

HARNESSING WOMEN POTENTIALS FOR NATIONAL UNITY AND DEVELOPMENT: A REVIEW OF REGINA YAOU'S *LA REVOLTE D'AFFIBA*

JUDITH EZEAMAKA (PhD)
DEPARTMENT OF LANGUAGES
SCHOOL OF GENERAL STUDIES
DELTA STATE POLYTECHNIC
PMB 1030, OGWASHI-UKU.
ezeamakajudith@gmail.com
+2348037793817

&

NNAMDI JANE C.
DEPARTMENT OF LANGUAGES AND COMMUNICATION
SCHOOL OF GENERAL STUDIES
ABIA STATE POLYTECHNIC, ABA
chigononso@yahoo.com
+2348033110229

ABSTRACT

*This paper discusses the need for the potentials in women to be harnessed for the unity and development of the nation. The fact still remains that it takes two to tango and so, no meaningful development can be achieved without the full involvement and participation of women. Previously, women have been given little or no room to contribute their quota maximally to the nation's development. However, Régina Yaou's *La Révolte d'Affiba* reveals that there are enormous potentials in women that would greatly benefit the nation if properly harnessed. The author's treatment of the traditional African society in the novel shows that women are still very marginalised and humiliated. A lot of factors including tradition have hindered women from manifesting their full potentials. The research reveals how the negative aspects of the African tradition have denigrated women thereby robbing the entire society of all round development. It is on this ground that this paper presents the benefits to be derived if women are given ample opportunity to participate like their male counterparts in the affairs of the nation. From the work under review, it is shown that a nation could experience serious setbacks without the full involvement and collaboration of women. Therefore, this paper recommends full participation of women in every sphere and sector of the nation. In addition to the textual analysis, the theoretical framework adopted is socio-criticism.*

Key words: women potentials, national development and unity, socio-criticism.

Introduction

The roles and representation of African women and men have for centuries been strongly determined, anchored and internalized by patriarchal and hierarchical norms. This dichotomy has existed for centuries without significant changes. With regard to women, the traditional beliefs and prejudices conveyed by society are impressive.

As a result, African feminist writers have given themselves the responsibility of improving the condition of women, making them change their attitude and show that they are intelligent and can, like white men or women, reach positions of responsibility as well as contribute generously to the nations development. These feminist writers through their literary creations create positive feminine heroes who in most cases dominate their male counterparts, proving the enormous potential imbedded in women waiting to be harnessed.

According to Orucha (2003) the progress and development of any nation is the women in the society. Thus the women represent a tool for positive change, depending on how they are treated and the levels of opportunities given to them to actualise their potentials.

Definition of key words

National Development and Unity

According to Longman dictionary of contemporary English, National development refers to a phenomenon that embraces a whole nation. It also defines unity as the state of being in agreement and working together, the state of being joined together to form on unit. National development therefore can be described as the overall development or a collective socio-economic, political as well as religious advancement of a nation. It is holistic in approach. It can be described as a process of reconstruction and development in diverse dimensions of a nation and the development of individuals. As a matter of fact, national development cannot be complete if the individuals that make up the nation are not also developed. This can only be achieved through development planning, or collection of strategies and implementable policies mapped out by the government. National development and unity therefore means that all the individuals that make up the nation must come as a unified entity irrespective of gender, tribe, religion etc. and be able to contribute their quota on a justified platform.

Women Potential

According to the Oxford Advanced learner's dictionary, Potential is defined as qualities that exists and can be developed. It is the latent qualities or abilities that may be developed and lead to future success or usefulness. Therefore, women potentials are those strengths innate in women waiting to be exploited and put into proper use for the betterment and development of the nation.

According to World Bank Group report, Societies with greater gender equality and diversity are more productive and efficient. Breaking down gender barriers can help businesses and institutions perform better, boost competitiveness, and promote economic growth, thereby helping reduce poverty and improving development outcomes for the next generation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework adopted in this paper is the sociological criticism. The sociological criticism approach was introduced by Kenneth Burke in the 20th century; it is directed to understanding literature in its larger social context. It analyzes both how the social functions in literature and how literature works in society. According to Kenneth Burke, works of art, including literature, "are strategic naming of situations" that allow the reader to better understand and "gain a sort of control" over societal happenings through the works of art. Therefore, sociological criticism is interested on the social universe present in the text under study. Given its wide nature, we shall adopt the aspect of feminist criticism in this paper, which has to do with the place of the woman in the society.

Why the woman in national development and unity?

The significance of the woman cuts across every facet of life. The woman is the life carrier and care giver. Although her worth is not well esteemed, as a result of some reasons ranging from tradition, cultures, and even misunderstanding of some school of thoughts.

Examining the traditional African society, we see that the woman was always in silence, not free to express her own feeling or to make her own decision. She was relegated to being a dependent being. *In So Long a Letter* by Mariama Bâ, Ramatoulaye remarks this: "My voice knows thirty years of silence, thirty years of bullying" (109). This was the case of women in general in Africa, the consequence of the African tradition. Regina Yaou in her work *la Révolte d'Affiba* also affirms this fact of male dominance in a patriarchal society through Koffi:

Madame va réfléchir pour voir si elle peut insérer la venue d'un autre enfant dans son programme pour l'année. Comme je regrette l'époque de nos grands-parents où seuls les hommes avaient droit à la parole au sein de la famille. (43)

Madame will think about it to see if she can accommodate the coming of another child into her program for the year. How I miss the days of our grandparents when only men had the right to speak in the family. (43) With the tradition in active place, the woman is not seen as an important figure in any form of development let alone national development. Regina Yaou, as well as other feminist writers, affirm that in the traditional Africa society, the woman has no rights but duties, and this is one of the reasons why these female writers write to change the fortunes of the women and as well give them back their voice.

Susan Moller Okin, in her work, *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, posits that:

“when we seriously look at the distribution between husbands and wives of critical social goods such as work (paid and unpaid), power, prestige, self-esteem, opportunities for self-development, and physical and economic security we find socially constructed inequalities between them, at the bottom of the list”

The participation of women is very important to have an orderly society, because a society where a particular set of people feel cheated can never be in order. Bâ, in making a critique of negritude, asserts that «littérature africaine doit reconnaître les contributions politiques et économiques des femmes pour leur sociétés » (38). «African literature must recognize the political and economic contributions of women to their societies » women, are not only good at home for children rearing, but have also been graciously endowed by the creator to solve and meet some of the human needs.

Orucha (2003: 34) posits that the progress and development of any nation is the women in the society. Thus the women represent a tool for positive change, depending on how they are treated and the levels of opportunities given to them to actualise their potentials.

In addition, women are the unifying element by nature. In the home, they unify children to father, and make sure that the both parties cohabite happily; any home or society where the woman figure is absent or not active will always experience instability. Hence, the development of any society or nation can be guaranteed when the woman is given ample opportunity to play out her ordained role.

Mohammed & Abdulquadri (2012) posits that women are responsible for carrying out 50-60 % of the Nigeria's' food processing, agricultural and animal husbandry activities even with the fact they are challenged by lack of resources and funds. Women are resilient in nature, they are able to endure and whether through the storms without giving up. The full involvement of women for national development and unity is imperative. It has been established that, inclusive leadership teams make better decisions that deliver better results. Through women's innate leadership skills, they mentor, foster, and empower, thus leaving a legacy behind.

Barriers to full recovery of women potential

The author, Regina Yaou reveals from her book that the handicaps suffered by many women are mainly due to social circles that resulted from the interference of many diverse cultural traditions in various African societies.

Lack of formal education creates a feeling of inferiority and makes the woman less human, limits her potential and discourages her from competing favourably with her male counterpart. We can see this through the character of Gnamké, Affiba's mother. Lack of education makes the woman shy and unable to actively participate in the affairs of life. The relegation of women to the background of national development has been attributed to education, economic opportunities and the political power for women to actualize their innate potentials. Examining the role of women in national development, Asaju, K. (2013), noted that the high rate of gender disparity in the three tiers of educational institution is responsible for women not effectively participating and contributing to national development. The study therefore made a case for empowering women through education.

Child care

In the novels of this study, we see that childcare and domestic responsibilities fall largely on the woman with detrimental effects on her work. Regina Yaou reveals that the African woman still feels indebted to her children. According to Affiba's character, Yaou notices that bearing children is another factor that affects a woman's economic life and career.

De son cote, également Affiba monologuait intérieurement :

Un garçon ! C'est sa seule trouvaille pour m'occuper ! Et ma carrière ? je n'ai pas encore un an d'ancienneté. Diane vient d'avoir deux ans seulement ; il est trop tôt pour recommencer. (48)

on his part, Affiba also monologue internally:

- A boy ! This is his only find to keep me busy! What about my career? I don't have a year of seniority yet. Diane is just two years old; it is too early to start over.

Also, in *So Long a Letter*, Mariama Bâ recognizes this fact, that motherhood can hinder a woman's economic effect, since women are more attached to children than to men.

Of course, economic autonomy ensures that women are able to make choices that they consider important in their life thereby contributing their quota to development. In the novel *La Révolte d'Affiba*, Affiba recounts why she must fight for her right.

"I fight against the principle of robbing a woman in her husband's agony. We must not give in. Women, who have no gainful occupation and live only on their husbands' income at a pinch, can let that happen, although they should not. But, we who, with the sweat of our brow, help our men! I work! I have earned enough money to support my husband in acquiring everything they want now. (139).

Poverty has silenced the potentials of several women from manifesting. Made them to swallow their ideas and killed their vision for a better society.

Eyinade (2010:3-4) also have identified several other impediments which to her limit the participation of women in the political fronts. They include the cultural mores: social conventions, values and mores which combine to maintain the stereotype of women as kitchen dwellers and gate crashers outside their matrimonial homes, religion as an accomplish of cultural mores in reinforcing the barriers that prevent the women from participating politically, women's perception of politics as a dirty game and the demands of politics which is time consuming, violence and threats in political activities, etc.

Helen Chukwuma in her article "Positivism and the Female Crisis: The Novels of Buchi Emecheta", describe characters like Affiba as women who excel in their roles, they are forceful and articulate, thinking beings whom the reader is brought to recognize and appreciate as individuals not types. Each character brings to bear on a stifling situation her own peculiar way of solving the problem, hence we appreciate them for what they are and have become and not so much what they are supposed to be'.(9)

Regina Yaou through the character of Affiba illustrates how women, who are trapped in unpleasant circumstances, can be "forced" to use their intellectual independence "ingeniously" in their attempt to experience personal choice and self-determination.

Affiba chooses to fight for her right with all the means at her disposal. Affiba's resolve brought her to transformation, although her intellectual confidence does not prevent her from conflict and emotional pain, even though she fully anticipates the cost of her freedom and self-determination when she decided not to be a victim of a common syndrome. Affiba's struggle is certainly the struggle of women in Africa and but her triumph takes her beyond the intransigent battle lines established between the sexes.

Affiba rather, thinks, plans and executes her plans. Through this labyrinth of assertiveness, female individualism and personality emerge; they appear, as people capable of making and executing decisions. The struggle remains over whether society will recognize and accept the transformed identity of women like Affiba to contribute their part to the development and unity of the nation. Modupe posits that: 'the liberation of Africa is directly connected to the liberation of women'

In order for a woman to successfully wage a war against patriarchy in the society and also given the ample opportunity to utilise her potential, she must be reborn, rejecting her submissive female identity and donning the mantle of male authority. Affiba believes it is necessary to remind men that women have indeed helped liberate the African continent. She reminds men to look back and appreciate the efforts of women and see them as partners. Yaou's work shows how African society is positively being transformed owing to the contribution of few intelligent women. The protagonist's victory represents the freedom of African women.

Recommendations

The most urgent task is to form conscious individualities, starting with the inner revolution which is first of all the struggle against prejudices, these inner tyrants.

In addition, the education of women is very important and fundamental in their emancipation and liberation. An educated woman is a woman whose mind is illuminated and such a woman can competently contribute to the nation's development and unity. Education is internationally recognized as the most powerful tool for the advancement of women and girls and for the protection of their rights. Investing in their education can transform and even save the entire nation.

In addition, more slots should be allotted to women; there should be equal opportunity to both men and women

Feminist writers should continue revealing the strength of women through their various literary creations

CONCLUSION

The struggles of African women and the arrival of French-speaking African writers on the African literary scene have led to the disruption of the unilateral representation of women previously as weaklings only good for domestic activities. Yaou and a host of other African feminine writers offer a realistic assessment of African women, moving them from passivity and subordination traits, notable in a number of African writings, to exploits and action. In particular, Yaou's works push women beyond the limits of confinement and transform them into strong women who are determined to take their part in life while also making dynamic inputs to their society and the nation at large.

The unity of any nation is dependent on the satisfaction of the parties involved, which in this case is the male and female folks.

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