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22 The Role of Woman In African Literature

By Grace Akinyi Ogot

In view of the world-wide women's liberation movement, it was inevitable. The role of the woman as is portrayed in African literature is now being assessed and reassessed.

The evaluation of her involvement in the society before and after independence, the impact of alien cultures on her indigenous ways of life, the clash between Christian and non-Christian values, and of modern and traditional cures, will shed much light as to what part she is likely to play in the Western women's liberation movement which is sweeping some parts of the world. Only by analysing these factors can she answer with competence the question which has been asked again and again: What is the position of the women's liberation movement in the African context where governments still lay a lot of weight on the people's cultural heritage?

Although communication has improved tremendously, it is getting increasingly difficult to discuss African literature for the whole continent. The time when that could be done—when there were only a few works of literature in English and French or Arabic—is long past.

Most critics now prefer the regional approach, with literary works by Africans examined in the context of their regional origin: West Africa, North Africa, East Africa, Central Africa and Southern Africa. Likewise, this commentary applies to East Africa, where during the past 10 years, a sizeable number of imaginative literature has been produced.

Although there had been some literature in Swahili and other African languages, East African literature in English was born in 1964 with the publication of James Ngugi's novel, *Weep Not Child*.

This was a historical landmark in the sense that it was the first novel written in English by an East African. Of course, a few East Africans had written stories in English, for example, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta's story, "The Gentleman of the Jungle," which was published in the 1930s. But these are exceptions which prove that serious writing in English in East Africa started in 1964. Late in 1965, Ngugi published a second book, *The River Between*. These novels covered the state of emergency period in Kenya.

In the March 1966 issue of the *East African Journal*, a major debate was staged on the question of whether East Africa was suffering from a literary drought. The conclusion was that it was strange to be speaking of drought in an area which was busy ploughing its first crops. This debate was not without foundation. That year, my novel, *The Promised Land*, was published. In this novel, Nyapol, a young bride whose breasts had not suckled the first baby, is torn away from the warmth and the security of her home to migrate with her ambitious husband, Ochola, in search of better pastures in the rich and virgin soil of Tanganyika (Tanzania). To Ochola, it is bad luck that forced them to turn their backs on the wealth they had labored so much to accumulate. Yet, Nyapol—now mother of three children whose life is so tied up with her motherland—takes it as a matter of fact that the spirit of her husband's deceased mother was not happy with them when they turned their back on her grave. Nyapol would return home to appease the spirit of the dead mother-in-law.

The same year also saw the publication of *Song of Lawino* by Okot P. Bitek, who had produced a new form of poetry greatly influenced by the oral literature of the Acholi—a form which other less gifted authors have not found easy to imitate. The impact of alien culture destroys everything that Lawino loves and lives for, and she was not to recover;

there followed a feverish outburst of literary activity, both in Kenya and in neighboring Uganda, which deepened her sorrow and made her voice ring loud out to the mountains and down in the valleys.

Okelo Oculi, another Ugandan, published the *Orphan and the Prostitute*. David Rubadiri published *No Bride Price*, which like Davis Sebukima's *Half Brothers* teams with political maneuvers and sex. Ngugi adds to his list, *The Grain of Wheat*, and *I, Land Without Thunder*.

The literary drought is now over. Novels, short stories and poems pour into the market. As if the African woman has not been scathed enough, urbanization and new class distinction poses a major disruption in her life. Her man is taken away by the white-collar jobs in the big towns and cities, or to labor in the white man's farms. She must remain widowed by the white man's culture to carry the chores of her rural home. Like her man, her sisters with whom she shared the childhood rites are also changed by the city life. Charles Mangua echoes her fears in *Son of Woman*. Her brothers are gone too, as in Henry Ole Kulet's novel, *To Become a Man*, Joseph Baruga's *The Abandoned Hut*, and Leonard Kibera's *Voice in the Dark*.

Studying these works of African literature in English, one is acutely aware of the disruptive elements which the woman had to cope with. Never in the history of our people had the woman found herself in a position of great tribal and emotional strain as she did with the onset of colonialism.

In the traditional African society, the woman knew her role and rights, and was conversant with society's basic rights and division of labor between men and women as well as children. In principle, the woman's authority was asserted in the home where it was felt her wisdom, diligence and reconciliatory attitude would go a long way in keeping the

family together. Thus, a woman was consulted on many things and her contributions were not minimal. These consultations ranged in the areas of war, medicine, marriage, naming children and land matters. But there is a point to be noted here: through tact—not a weakness—the traditional woman left public pronouncements to the man, once a decision was reached through family discussions.

On the other hand, a man's authority was asserted on the protection of the clan, and adventures to explore the possibility of widening the society's boundaries whenever the need arose. This often resulted in interclan wars. That was the position at the time of introduction of alien culture and colonialism in Africa. The woman was then caught with her hands full of immovable assets to care for: land, home, children and old parents. It was the man who could move away easily. The men were recruited into the white man's labor force, sometimes peacefully, sometimes forcefully; many who fought in the white man's war never came back to their families—only the identity card returned to the expectant wife.

The pattern was the same with the introduction of education by the missionaries. It was adventure which would entail unknown dangers. The families agreed, not willingly, that the boys were to start the experiment. Gradually, the gap between men and women, boys and girls became marked and grew wider. There was a clash between converts and non-Christians, between modern medicine and traditional cures, between urban and rural values. The woman found herself in an awkward position, with one weak foot trying a new world which had attracted many men. Some of the daring women joined the new world but many remained at home with the cultural heritage they knew and the warmth of the extended family and their age mates

In *Song of Lawino*, when Lawino's world crumbles under her feet, she feels Acol, a man who had taken her girlhood away and turned her into a woman, had changed. Her husband has lost his head in the forest of books. He is no longer a Black man. She laments:

*Husband, now you despise me
Now you treat me with spite
And say I have inherited the stupidity
of my aunt
Now you compare me with the
rubbish pile
You say you no longer want me
Because I am like the thing left behind
In the deserted homestead
You insult me*

But Acol is gone. His wife, his clan, and his village which once meant so much to him are things of the past that could only block his progress. Helplessly, Lawino appeals to her brethren:

*Acol is no longer in love with me
He is in love with a modern girl
The name of this modern girl is
Clementina
Brother, when you see Clementina the
beautiful aspires
To look like a white woman*

Lawino hates with intensity the influence of the alien culture that has taken her man, and Clementina's audacity to steal her man. Lawino hurls abuses at Clementina:

*Her lips are red hot
Like glowing charcoal
She resembles the wild cat
That has dipped its mouth in blood
Tina dusts powder on her face
And she looks pale
She resembles the wizard
Getting ready for the midnight dance*

Clementina—in *Song of Lawino*—is the age-mate of Angelina in my book, *The Middle Door*, published in 1972. Angelina is a sophisticated executive with a good job, a happy marriage and a comfortable home. Her education and her husband's status have lifted her high

above her rural sister and put her into a different class and better circumstances than the village woman.

When she finds that she has to share first-class cabin with Achieng—a woman carrying a cock and a bunch of bananas—in a Kisumu-bound train, she turns furious. Yet, deep down in her heart she felt that independence should have brought equal rights and opportunities to all of her people—even to the other woman. But her type of education together with assurance from the train ticket examiner give her a clear mandate to discriminate. Thus, the ticket examiner assures Angelina:

*“Community ministers were not fools
to create first-class, second-class,
and third-class in these trains. This
law is not peculiar to Kenya, it has
been practised from the time of Jesus.
Give honor to those in high positions.”*

On returning to the cabin, after colluding with the ticket examiner, Achieng now represents in Angelina's mind the two women in *Weep Not Child*: Mwachiki, who had lost a father and whose young lover was being tortured in captivity by the colonial administrators, and Njeri, Njoroge's mother, whose husband and all other sons have been murdered. Achieng's cold eyes seem to be accusing Angelina:

*Do you know who I am, you rich
woman?
Where were you when we nursed the
wounded men
During the struggle for independence.
Where were you when we went without
food and water?
You rich woman.
And what do you know about
sacrificing
For the nation?
Now you are proud because you
are educated
You can write books. You have good
clothes
Yes, and you are very proud. It is
not my*

*Choice that I am a village woman,
it is fate.*

Achieng feels that Angelina should know and appreciate the unique role that Kenyan women played during the liberation movement. They were subjected to torture and death, but fought gallantly, with many of them risking their lives to acquire arms and ammunition and smuggle them to their men in the forest. Who thought of school?

Schools and examinations were soon forgotten, and sorrow twined us into old women.

The only thing we were longing for was the comfort and protection of a man, which alone was capable of restoring the beauty of our womanhood which had been defiled by the white man.

But men were rounded up daily and shot at night. We knew then that we would never know the warmth of a man. The world was coming to an end.

Angelina felt Achieng's anger mounting; she was asking threateningly:

"Why then, rich woman, can't I also enjoy the comforts of freedom which the Black man fought for? The fight which turned us into old women at a tender age!"

But just as alien culture had hardened the heart of Acol against Lawino, it also hardened the heart of Angelina against her age-mate. Angelina, with powdered face, pink nails and false hair-piece, has no time and energy to champion the cause of all the women who fought for independence. People got educated to better themselves, and to get comfort.

Quietly, Achieng is moved with all her luggage to the part of the train where she belongs.

Looking at oral literature, which is as old as society itself, discrimination and segregation as is practised among

which must have been introduced to Africa with the introduction of Western education. It is the child of colonialism, a practice which has tended to keep the rural woman and her urbanized sister far apart. Jealousies against each other have been a part of life, yet showing off and displaying importance in public was a curse to the family.

The educated African woman, therefore, is in a dilemma. Her Western culture has isolated her from her African heritage and turned many of her age-mates against her. Yet, the man eyes her with great curiosity and sheer amazement. She is capable and dynamic; can comfortably combine those duties which society allocated to her, and in addition, do duties traditionally allocated to man. But her mind is very clear about these important points:

That the man is the head of the family. Once a decision is reached, the head of the family should announce it.

Does the African man naturally accept the position of an educated woman? Many enlightened ones do. But to the others, she is not a proper woman. She is too Westernized and cannot be trusted.

In conclusion, it is my contention that modern East African literature has portrayed the woman as a loser, unwanted being, whose life is full of sorrow and struggle.

Oral literature on the other hand, talks of women who became traditional chiefs, great medicine women and even Prophets. Their stories were retold and are still being told.

East Africa and the rest of Africa are eagerly waiting for literature which will depict both the losers and the winners —stories that will encourage and inspire the youth. □

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Grace Ogot

Grace Ogot is a novelist and chairman of the Writers Association of Kenya. This commentary was adapted from a lecture she delivered at Howard University during her recent visit to the United States as a Kenyan delegate to the 30th