

Echos of Gendered Voices, Feminist Politics and Social Transformation in Nigerian Literary Scene

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Abstract

Women in Nigeria have over the years played vital roles in fostering national growth and development which are important for sustainable transformation of progressive society. However, the phenomenon of gender inequality, a systemic aberration rooted in the long-entrenched sociocultural norms tends to persist and continues to relegate women to second-fiddle roles in most parts of African societies. By employing feminist literary theory as an analytical parameter, this study examines the contributions of Nigerian women writers in reshaping gender narratives in the last few decades. The paper examines the imperatives of creative works as means of awareness creation and as mobilisations strategies towards resisting patriarchal oppression. The study closely interrogates patriarchal stereotypes and strategies of reimagining female characters within the evolving sociopolitical, socio-economic, and cultural realities portrayed in literary texts, particularly those of women writers in the Nigerian literary ferment. The study thus underscores the transformative power of literature in advancing inclusive development and addressing critical needs of society. It finds out that the push for gender equality is a critical catalyst for national development just as contemporary literature increasingly mirrors gender-based sociocultural anomalies in society. The paper thus concludes that equitable representation of women's presence in narratives as depicted in literary tests and in reality will not only reflect but will actively accelerate societal progress and drive Nigeria's developmental aspirations to greater heights.

Keywords: Gender equality, women's voices, Nigerian literary scene, national development.

Introduction

The Nigerian society is largely traditional and patriarchal, characterised by male-dominating norms of which women are often pitched on the receiving side of the patriarchal anomalies and gender-based inequities. The culture of patriarchy tends to justify women's marginalisation in education, economy, labour market, politics, business, family and domestic matters, and also in issues of inheritance (Salaam, 2003). It is against this backdrop that this study is motivated by the need for society to reconsider the role of women in society for an effective social, political, socio-economic, cultural and national development. It is regrettable that the real value of women in society, especially in most of African socio-cultural milieu, has not been sufficiently or properly captured by earlier male-dominated creative writers as it is with the male counterparts.

There is no gainsaying that literature serves as catalyst for national development and social transformation of the different societies of the world. Literature mirrors the society that it is rooted in. Essentially, it captures the different experiences, struggles, aspirations, successes, human foibles and failings, as well as achievements and progress over time (Udoinwang and Tsaaior, 2023, P.1). With the use of different literary genres such as novels, drama, poetry, essays, fiction and nonfiction, the Nigerian women writers have used their creative talents as means to explore different themes that are related to their experiences in the socio-cultural world that they find themselves. Such themes that have become the signature tune among Nigerian female writers include gender issues, women empowerment, resistance against patriarchy and other forms of socio-political, socio-economic and socio-sexuality issues, all in the bids to make the female voices to be heard and recognised as those of the male counterparts. Their works, like those of socially committed writers (Udoinwang and Enukora, 2024, P.37), serve as avenues for addressing social and critical issues that ignite and illuminate conversations that are envisioned as roadmap to progressive change and national development.

The Nigerian women writers have not only come of age, they are breaking new grounds and making serious incursion and creating significant impact on the Nigerian literary scene. Much of the female-gendered voices that echo through the female-authored literary texts have been inspired by the widespread inequities that male-deterministic society inflicts on the female gender through primordial cultural mentalities that still persist in the present. Hence, female writers simply use artistic media as platform to lend their voices to the movement and mission to change the status quo that had affected and constrained women from realizing their full potentials and human dignity over the ages. Nigerian women writers have continued to contribute immensely to the discourse of gender equity, social justice, equality, growth and development in society through literary discourse and women sensitisation as their patriotic contribution towards nation building, and human capital development. The continued growth and widespread of literary works that are centred on these themes are clear indicators and the recognition of the role of literature as catalyst for human development.

Gender Framing and Feminist Construct in Nigerian Literary Ferment

Feminist conceptualisation as a theoretical parameter for critical analysis of literary texts, resists the concept of traditional stereotyping, assumptions and gender inequality viewed from male chauvinistic and patriarchal tendencies. Feminist writers adhere to portraying women characters from the point of view that seeks to accord the women their fundamental human rights as humans, and advocate resistance to women enslavement and tyranny. Feminist scholars and advocates tend to crave a positive model of gender equality, equity and parity which they consider as mandatory for a peaceful coexistence and sustainable development of societies around the world. Generally stated, feminist thought in its variegated hues, is opposed to gender discrimination and oppression while it advocates that things should be done from the point of view of gender justice and equity, demanding through diverse creative strategies a certain degree of level playing ground for both sexes towards achieving gender cohesion, national transformation and human progress. It advocates the creative engagement that promotes the reality that male and female members of the society are treated with the mindset of human equality, shared humanity and mutual respect, with respect to equal opportunities, decent partnership and fairness as opposed to tyrannical control of one gender against the other. In other words, feminist conception is grounded on the reasoning that no sex – male or female- in the society will be at the mercy of the other or treated with bias and discrimination or unjustly for reasons of cultural ethos and values that are obviously inhuman and unjust.

The notion of gender conceptualisation in the Nigerian society is socially and culturally construed based on social norms, traditional practices and patriarchal value system. Gender is not necessarily about biology or nature in this contest; rather, it is viewed based on theory or analysis which is socially constructed and appropriated based on biases. Feminism in the context as used in this paper is based on the tenet of political, economic, and social rights or on equality of both sexes organised around activities for the actualisation of women's rights and interests. Gaelle Abou Nasr affirms that feminism as a theory argues against women's oppression and demands the abolition of women's discrimination especially in the present socio-political dispensation. In addition, she asserts that it helps us to take a closer look at socio-economic and political reality of women (1).

The concept of gender and feminist struggles has evolved over the years and this has added significantly to rouse attention of policy makers as well as draw more and more women to the consciousness of their potentials and power as well as their roles in the power dynamics of society that they live in. This paradigm shift is influenced by societal perception of gendered groups depending on individuals, contexts and particular society or environment. This has led to various interpretations, including cases of gendering transitions, modifications or identities that do not conform to or align with an individual's biological sex at birth. The term "gender" is often mistakenly conflated with "sex," though they are not synonymous.

From the foregoing discussion, it is established that from a historical and cultural perspective, that men enjoyed better recognitions and opportunities in life than the woman. Apart from the fact that women are meant to be seen and treated as the "weaker sex" they are often relegated to the background by society. Take for instance, in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) the novelist uses the classic work to extol traditional Igbo society. However it shows that women are marginalised in the society. Thus Achebe portrays Okonkwo as visiting his violent temper on his wives as an outlet to pour out his violent temper whenever he feels frustrated and on the slightest provocation. Ekwefi, his patient wife puts it very succinctly after being beaten up and shouted at by her husband Okonkwo; women "have not yet found the mouth with which to tell" their story of oppression from their husbands. This chauvinistic tendency is also observed on how Okonkwo, the stereotyped Nigerian patriarch, treats and beats up his wives and daughters. Despite the pervasive sexist beliefs and the traditional expectations placed on women first as child-bearers, they are also seen as a resilient and vital force within traditional African society where children symbolise the continuity of family lineage and heirloom embodied both for women and men. This seems to be representative of how women were hitherto seen in real life and now captured in literature.

Women's voices according to Lloyd Brown were hardly heard, rarely discussed or even barely accorded a space in the repeated anthologies dominated by men. He adds that one needs to skim through pages of some of the publications to verify that "women writing is conspicuously absent" (3). Subsequently, Ama Ata Aidoo puts it that women's works were not considered serious enough to deserve giving them any critical attention in the earlier African literary discourse (516). As time went on, with new wave of economic, social and political developments in Nigeria, the gap in gender framing, feminist and women matters started to change positively and the portrayal of women image and their recognition, started to improve, to gain prominence. Female characters began to be recreated as modern, rational and assertive. Women writers started representing their female characters to embody societal gender norms, roles and they argue for change against traditional practices. Beyond this, they started depicting women characters as fighting to claim what rightly belongs to them. This new wave of change of the image of the Africa woman is pioneered in the novels of Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta (Helen Chukwuma, 1989). Recent developments in

Nigeria, Africa and indeed the world at large, prompted Nigerian women writers to reappraise themselves and their works from their own perspectives; as they feel that they should be portrayed and not from the eyes of their male counterparts or the larger society that seem to undermine their worth and importance. They detail their circumstances and create a new art form showing empathy as wives, mothers and women writers for the benefit of society and their gender who suffer similar circumstances.

Feminist Echoes, Gender Parity and Reformation in the New Dispensation

In the literary arena and critical scholarship, the Nigerian women have broken through the 'silences' and 'absences' that reflected the socio-cultural and political discourse in the literary works of the pioneer male-dominated literary eco-system. Through creative mediations and critical scholarship, the Nigerian women who were represented culturally as baby making machines and objects of sex, or as house-keepers have come through thick and thin to recreate themselves both through individual and collective voices to assert gender pride, assert womanhood and blaze frontal presence as mirrored in such texts as Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, *Everything Good Will Come* by Sefi Atta's, *The Last of the Sting Ones* by Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo, the various award-winning literary works of Chimamanda Adechie, among the whole lots. They have gathered boisterous energy towards recreating their identity and asserting female power and their humanity in the face of what had hitherto laid down patriarchal adversities. Being so energised, it could be said that it would be difficult for the Nigerian woman of today and in the future to endure subjugation or cope with the subservient role that society apportioned to them as could be noticed in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* where women tolerated second fiddle roles, existed in absence and were more or less objectivised.

In the new dispensation, the Nigerian male chauvinistic attitude towards women have become challenged and largely interrogated in the bulk of contemporary gender-based literary works written by both male and female authors towards a re-jigging of the patriarchal narratives and lopsided cultural stereotypes. The voices challenging patriarchy have gone far and wide, and the society have been closely sensitised through engaging literary discourse and practical proclamations and daily engagements. Thus, Achebe's *Anthill of the Savannah* (1987), a relatively newer novel, diverges significantly from *Things Fall Apart* in its representation of women. This represents a shift that aligns with feminist critiques of gendered power dynamics that underscores evolving literary engagements and better-informed gender discourse. In *Anthill*, women are not portrayed in the stereotype notion of the traditional African woman as seen in *Things Fall Apart*. In the novel, the main female character Beatrice retorts:

You hear all kinds of nonsense talk from girls: Better to marry a rascal than grow a moustache in your father's compound. Better an unhappy marriage than an unhappy spinster-hood. Better marry Mr. Wrong in this world than wait for Mr. Right in heaven; all marriages are how-for-do. I was determined to put my career first. That every woman wants a man to complete her is a piece of male chauvinist bullshit I had completely rejected before I know there was anything called woman's liberation (*Anthill*: 92).

The caption reflects the protagonist Beatrice's strong and independent mindset and symbolism the dawning of female self-assertiveness on matters of marriage and gender roles as she rebels against traditional stereotype of women and marriage. This is a feminist viewpoint borne out of the current vision of the truly liberated African woman. Beatrice rises against the traditional notion of 'subservient women' and marriage. No female character would have been depicted in this light a few

decades ago when *Things Fall Apart* was written.

Female writers led by Flora Nwapa try to redefine themselves in the fiery feminist engagement against patriarchal order in Nigerian society. Monique Ekpong magnifies this feminist empowerment consciousness and astute voices in women writing by arguing that they write to validate women's personality, experience and provide a more realistic image of women as a separate human entity different from men as asserted thus: "It has become compelling for women to write to validate fellow women and to project their identity and tragic condition" (1). Charles E. Nnolim, asserts that "Nigerian women writers have formed a radical feminist school and orientation in order to counteract and redeem the historically disparaged and debased image of Nigerian women in literature" (240). This highlights how Nigerian female authors challenge patriarchal narratives by creating alternative perspectives in literature in the bids to redefine female roles, power and identity.

The above postulation attests to the fact that women are increasingly beginning to be portrayed as modernised, bold, dynamic, hardworking, and assertive which they of course have always been, though suppressed by the gendered eco-system; and are thus actively contributing to their personal growth and development. By the utility of literary medium, women have been extirpated to new awakening, and are gaining more and more energy in participating in driving the dynamics of power; actively participating in building families, communities, and the nation at large. The need for gender balance in Nigeria is a fundamental requirement to foster peace and unity, and to enable individual growth to perform their best and develop potentials for self-actualisation. It is crucial for upholding human rights, equity, fairness, and justice; and serves as catalyst for nation building and sustainable development individuals and the society.

All the harsh treatments faced by women notwithstanding, they are still making impacts and breaking new grounds in the midst of different gender-based vicissitudes. This includes most importantly taking charge of their lives and what concerns them as reflected in their literatures. The Nigerian women's voices have become a force to reckon with, a voice of inspiration and transformation despite the various setbacks that still hinder them. Their contributions to literary creativity and critical scholarship in Nigeria demonstrate the level of consciousness and strength they have garnered in terms of ingenuity and creative power. In the evolving 21st century Nigerian society, the interconnectivity of women's contribution to literature and national development are glaring. Today's incisiveness found its way into the repertory of Nigerian literature, and happily enough, female writers form a substantial block of the present day literary epoch. They have grown in number and strength, and are breaking new grounds. Besides, they have acquired education, new skills and self-confidence which have contributed positively to literary growth in Nigeria. In classrooms, in colleges and tertiary institutions, young girls could be seen clamouring to do their long essays and projects on feminist or gender-based areas. The Nigerian women writers and their works discussed in this work are Flora Nwapa, Molara Ogundipe Leslie, Zaynab Alkali, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Zulu Sofola, among others. Some of their works are discussed to buttress the underlying trend of the feminist consciousness. Emphasis are made to show that since the late 20th century, Nigerian women voices have continued to rise and have contributed to the reformation of social structure, economic life, gender roles and parity, identity and female self-respect. Literature has remained the essential megaphone by which women's voices have been amplified and with sustained echoes.

Female Voices and Feminist Momentum in Contemporary Nigerian Literary Sphere

Flora Nwapa, the female forerunner of African literature, occupies the pride of place in the Nigerian literary history; and thus subsequently, paving the way for others to follow. She grew through the dint

of hard work to become an accomplished writer and activist who occupies herself with gender politics and womanhood. Her literary and critical works display a firm commitment and avid belief in feminist issues and family ties while showcasing rich African culture; particularly that of the Igbo. The consistent theme that runs through her work magnifies the emotional trauma which women suffer owing to childlessness and broken marriages due to no fault of theirs. Her *Efuru* (1966), for instance, set in a traditional Igbo society in Nigeria, underscores the pathetic position of women in Nigeria's patriarchal society. The story revolves around Efuru, a strong, hardworking and independent woman who challenges and defies traditional norms and oppressive societal practices imposed on women; such as the traditional expectation of motherhood as the measure of fulfillment in the life for a woman. Efuru is abandoned by her husband for another wife because she could not have a child of her own, having lost her only child at infancy. She pondered with a heavy heart the thought that she was considered barren: "It was a curse not to have children. Her people did not just take it as one of the numerous accidents of nature, it was regarded as a failure" (*Efuru*: 165).

Childlessness is considered a taboo in her traditional society. In order to salvage this situation, she decides to find solace in serving humanity by worshipping the goddess of the lake, Uhamiri. Her reverence to this goddess shows her independence, determination and spirituality as she defies societal norms and marital challenges regarding motherhood. Her choice to worship the goddess represents defiance, a different trajectory towards fulfilling her life desires which is different from societal expectations. The image of Uhamiri, is introduced by the novelist to serve as an alternative path to life for Efuru so that women would be educated and know that there are other ways to find happiness in life other than marriage and motherhood. This other alternative routes centers on spirituality, economic interest, humanity and one's personal fulfillment beyond the imposed value system of motherhood even when it is not possible:

Uhamiri has never had a child, yet she is worshipped and loved. Efuru herself deliberated on this and concludes that the goddess; was beautiful. She gave women beauty and wealth but she had no child. She has never experienced the joy of motherhood. (*Efuru*: 221).

This underscores the novelist's criticism and cynicism of societal expectations which are tied to a woman's value and fulfillment in life being linked to marriage and childbearing.

Efuru endures two failed marriages thereby emphasising societal pressures placed on women in an attempt to make her home. Her resilience in life despite her plight highlights her strength and independence in going above society expectation. By portraying Efuru as a stereotype, Nwapa explores the stigma that extends beyond infertility to delve into the belief that a woman's real value is intrinsically tied to her ability to bear children. In creating the character Efuru, Nwapa preaches that there could be fulfillment in life for the Nigerian woman if she finds happiness in what she enjoys doing other than motherhood and marriage. The cogent message made by the novelist is that the agony of childlessness borne by women is etched in physical, psychological and emotional pain which results in mental and emotional trauma. Consequently, she calls for a reformation of traditional values in favour of women. As a gender-conscious narrative, *Efuru* stands out as a pioneering and essential work in African literature that offers a genuine picture of the struggles which women face in traditional African societies. Ama Ata Aidoo reinforces this assertion:

Efuru truly symbolises the struggles that face millions of female workers and peasants all over the African continent (who) daily wage heroic struggles against the shackles of the negative tradition, ...natural forces and exploitative eco-political systems that seek to silence them (2007, PP.514-515).

Nwapa's empathy firmly aligns with women as she demonstrates a deep understanding of their circumstances. She champions women's liberation and empowerment while advocating self-realisation and the creation of a fair and just society.

Her One is Enough (1981) is a captivating and thought-provoking life experience of its protagonist, Amaka. Amaka separates from her marriage to Obiora because the marriage is stressed by irreconcilable facts which are her inability to give birth to a child, most expectantly, a male child who will carry on the family's lineage. Her marriage fails because a happy marriage is certainly the one that is blessed with children. In the midst of this, she tries everything possible to redeem her image from the shackles of barrenness. As a result, rather than stay in the troubled marriage (as tradition expects of her) with her unfaithful and polygamous husband, she decides to move to Lagos where she becomes a successful businesswoman through the dint of hard work and determination. This proves that she has the capability to thrive and succeed in life outside of marriage. In Lagos, she falls in love with a Catholic Priest, Rev Fr Mclaid with whom she has a set of twins out of wedlock; proving that she is not barren. Writing from a woman's perspectives, Nwapa in *Amaka*, creates her female character as strong, independent and assertive. This is because Amaka makes up her mind to live as a single mother and damns the consequences of the stigma rather than to remain in an unsuccessful marriage, and of course not to go in for a second marriage. This falls short of traditional expectation and in the context of self-realisation as a single mother, she declares:

I don't want to be a wife... A mistress, yes, but not a wife... As a wife,
I am never free. I am a shadow of myself. As a wife, I am almost impotent.
I am in prison, unable to advance in body or soul" (OIE, 132).

This is a challenge and an indictment to traditional belief that a woman's worth is linked to her ability to marry and have children. Amaka's decision to stay single, with or without a child, symbolises defiance against patriarchal cultural dictates. Her success in Lagos illustrates that women can make it in life outside the confines of traditional gender roles. *One is Enough* is a powerful feminist statement where the novelist uses Amaka's encounter as a stereotype to challenge the deeply rooted cultural norms of patriarchy in society. Its relevance serves as a commentary on gender roles and empowerment for a possible alternative voice.

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie is a critic and poet whose legacy lies in her groundbreaking concept, known as "Stiwanism," which redefines African feminism thought by prioritising social transformation and cultural authenticity. Her revolutionary poetry which is ambitious, firm and poignant in theme and form is set to defend the plight of the African women against oppression. As a trailblaser of contemporary African literature, the poet preaches equality of both sexes and seeks to redefine, establish and support equal rights for women and men in traditional patriarchal institution and society. Her "On Reading an Archaeological Article" (1982) is a critique of ancient practice of neglecting women's contributions in Africa as captured in historical narrative. Ogundipe-Leslie frowns at the fact that African women are often marginalised and are not usually recognised in

archaeological and historical record suggesting that men focus on themselves in recognising and recording historical facts and grand structures, overlooking crucial roles played by notable women in society.

The poem subtly frowns and reminds readers that African women's roles and impact to political leadership and the society are not given the recognition they deserve even though their contribution are central to the development of society, but rather their input and participation are often being overlooked or neglected. She calls for an inclusive and accurate portrayal of African history especially where the voices and contributions of African women in the growth and development of the society are captured. In doing this she challenges scholars to ensure that women are no longer forgotten or macerated from the past. She makes this observation in reference to the person and reign of the legendary Queen of Egypt, Nefertiti. In the first stanza the Queen is described in picturesque and geographical images:

They would say that she with the neck like a duiker's
Whose breasts are the hills of Egypt
Who weeps the Nile from her eyes of antimony?
Is but another cosmopolitan housewife.
("On Reading an Archaeological Article" PP.42-43).

The beautiful regal Queen Nefertiti is described in a grand style and majesty that seems to embody the whole landscape of Egypt. Her neck is compared to a duiker's in resonant of the curved tip of the nation's map. Her breasts are likened to the rolling hills of Egypt and the Nile, which is Africa's longest and famous river. Ogundipe-Leslie points out that this powerful Egyptian Queen, with all her powers and majesty as the ultimate Queen of Egypt, is still not given the honour she deserves, but she is only perceived as a mere woman because of patriarchal prescriptive mores obtainable in the ancient Egyptian society as she is perceived and seen first and foremost, as yet "another cosmopolitan housewife". Despite her position as the powerful ruler of the country, she is not accorded the respect and honour which she deserve but rather she is perceived first and foremost as the "Other", a woman and a wife. This is a feminist-oriented poem which preaches the recognition of women in the society where from historical and cultural perspectives, women are discriminated against.

In the second stanza, in order to help alter and reshape society, the authorial voice of the poet comes out strongly, and she ask a fundamental and philosophical question that borders on the existing power structure:

How long shall we speak to them
Of the goldness of mother, of difference without bane
How long shall we say another world lives?
Not spinned on the axis of maleness
But rounded and wholed, charting through
Its many runnels its justice distributive.
("On Reading an Archaeological Article" PP. 42-43)

The excerpt above is an evocation and deep reflection of gender equity and the feminine essence of motherhood. The poet demands for an egalitarian society that is not dominated by patriarchal structures, but for a balanced and a more holistic environment of fairness, equity and justice, for a place that nurtures and sustains qualities that are associated with motherhood. The phrase "goldness

of mother" suggests the sacredness and richness of motherhood, perhaps pointing to an ideal where this quality is valued because motherhood is central to human progress and development. The phrase "not spinned on the axis of maleness" suggests the historical domination of masculinity and advocates for a more holistic and inclusive society. The interjection of "How long shall we speak to them," captures a frustration by the need to constantly explain these concepts to those who have not yet accepted the concept of equity and fairness. The "runnels" refers to channels and paths of justice that wind through various societal layers, carrying with them the promise of a more just and equitable future.

Her "Yoruba Love" is a satire directed at the romantic expressions of men on the disparity between their sweet-coated poetic declarations to young girls and their real self which do not tally. Ogundipe-Leslie uses negative imagery to critique men's pretentious utterances and emptiness which do not truly portray love and empathy. The poem concludes with an advice and admonition to women to bear and watch out for deceptive lovers who are merely out to dishonor, deceive and take advantage of them:

When they smile and they smile and then begin to say
With pain on their brows and songs in their voice,
The nose is a cruel organ, and the heart without bone,
For were the bone not cruel, it would smell love for you,
And the heart, if not boneless, would feel my pain for you.
And the throat, O, has not roots, or it would root to flower my love—
Run for shelter, friend (Okike, P.36).

The collection, *Sew the Old Days and Other Poems* generally captures her feminist poetic posturing and shows the author's tendency to be blunt and confrontational on gender and related socio-cultural issues.

Zaynab Alkali is no doubt a leading literary voice from Northern Nigeria whose thematic concern recreates a subtle exploration of women's plight within the confines of Northern Nigeria's patriarchal and dominantly Islamic socio-cultural geo-political setting. Her *The Stillborn* (1984) and *The Virtuous Woman* (1987), foreground the tensions between tradition, religion, and women's experience, thus making her a critical voice in postcolonial African feminist discourse. Alkali lends her voice to that of her other Nigerian women writers to promote the image of the Nigerian woman in order to change the already established narratives and gender roles in society. This is seen as reflected in her novels. *The Stillborn* critically examines the social, cultural and religious intricacies that interplay within the Northern Nigerian socio-cultural milieu. Using Li as a type, Alkali interrogates engendered stratification of roles that conflate womanhood with domestic roles, positioning societal expectations of daughters, wives and mothers as antithetical to the growth of women and their aspirations. The novel also condemns the rigid interpretations of Islam that endorses women's subjugation, while at the same time advocating a positive interpretation of Islamic faith that aligns with female empowerment, social justice and fairness.

The novel opens with a gloomy foreboding, an apprehension that the protagonist Li, is already confined and choked with the life in the village that is "worse than a prison" where "she felt trapped and unhappy" (P.3). She is presented as an embodiment of tension and suffering that oscillate between an individual's ambition and communal tradition. Alkali's portrayal of Li's psychological and emotional trauma is symbolised by the metaphor of "stillborn" aspirations. This serves as a critique of

systemic barriers that render women's potentials unrealisable. The novel underscores how patriarchal structures are reinforced by sexist cultural practices, and this enforces women's subservience, complicating their quest for freedom and self-actualisation. Alkali's feminist discourse emerges through her depiction of female resilience, as characters navigate oppression through subtle rebellion, economic activities, and educational attainment. Thus, Li symbolises the liberated Nigerian woman whose struggles against gendered stereotype reflects broader postcolonial feminist concerns about identity and autonomy in traditional societies. The novel posits education as a catalyst for emancipation, framing it as both a tool for intellectual liberation and a means to dismantle systemic inequities.

In the same vein, *The Virtuous Woman* (1987) offers a rich stream of feminist statement that relates to gender roles, power, autonomy, and the quest for self-identity in a traditional Nigerian society. The novelist challenges traditional socio-cultural ideal placed on women in Nigerian society by using the protagonist as means to critically examine the unrealistic expectations placed on women, while also celebrating the exemplary value of morality, resilience and inner virtue of the Nigerian woman. The thrust of the feminist content is deeply rooted in exploring women's struggles and pain as they attempt to transverse and subvert themselves from patriarchal systems. The title of the text itself lays emphasis on the societal expectation from women especially from the point of view of the traditional Nigerian culture where women are often pigeonholed to conform to strict traditional standards. The meaning of "virtuous" in the novel is not defined by her compliance with patriarchal demands but by her ability to remain true to herself and assert her own self-identity. This means that in life, true virtue is the ability and courage to make bold choices and take control of one's life and dignity. Using the novel as channel of resistance, Alkali condemns patriarchal system that defines women's roles as being submissive to men. Women in the novel though often traumatised by societal standards are depicted as finding ways to resist and subvert these structures. Alkali uses the experiences of her female characters to critique the disadvantages of traditional gender roles, particularly in marriage, education and family life.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2004) also interrogates feminist ideals through the lens of patriarchal system that is entangled with neocolonialism, religion, and inflexible cultural practices. The novel is set against Nigeria's political turbulence, during the Nigerian Civil War. It deploys African literary traditions to intersect with themes of gender, justice, and resistance. The novel unravels the layered struggles of women navigating through pains of reproduction and systemic oppression. The narrator, Kambili Achike exposes the suffocating tyranny of Eugene, a devout yet abusive patriarch whose rigid beliefs mask his violence and masculine control. His wife, Beatrice, embodies quiet resilience, which shows that she endures years of subjugation before repositioning herself and her children for liberation. Their daughter, Kambili, narrates her journey from silenced obedience to self-discovery, and through mirroring broader societal shifts. Adichie's feminist lens underscores how colonialism and religion exacerbate gendered oppression, positioning feminism not as a Western import but as a vital framework for dignity in postcolonial Nigeria. The novel celebrates forms of resistance while critiquing institutionalised misogyny. By centering women's quests for autonomy, *Purple Hibiscus* asserts that true liberation demands confronting different forms of systems of power thereby, ultimately affirming feminism as a tool of survival, empowerment and transformation.

Her Half of a Yellow Sun (2006) explores historical facts about the Nigerian Civil War and feminism through the experiences of its female characters. The novel interrogates gender roles, autonomy, and

resilience in a society tortured by colonialism, war, and patriarchy. Olanna, an educated, privileged woman, embodies the tension between traditional expectations and modern independence. Her academic career made her to refuse to conform to passive feminist challenges and patriarchal norms. Her twin, Kainene, on the other hand, is a sharp contrast, assertive, business-minded, and emotionally guarded. Her relationship with Richard, a white man, subverts colonial and gendered power dynamics, as she remains the dominant partner. The novel critically looks at the limitations placed on women's intellectual lives, even among the elites, showing how war restricts and forces their resilience. Again she condemns sexual violence during the war. For example, the rape of Ugwu's sister vehemently exposes how women are vulnerable during war and conflicts. Adichie does not sensationalise events; she presents the horrors with stark realism for all to see. Olanna's affair with Odenigbo and her subsequent shaming highlight the double standards of sexual freedom. For example, men are celebrated for promiscuity, while on the other hand women are judged and condemned. Pregnancy and motherhood are portrayed as both empowering and imprisoning, reflecting the societal pressures placed on women to reproduce while denying them romantic freedom. Amala, the impoverished village girl is forced to be a "wife" to Odenigbo. This represents the exploitation of women from the lower-class.

Women generally bear the brunt and devastation of war as they are seen scavenging for food, protecting children, sexually abused by warlords and enduring trauma while men fight or debate politics as the case may be. Olanna's transformation from a sheltered academic to a war-hardened survivor illustrates how crisis forces women into roles they never chose, yet they adapt with fierce determination. Adichie does not present feminism as a Western import, but as an organic part of African women's lives which is complex, painful, and depressing. The novel shows that in war and peace, women's labor, love, and suffering sustain society, even when their contributions are not often accorded desirable recognition. Adichie's works are noted for the exploration of feminist themes, making significant contributions to both African and global feminist movement.

Zulu Sofola's "Wedlock of the Gods" (1972) is a dramatic critique of patriarchal conflicts in traditional African society which challenges existing power structures, social norms and gender inequality. It is a focus on how traditional values and gender roles affect women, their self-determination and love life. The play is set in an Igbo society and narrates the unpleasant encounters of Ogwoma, a young widow, who was forced into a marriage to uphold tradition, and her failed love affair with Uloko, a man from a lower social class. Ogwoma's fate is decided by men, her father, late husband's family, and the elders in the community who force her to marry her late husband's brother. She is seen as an object to be used and transferred to another man without her consent. She loves Uloko, but she is forced to marry Adigwu, her late husband's brother in order to preserve her late husband's family name. When Ogwoma and Uloko want to elope, they face brutal refusal. This shows how society treats women who resist unjust traditional practices. Meanwhile men like Adigwu marry many wives and exert sexual authority on them. The tragic side to the play is that Ogwoma is made to die which is a critique of a system that destroys women to preserve men's ego and patriarchal cultural norms.

This play could be seen as a veritable expose on the repercussions of a society that is plagued by inequitable cultural system that inhibits growth and development of women. The society mirrored in the play foregrounds the playwright's conscious projection of artistic vision that elicits foundational feminist statement in African literature. It also reflects the playwright's commitment to addressing the complexities of gender roles while advocating women's emancipation and reformation within the

context of African traditions. In *Wedlock of the Gods*, Sofola does not dismiss African culture as such, but she challenges its oppressive nuances, particularly those that dehumanise women and limit their choice for a better life. At the end she calls for reforms, but not abolition of African tradition in any case.

Conclusion

The analysis so far in this work has focused on the socio-cultural imperatives and power dynamics of the transformation of Nigerian women as voiced out through literary works in shaping gender equity and sustainable national development. This representation has shifted from historically reductive depictions of passivity to a distinctive portrayal of their plight, individuality and resilience. The analysis of women-authored Nigerian literary outputs has shown that women writers have emerged from their cocoon to become critical reformers by interrogating traditional cultural system where women are used as sexual objects, discriminated against and subjected to diverse sorts of disenfranchisement as determined by patriarchal norms and traditional cultural ethos. The work has tried to highlight how the ever-flourishing feminist texts continue to project narratives of freedom, female power and self-fulfillment by stridently challenging the “primordial” patriarchal socio-cultural stereotypes. It underscored the fact that literary texts has come to serve as channel to voice out gender equality, women inclusivity, empowerment and social justice, while at the same time serving as illuminant for exposing the complexities of such socio-cultural issues as polygamy, childlessness, broken marriages, infertility and other forms of gender-based marginalisation.

The paper thus asserts that gender equity is not a mere moral question or an ego trip, but has much to do with socioeconomic necessity for a nation's sustainable development. By highlighting literary mediations as tool for advocating equality in all spheres of human endeavours, this study emphasises that the rising momentum of female voice in literature reflects broader developmental priorities such as inclusive growth, equitable resource distribution, and the dismantling of systemic imbalances where the female gender plays the second-class roles in society. Thus, institutional reforms fostering gender equality must be prioritised, as literary representation and national progress are inextricably interwoven. Only through such structural adjustments can Nigeria begin to harness the full potential of the women towards realising the ultimate goal of human capital development and sustainable, transformative society.

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