring. Whereas, her promise to give the baby to Agbadi if the baby is a girl also implicates Ona's failure to carry forward the challenge to refuse Agbadi's control over her because he clearly uses the baby girl as an excuse to lure Ona into staying with him. Even though she sanctions her stubbornness in death, it is not enough to demolish the system of male privilege over female independence. At the time of her death, Ona realizes that she has not been a complete woman and gives her perception of a woman that does not accommodate a strong-willed character and woman personality. Her insistence on Agbadi allowing Nnu Ego to be a woman showcases her defeat as an independent individual before the male authority. This maintains the balance of power in the hands of people like Agbadi and Nnaife who treat women as commodities. Emecheta's Nnu Ego fulfils all the cultural expectations of Igbo community by acting submissive and subservient to it. She juxtaposes Adaku's character with that of Nnu Ego's to show the difference that separates the two. She makes Nnu Ego's ego evaporate to feed male dominance. She gives her husband, Nnaife, male children to canonize him and struggles throughout the novel to help them survive. This presents Nnu Ego a good woman in the eyes of Igbo people. On the other hand, Adaku is outspoken, self-assertive and will not compromise her determination. Within this Igbo culture that surrounds her, Adaku is not recognized as a woman. Pushed to the limits of female conformity to the male dominated culture, Adaku decides to break free to become a woman of her own. Knowing the consequences of her actions, she willingly takes such a step into becoming a prostitute. Feeling utterly discouraged and delimited before Nwakusor and Ubani's unjust treatment, which acceded to Nnu Ego's narrative, she

decides to leave the marriage obligations and carve out a niche for herself and for her two daughters. The impression she imposes of the self is one of self-assertiveness. In fact, her independent way of thinking does not go unnoticed by her senior wife who tries to find out reasons why Adaku is so different from her. Again, Nnaife also notices Adaku's boldness even when she's quiet. Adaku is full of questions underscored by male privilege. She is "rebellious", "chasing and berating [her] husband" (Emecheta, 151). Before deciding her fate, Adaku has heaped of complaints against the abnormalities of the society norms that prioritize women with male children. As a consequence of this, a woman who is economically better off and independent does not earn the respect of society. Emecheta, at this particular moment, does create a woman of economic independence but fails to ascribe her dignified self that a woman anticipates. Faced with the moment of unfaithfulness, she chooses the economic prosperity over social conformity and sets off into her own world to construe her own destiny. At heart, Adaku's decision is endorsed by Nnu Ego who contemplates Adaku's decision full of wisdom that any dignified woman can imagine. Recognizing Adaku's economic independence, Nnu Ego for a moment forgets cultural belief that woman's children are her wealth. Emecheta does create job opportunities for such women but indirectly also makes the readers clear of the view that the independence comes with a heavy toll, hence suggesting communion with men that would ensure balance. Adaku refuses to marry off her daughters before the right time and even rejects the bride prize to be taken by their father, Nnaife; these instances come as the inciting forces for Adaku that empowers her in disobeying the patriarchal heritage. Her actions are prompted by her refusal to be turned into a mad woman as opposed to Nnu Ego who becomes insane and dies alone in the end. Adaku sacrifices herself for her girls and breaks the cultural code of conduct. Nnu Ego sacrifices herself for her children but along the line of conformity to patriarchal culture. Adaku sticks to her views of freedom for women while Nnu Ego adheres to her belief that a husband owns his wife.

### 4. Understanding African Womanism in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

Adichie's female characters reflect the womanist perception of challenge and change in their involvement with authoritative patriarchal society. Adichie fulfils one of the characteristics of a womanist writing by making Kambili, the narrator; undergo womanist metamorphosis as her perspective and attitude towards life changes along the storyline once she comes to her understanding. In her Ted Talk entitled the "Danger of a single story", Adichie foregrounds the importance of eschewing stereotypes and the necessity of multi-faceted portrayal of stories and characters in literature. According to her, "the single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story"<sup>[11]</sup>. Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* portrays multiple female identities

that are complex, dynamic, and predictable. They are remarkably diverse characters that represent positive exemplars for women in the context of Nigeria. The novel follows a subtle yet powerful thrust of feminism. The female characters are linked through problems of domination, power, control, abuse and freedom. The empowerment of a woman takes two different forms in *Purple Hibiscus*. It narrates the story of two characters, Beatrice, the submissive, docile and traditional wife, and her sister-in-law Auntie Ifeoma, the educated, and independent Nigerian woman. Beatrice delineates the tale of a long-enduring wife who expresses her strength once the end approaches. It is only through her interactions with Ifeoma; her resolve strengthens and propels her towards the moment of resistance and identity building. Through her silent suffering, Adichie shows the suffering of general Nigerian women under male dictatorship. Beatrice becomes every woman's character in Nigeria who when married to a wealthy businessman, is conservative, "unsophisticated and content with the economic security her husband guarantees". She constitutes a prototype of hackneyed wifehood in *Purple Hibiscus* as she lives in a complete subjugation and enslavement to her domineering husband. Because of her lack of education, she inadequately submits to her husband's abuses like an ideal Nigerian housewife without realizing a sense of self-actualization. Eugene laughs away Beatrice of any effort at her self-assertion or freedom of speech. Such is her dilemma that she remains divided between her love for her children, a deep-seated sense of the marital obligations, and her own lack of power. It is the bond with her children that she keeps herself from falling hopelessly apart. Social conditioning, Catholicism, coupled with her inaction and conformity, Beatrice unarguably accedes to Eugene's power and enables her own victimization. Her conventionalism comprises a negative attribute to her persona and to womanhood, as women risk their lives in volatile marriages just to conform to sociocultural norms pertaining to marriage. Eventually, she musters courage and strength to struggle against the defined confinements of patriarchy and conjugal bond, although in a subtle but radical fashion. Therefore, the release from the situation of the marriage is not portrayed as a triumph, but as a sad necessity. Her identity revolves around her family and home that define her lack of independence and powerlessness. However, Beatrice also represents postcolonial woman who finds her empowerment through her domesticity, her eventual control over sustenance and love for children. This control that she exercises adds a new dimension to her character. From a "voiceless female", she searches her existence as an "empowered woman" through this control. Despite her voicelessness, Beatrice transforms in the end into an empowered woman through her rebellion against her violent husband, Eugene.

While Ifeoma is in complete contrast to Beatrice, she is a willful lady, intelligent professor at the University of Nsukka. She is not only sophisticated but has a strong presence in public sphere. She is shaped by her role as an independent

woman and as a single mother. The encouragingly positive pressure from Ifeoma acts as a catalyst to Beatrice's eventual and quiet insurrection against Eugene's indomitable power. Ifeoma's consistent urgings lead Beatrice to take an ultimate stand for herself and her children. Auntie Ifeoma comes across as a strong woman as against other characters; sure of herself and her position, she is in a favorable position to clearly see others for what they are. If Kambili embodies hope and future of Nigerian women, Auntie Ifeoma demonstrates that future through her impeccable insights into the workings of her Nigerian society. As is evident from Kambili's observations, Auntie Ifeoma had the confidence that the other two women, understandably, lacked. She is the only female character who neither fears Eugene nor places him on some marked pedestal. Ifeoma's sense of presence commands respect and becomes the most powerful female character in *Purple hibiscus*. Also, Beatrice's quiet uprising and abrupt sense of insurgence against her husband is in stark contrast to Ifeoma's open rebellion against the prejudiced conventions of gender difference and male dominance in Nigeria. Ifeoma's character is one of impassioned and remorseless strength, strength she finds through her disposition of equality. Beatrice musters courage through her exquisite, more covert and climactically deadly ways. In the end, her rebellion is as powerful and fierce as is Ifeoma's. Her control over the domestic space to what she has been relegated all her married life in the house act as a liberating tool for Beatrice. Adichie's women present a series of dichotomies but her portraiture of women characters have depth and complexity. They embody a postcolonial feminist identity which utilizes both the traditional domesticity of Beatrice and the brutish intellectualism of Auntie Ifeoma. While they represent different aspects of a Nigerian woman, neither of them fit neatly into a simple concept of Ogunyemi's womanist theory. These two women go through a womanist metamorphosis but without their husbands. The all inclusive aspect of womanist theory fails in case of Adichie's female characterization because of their transformation, especially in Beatrice.

### 5. Reading Novels Comparatively: Sense of Continuity and Discontinuity

Emecheta's protagonist in *The Joys of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego, primarily, does not go through any form of womanist metamorphosis. As an adult woman, she is fully aware of her surroundings and recognizes the social restrictions and cultural impositions on a woman that force her to behave ideally. She is not a round character, hence, finds it hard to change as opposed to Beatrice, who changes just before the novel ends thus marking her independent journey. While Beatrice inspires womanist change in *Purple Hibiscus*, Nnu Ego is more of a flat character, laid back and will not challenge the male dominated cultural tradition. She is more accommodating and obedient to male culture even when her life is at stake. There are two resourceful women character portraits in the novels under scrutiny, Ifeoma, in *Purple Hibiscus*, and Adaku in *The Joys of Motherhood* whose reactions and mental outlook

towards patriarchal structure contribute immensely in addressing sex discrimination within African literature. They both question and confront patriarchal system. Ifeoma carves an independent course for herself registering dislike for her late husband's family for abhorring her and treating her disrespectfully after his death. She establishes herself an independent woman through her education and her access to a good job as a lecturer at Nsukka University. Adaku's, on the other hand, challenge to break away from patriarchal sovereignty is carried to the extreme as she seeks an individualistic path for herself and for her girls. With plenty of ambition and purpose, Adaku calls off her marriage to Nnaife and breaks away her bond to patriarchal culture by turning into a prostitute. By making Adaku opt for prostitution as the only option available for independent women in Nigeria; Emecheta pushes her feminist view rather negatively by making obvious two imperative points. Firstly, it encourages prostitution as the only valid choice for women in her husband's absence. Secondly, one could arguably say that the work of prostitution cannot be possible without men, hence, again creating a sense of enslavement, unlike Adichie's Auntie Ifeoma who survives without any direct aid coming from a man. Also, Adaku's decision looks more forced rather a willful desire to become one of the women on Montgomery road. Emecheta's ambivalent position as an author suggests that Adaku and her children will be ostracized and stigmatized by the patriarchal society for the rest of their lives. As a matter of fact, there is no real freedom experienced by women in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*. Adaku inspires change undoubtedly, but it is the change that only aggravates the patriarchal culture and does not overthrow it. Unlike Adichie's character, Auntie Ifeoma, in *Purple Hibiscus* who realizes her respectful status and economic independence that would help her achieve anything in life without a man. Nnu Ego, a devoted daughter, wife and mother, is a testament that Emecheta writes about women who try very hard to assemble the family together until it becomes totally impossible. At the core of Nnu Ego's reasoning and struggles is her commitment to see her family survive, especially her children.

## 6. Conclusion

Womanism, as a variant of African feminism, gives a holistic view of the works of literature by African women writers. While Adichie is committed to the womanist goal of survival, she is also committed to challenging patriarchal culture. She imbues her female characters with strength, resilience, and courage while undermining patriarchal authority. On the other hand, Emecheta fails to confront and challenge patriarchal society in her novel. Her protagonist is filled with a desire to compromise and her willingness to be submissive to patriarchal structure. The agenda in her novel is seen as that of

an agreement with culture of male-dominated society. Her novel, even though, ends on a note of survival of the family, cannot be said to be permeated with womanist hope as compared to Adichie's novel. Emecheta creates sparse moments of challenge to patriarchal authority, the challenge that does not even come with a change. Rather, her challenge to patriarchy is heavily augmented by conformity and acceptance of the system of male dominance. Emecheta remains committed to the unity and survival of African men, women and children, Adichie's challenge to patriarchy appears so lethal that she almost eliminates all male characters in the novel.

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