The Heroine and Others: Feminist Collaborations in Purple Hibiscus

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Abstract

From its introduction to the present in the Nigerian literary space, feminist narratives portray in diverse ways the experiences of the female gender, which are largely negative. It is based on these experiences that the authors, mostly female champion the need to take redefining steps towards altering conditions that limit the female gender and institute a counter discourse against the patriarchal conception of the female gender as an insignificant other. Recognizing that the feminist agenda is not an individualistic affair, feminist authors create different female characters who collaborate to achieve the ultimate goal of feminism and liberation of women. This noble notion has however been constrained by the diverse interpretations of feminist narratives through the experiences of the perceived heroine. The neglect of other female characters against their contributions to the development of the plot and ultimately the feminist goal is the thrust of this endeavor. Engaging the female characters in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Purple Hibiscus, purposively selected for this study, I hope to demonstrate that together with the perceived heroine, female characters in feminist narratives collaborate to negotiate with patriarchy the rights and the privileges of women in the society. Adopting an eclectic approach to feminism, the study argues that female characters though independent in their thoughts and experiences join forces together directly or indirectly to fight and positively alter conditions of their gender in the society. Thus, they collectively engage patriarchy and champion better conditions of life for themselves. It is through this that feminist narratives become formidable in interpreting and translating the negative experiences of the female gender. The paper concludes that beyond this, they advocate for a change in the patriarchal order and vigorously pursue not just feminist but also nationalist ideologies.

Keywords: Feminist Narratives, Feminist Agenda, Female Characters, Heroine, Gynocentric Aesthetics.

Introduction

Best known for (re)creating stories from a feminist perspective, female writers across the world in general and specifically in Nigeria against the patriarchal idea of the relegation and subjugation of women are inclined to, and have continued to give prominence to their female characters. In their narratives, they devote concerted efforts and deliberate creative energy to issues that concern and are related to women. Accordingly, from the beginning of feminist

writings in Nigeria female writers have been preoccupied with the duty of extricating the Nigerian girl / woman from the chains and shackles of patriarchal bondage typical to the Nigerian society. In all ramifications, they seek to promote the interest of the female gender and draw attention to their desire which is anchored on the need for a change in the social order. Nweke avers in this regards that

[i]n many African societies, women writers have equally devoted their works not only to the task of drawing attention to the continued subjugation of women in the continent, but also to the need to write themselves anew by interrogating, reformulating and analyzing inherited popular codes. They are confronted with the challenge of working to transform the society. (209)

This invariably informs the multiplicity of female characters and by extension female voices in different feminist narratives.

Over the years, feminist creative discourse in Nigeria has been premeditated on the multiplicity of female characters. This multiplicity, which has been sustained to the present day, has ensured that through the experiences of different and sometimes independent female characters in feminist narratives, the ultimate goals of challenging patriarchy, championing the plights and sufferings of girls / women, as well as renegotiating their place in the society are achieved. Each of the female characters in narratives that falls into this category contributes significantly to the development of the plot as they represent specific female strengths and weakness. Adeoti terms this as gynocentric aesthetics in literary narratives. According to him,

[G]ynocentric [Aesthetics] essentially draws its artistic materials from the multiple nuances of feminism – a critical perspective that regards women as victims of discrimination and oppression. [It] seeks a new gender relationship [...] with a view to creating an alternative literary [and by extension, socio-

political] order that is fundamentally woman-centered. [...] Writers who share gynocentric mode of thought argue against political [and cultural] arrangements that sustain the power hierarchy in favour of men. (261)

This arguably justifies the development of and importance attached to the different brands of feminism which include; liberal feminism, radical feminism, lesbian feminism, cultural feminism, womanism, nego-feminism, stiwanism, snail sense feminism, among others. These variations are sometimes combined and engaged as literary theories in the interpretation and analysis of any feminist narrative in order to uniquely understand the individual experience(s) of different female characters as portrayed in the narrative. The tag notwithstanding these different approaches to the interpretation of female experience(s) in literary narratives are all aimed at achieving one ultimate goal, the renegotiation of the place of women in the society.

Building on the notion established earlier that female characters combine forces to upturn patriarchy in feminist narratives, the poser then is who by labeling becomes the heroine of a feminist narrative. Additionally, what are the criteria for such labeling. A cursory look at feminist narratives beginning with Efuru will reveal that more than one female character is encountered and many female voices heard crying out against different orchestrations and manifestations patriarchy. Such is the instance of Li and Awa, the sisters in Zaynab Alkali's The Stillborn and Tess Onwueme's characters; Wa, Zo and Bia, the trio, each named after the syllabic constituents of their leader's name; Wazobia, and Omu, who leads the women to adopt nudity as their weapon of protest against the men, all in Onwueme's Wazobia. The eponymous novel, Efuru, by the matriarch of feminist writings in Africa, Flora Nwapa, falls into this category too. Through Efuru and Ajanupu, who were both victims of patriarchal debauchery, Nwapa successfully pioneered the tradition of feminist writings in Africa.

Similarly, although these narratives have been engaged and interpreted to point out the plights of the females in the Nigerian society and the need to take bold steps towards altering the conditions laid down for them by patriarchy, large proportions of these interpretations were done through the character of perceived heroines in the texts. This same tendency is not divorced from Adichie's Purple Hibiscus. Though the experiences of Kambili, the character-narrator who has been considered as the protagonist in different interpretations of Purple Hibiscus, the reader is informed about the experiences of other female characters who are not always discussed but played major roles in the development of the plot. As such, a critical study of these female characters - Kambili, Beatrice, Aunty Ifeoma and Amaka – selected for this study reveals that they all contribute significantly to Adichie's testament to the plights of women in the Nigerian society as well as the need for a change in the socio-cultural cum religious order of the society. Added to the aforementioned is also her testament to the undeniable roles of women in their homes and their contributions to the discourse of nation-building in Nigeria. Collaboratively, Adichie used these female

characters to achieve her feminist agenda. Laure Clémence Capo- Chichi Zanou et al captures this agenda thus;

Adichie is engaged to work with women, and through her writings, she gives them the means to empower themselves and the opportunity to achieve their highest potential. She intends to remove the stereotypical portraiture of women and move towards stronger representation of women characters not only taking active and shared roles with men, but also taking responsibility for their own destinies. To achieve her vision, she is convinced that, for lasting change to occur, it has to start from the family, a place where men usually assert their power over the women and get them fall submissive. (66)

The collaborative roles of the aforementioned female characters in achieving Adichie's feminist goal is the focus of this study, hence the first part of the title the heroine and others.

Feminism: Diverse Approaches, One Goal

This section is hinged on the difficulty to define and codify feminism both as a socio-political, economic and a literary movement. As a multicultural ideology of different shades, feminism had its origin in the struggle for the rights of women the world over. In its adaptation to literature, it has indeed proven to be a sustained challenge to the canonically traditional norms and interpretation of literature. This school of thought is notable for its multiple and diverse nuances adopted as theoretical insights. multiplicity arises from perceived weaknesses and limitations of the mainstream feminism and the peculiarities of the different socio-cultural terrains to which feminist has been adapted. These diverse methods have ensured that instead of reaching an all and inclusive codification of the concept, its several brands arising from its long history varies from the experience of one woman to the other, the conditions prevalent from one country to the

other, as well as the disposition of one critic to the other. This long history notwithstanding, the premise that unites all feminist agitations whether in Africa or in the western world is the assumption or rather the reality that the global community and by extension its literary discourse is patriarchal, relegating women and women related issues to the backline.

Based on the above, feminist narratives are evaluated and interpreted to reexamine the sociocultural cum political contexts in which they are produced, analyze the power structures in relation to the male and female relationships and ultimately expose the patriarchal structures created by the society for the perpetual relegation, subjugation and domination of women. This has informed the revisionism in feminism as a literary theory. It is against this backdrop that feminists challenge tradition and strive for the equality of the male and female genders. All of these, coupled with the realities and sentiments in Nigeria are factors that have provided a fertile ground for the enactment of feminism to suit the realities in traditional Nigerian society. Little wonder that different African variants of the theory, such as Africana Womanism, Motherism and Stiwanism were

developed by Nigerians to cater distinctly for the need of Nigerian women in particular and African women in general. The current study adopts two approaches to feminism, which are liberal feminism and radical feminism.

Liberal Feminism

Championed by feminists such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and John Stuart Mill among others, liberal feminism draws its concerns from the ability to show and maintain that women - despite the belief of the society that they (i.e. women) were created after men and as such should maintain the backline their actions, reactions, choices and dispositions, are equal to men. This is usually perceived through the portrayal of female characters in feminist narratives. Liberal feminists argue and take not only as false, but also as untenable the patriarchal conception that women are naturally inferior to men socially, intellectually and physically. The society they say discriminate against women. It is against this that they challenge and encouraged the woman to stand up to the challenge of using her voice to make decisions for herself as distinct from the decisions made for her by patriarchy.

Radical Feminism

The radicalism of some women, their refusal to accept the patriarchal definition of a woman, and their continued agitations for equal rights for both the male and female genders is the focal point of radical feminism. This brand of feminism, an offshoot of the second wave feminism, challenges and seeks to overthrow patriarchy; it's laid down gender roles and the oppression of women. Adherents to this feminist school radically call for the restructuring of the society

to accommodate their agitations against the prevailing supremacy of men which is used as a tool to oppress women. This school of thought is championed by feminists like Mary Daly, Andrea Dworkin, Robin Morgan among others. It is with the understanding that patriarchy uses social, economic and political systems of the state to control the woman and dominantly keep her suppressed that radical feminists submits that the way to deal with patriarchy and its different forms of oppressing of the female gender – which include: social class, race, gender identity, and sexual orientation - is to get to the root causes these oppressions. This they say is achievable only through a sustained revolution of the social, economic and political systems of the state. Jessica Xavier cited in Emi Koyama submits that '[R]adical feminism in its simplest form, believes that women's oppression is the most pervasive, extreme and fundamental of all social inequalities regardless of race, class, nationality and other factors' (5). The belief therefore is such that it is in eliminating patriarchy through its various systems which perpetuate and sustain the domination of one group (men) over the other (women) that everyone will be liberated and free from the unjust society.

Data Analysis

For the purpose of the analysis here, selected female characters in Purple Hibiscus are grouped into two categories. The first category comprises female characters in the nucleus family of Eugene Achike, Kambili and Beatrice. The second category is made up of female characters in the extended family of Eugene Achike, Aunty Ifeoma and Amaka. The ensuing analysis reveals that while characters in the first category are liberal

and forlorn, those in the second category are radical and anti-patriarchal. However, both categories collaborated and ensured the victory of the female gender in the end of the novel.

The Liberal and Forlorn Characters of Kambili and Beatrice

Through the characters, experiences and dispositions of Beatrice and Kambili, the reader encounters the liberal submission of women to patriarchy despite the assault and battery meted out on them. Eugene Achike, the symbol of patriarchy in the novel is aided and abated on the

one hand by his religion (Catholicism), the fact that he was a Knight, and on the other hand, the social order in the society, the fact that he bears the title, Omelora (The One Who Does for the Community). This continually strengthen him to perpetuate his domination over the other gender (i.e. the females in his nucleus family) mainly his wife, Beatrice and his daughter, Kambili. These two backings by religion and the social order left his excesses unchecked. Nobody seem to care about his character dispositions to his nucleus and even his extended family members provided he meets the needs of the church and satisfies the demands of his community. Kambili the narrator defines this thus,

[w]e were always prepared to feed the whole village at Christmas, always prepared so that none of the people who came in would leave without eating and drinking to what Papa called a reasonable level of satisfaction. Papa's title was omelora, after all, The One Who Dos for the Community. (64)

The liberal stand of Beatrice and Kambili forces them to submit to Eugene's brutality and inhumane treatments. On the one hand, Beatrice loses two pregnancies to the physical assault on her by her husband and still decides to stay against the advice of Aunty Ifeoma that she should run for her dear life. In her conversation with Aunty Ifeoma, she says: '[w]here would I go if I leave Eugene's house? Tell me, where would I go? [...] Do you know how many mothers pushed their daughters at him? Do you know how many asked him to impregnate them, even, and not to bother paying bride price?' (255).

Her determination to protect her marriage is a strong indication of the indispensable role of women as home builders and home keepers. For Beatrice, she was ready to endure the hardship and even sacrifice her pregnancy to keep her family. She is no doubt aware of the endless competition for her position as the wife of Eugene Achike, and she is resolved to pay the sacrifice of keeping her home no matter what she passes through. This is the basis for her resolve to always go back home, no matter what happens to her. It is her liberal character that eventually makes her regret her action of killing her husband, Eugene, by poisoning his tea. Kambili recounts after Eugene's death, that

[s]he went about telling people that she killed Papa, that she put poison in his tea. She even wrote letters to newspapers. But nobody listened, to her; they still don't. They think grief and denial – that her husband is dead and that her son is in prison – have turned her into this vision of painfully bony body, of skin speckled with blackheads the size of watermelon seeds. (300)

On the other hand, Eugene, who expects Kambili to 'strive for perfection' is disappointed when she stays under the same roof with Papa-Nnukwu, a hearten in the word of Eugene. What she gets for

this perceived imperfection is the burning of her feet with hot scalding water. Liberally, Kambili submits to this without protesting. In her words,

[h]e lowered the kettle into the tub, tilted it towards my feet. He poured the hot water on my feet, slowly, as if he were conducting an experiment and wanted to see what would happen [...] I saw the moist steam, before I saw the water. I watched the water leave the kettle, flowing almost in slow motion in an arc to my feet. The pain of contact was so pure, so scalding; I felt nothing for a second. And I screamed. (201)

A strong point in all of these experiences however is not just the submission of Beatrice and Kambili to this brutality, but their self-defense when it seems the battery has become a

routine exercise. Determined not to allow her father destroyed the last artifact she has of Papa-Nnukwu, Kambili courageously defied patriarchy and move to save the painting.

No! I shrieked. I dashed to the pieces on the floor as if to save them, as if saving them would mean saving Papa-Nnukwu. I sank to the floor, lay on the pieces of paper [...] I lay on the floor, curdled tight like the picture of a child in the uterus in my Integrated Science for Junior Secondary Schools [...]. Get up! Papa said again. I still did not move. He started to kick me [...]. I curdled around myself tighter, around the pieces of painting; they were soft, feathery. [...] More stings. More slaps. A salty wetness warmed my mouth. I closed my eyes and slipped away in to quiet. (217)

This is a strong demonstration of her determination to protect her new found life, totally different from what she is used to in her father's house. Her liberal stand to always respect the orders of her father should ordinarily

have kept her away from this, she should have easily allowed Eugene destroy the portrait of Papa-Nnukwu without any protestation, but Nsukka had changed her perception to stand for whatever she loves and believes in and had given her a new disposition to life, and dignity of the self.

The Radical and Anti-Patriarchal Characters of Aunty Ifeoma and Amaka

For Aunty Ifeoma, her character is a strong demonstration of the radical orientation of women and their decision to challenge the patriarchal order of the society. Despite her widowhood, she stood her ground, disregarded her in-law's claims that she killed Ifediora, her husband to inherit the money he has hidden in an unknown place and single handedly took care of

her nucleus family, her children. In her extended family, it is Aunty Ifoema's world against the world of her brother, Eugene. She stood her ground against Eugene's decision to ban their father Papa-Nnukwu from coming to his house and bothered less about sustaining the sibling and familial relationship between the duo. She sacrificed her bloodline relationship and by extension any form of assistance she will get from Eugene (which were always tied to the condition that she converts to Catholic and abandon her usual way of life) to protect the interest of their father. Kambili in her narration recounts that

[w]e did not know Aunty Ifeoma or her children very well because she and Papa had quarreled about Papa-Nnukwu. Mama had told us. Aunty Ifeoma stopped speaking to Papa after he barred Papa-Nnukwu from coming to his house, and a few years passed before they finally started speaking to each other. (73)

Additionally, she did not just only cautioned Kambili against referring to Papa-Nnukwu as a pagan, but also scolded Papa-Nnukwu for his idea that a woman does not count, preferring that Eugene was not misled by and lost to the missionaries. "But you are a woman. You do not count."/ Eh? So I don't count? Has Eugene ever asked about your arching leg? If I do not count, then I will stop asking if you rose well in the morning." (91). In all ramifications, against the traditions and customs of the cultural Igbo society, she took up the roles of a male child for Papa-Nnukwu, took complete care of him and did for him what Eugene as his son refused to do. By doing this, she disparaged Eugene and his highly revered Catholicism.

Aunty Ifeoma by all means is a defiant who seeks a breakaway from the gender roles assigned to women by the patriarchy. In her words, '[b]eing defiant can be a good thing sometimes. [...] Defiance is like marijuana – it is not a bad thing when it is used right' (152). Her defiance in all ramifications is dignified. She bore her burdens by herself and would only share her problems with people for confidentiality and not to elicit their sympathy. In her discussion with Beatrice, she posits that 'I tell you all these things because it is you. Without someone else, I would rub Vaseline on my hungry face until it shone' (85).

Again, Kambili recounts that the way she confidently and without special affiliations talks to Eugene, the man they (Beatrice, Jaja and Kambili) revered and fear so much is different

from theirs. 'Every time Aunty Ifeoma spoke to Papa, my heart stopped, then started again in a hurry. It was the flippant tone; she did not seem to recognize that it was Papa, that he was different, special' (85). As events unfold in the novel, it was her radical, rugged and antipatriarchal stand that aided the discovery of the real character of Kambili. Kambili began to laugh, albeit in her dream after she went in company of Jaja and her cousins with Aunty Ifeoma and Papa-Nnukwu to Eze Icheke to see the mmuo, the spirit of the dead come back to life.

In her words, '[t]hat night, I dreamed that I was laughing, but it did not sound like my laughter, although I was not sure what my laughter sounded like. It was cackling and throaty and enthusiastic, like Aunty Ifeoma's (96). While the statement 'I was not sure what my laughter sounded like' indicates the rediscovery of her true self, the statement '[i]t was cackling and throaty and enthusiastic, like Aunty Ifeoma's' indicates the lively roles of Aunty Ifeoma in this regards. The irony herein is that her father's house which should have been her immediate paradise has turned out to be a dungeon, where her life is regimented and streamlined by the rules of her father. Later she will recount that 'I laughed. It sounded strange, as if I were listening to the recorded laughter of a stranger being played back. I was not sure I had ever heard myself laugh' (186). Because she never laughed in her father's house, her laughter seemed strange to her. She finds it difficult to believe that she is laughing. Life is taken so seriously to such an extent that this aspect of laugher is missing in all their lives. She has been transformed in Nsukka and had experienced the other side of her existence. Little wonder that during this first visit to Nsukka, her father appeared to her like a total stranger. 'Those bushy eyebrows were not familiar; neither was that shade brown skin. Perhaps if Obiora had not said, Uncle Eugene, I would not have known that it was Papa, that the tall stranger in the well-tailored white tunic was Papa' (194).

In furtherance of her radicalism, when Papa-Nnukwu died, Eugene's initial refusal to give a dime for the burial unless Papa-Nnukwu be buried in the catholic way - 'I cannot participate in a pagan funeral, but we can discuss with the parish priest and arrange a Catholic funeral' (195) did not deter Aunty Ifeoma from pushing on with the burial arrangements. She protested that she will sacrifice her all to give Papa-Nnukwu the last respect. In her protestation, she posits that 'I will put my dead husband's grave up for sale, Eugene, before I give our father a Catholic funeral. Do you hear me? I said I will sell Ifediora's grave first! Was our father a Catholic? I ask you, Eugene, was he a Catholic? Uchu gba gi!' (195). This is symbolic of a female child against the laid down traditions ready to give up everything to save her family and accord her dead father the right respect.

Her radicalism and challenge of patriarchy is not only limited to her family. Professionally, as a lecturer in the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, she was reckoned with for her nonconforming, leftist and anti-military stand. The military interference in the administration of the University, through the appointment of a sole administrator, which she thinks is professionally wrong, is a strong indication that her much professed radicalism is her way of life. In her words,

We cannot sit back and let it happen, mba. Where else have you heard of such a thing as a sole administrator in a university [...] A governing council votes for a vice chancellor. That is the way it has worked since the university was built, that is the way it is supposed to work, oburia? [...] I am not paid to be loyal. When I speak the truth, it becomes disloyalty. (227)

She did not just only join in the struggle for a better educational system under the military dictatorship through the strike actions, but was never intimidated and ultimately sacrificed her job to uphold her stand even when she had fore information that her name is on the list of 'lecturers who are disloyal to the university' (227). It was clear that her discontent is aimed at a restructuring of the system for the best in line with global best practices. Expectedly, she lost her job on the allegation of 'illegal activity' (265).

Her discontent with the status quo in Nigeria and the resultant witch-hunt by the authorities forced her to seek asylum in the United States of America where she can be free, truthful and faithful to her professional career without fear, prejudice or favour. Her refusal to submit to the whims, caprices and dictates of the patriarchal society is a strong indication of her indispensable role in driving the plot of the story to a logical conclusion. She did not only raise a voice for

women oppressed by patriarchy, but also contributed to the discourse of a postcolonial nation. For her, the pursuit of womanist objectives is pari passu the pursuit of nationalist objectives in the society. She adequately understands that a woman will only have equal rights with a man when the society permits such and directed her radicalism towards the state.

For Amaka, worthy of note is her refusal to select a confirmation name from the array of names proposed by Father Amadi. Aside from scolding Kambili to aid her (Kambili's) self-realization, she strongly protested against the Catholic tradition of confirmation and picking an English name, which are meaningless or the meaning of which she cannot comprehend. She could not figure out the rationale behind this age long tradition of patriarchy through the Catholic Church that has gone unchallenged. In the words of Kambili, the narrator, Amaka protests thus,

[b]ut what's the point, then? Amaka said to Father Amadi, as if she had not heard her mother. What the church is saying is that only an English name will make your confirmation valid. Chiamaka says God is beautiful. Chima says God knows best, Chiebuka says God id the greatest. Don't they all glorify God as much as Paul, and Peter and Simon? (276)

She no doubt finds solace in the traditional names that were rejected by the church. This

decision which did not go down well with her mother is a strong point that challenges patriarchy, imperialism and chauvinistic myths.

Conclusion

An attempt has been made here to underscore and argue in support of the rationale behind the multiplicity of female characters in feminist narratives in Nigeria. This is perceived to be Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's feminist inclination. From the instances presented, female characters and their unique plights as presented in feminist narratives exposes the cruelty and inhumane treatments melted out on them by patriarchy. Purple Hibiscus, a contemporary feminist

narrative in Nigeria, though set in the past no doubt serves as a testament to this. All the identified female characters in this work, as against different interpretations of Purple Hibiscus through the character of the perceived heroine in the novel, were victims of patriarchy, gave a voice to the female gender, and concretize the undeniable roles of women in home building and the discourse of nationhood in Nigeria.

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