

Original Paper

A Literary and Discourse Study of Womanism and Women Literature

Maria Jennifer Iyere PhD.¹

¹ Department of English and Literature, Faculty of Humanities, Federal University Gusau, Zamfara State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This study examines Womanism and Women Literature from literary and discourse perspectives. The study is therefore immersed in Women Studies. In women literature, women literary writers' views, identities and cultural backgrounds are brought to the fore. In this regard, women-related themes such as gender discrimination communalism, complementarity, etc, are engaged. When language is used, certain actions are performed. The literature views the term 'discourse' as 'language in use'. By attempting an overview of Womanism and Women Literature, the ideologies that underpin theme and language use are studied. Female writers write on familiar themes including issues they have experienced personally. Women literary texts do not exist in a vacuum. They are products of the writers' existential experiences. The theoretical frameworks of this study are Gynocriticism and Gender Mainstreaming. The study concludes that Womanism is about Women Literature which is deeply rooted in womanist literary tradition in which case the different coatings of the discrimination, oppression and repression that women and females suffer in patriarchal African societies are brought to the fore and condemned with ideological underpinnings that project women identity.

Keywords

Womanism, Women Literature, discourse, Gynocriticism, Gender Mainstreaming

1. Introduction

A literary construct and discourse, Womanism is essentially about the oppression and discrimination that women suffer. According to Ofure Odede Maria (2010), '... a discourse on women's literary identity is only feasible on others who have the identical characteristics of 'oppression'. Thus, identity entails the metonymic selection of such characteristics as race, gender, history and culture.' Women writers hold the view that female subjugation predates the era of colonialism, as evident in Africa's cultures and

traditions before colonialism during which male literary writers dominated the literary canon (the Golden Age). Indeed, Women literary writers convey varied themes beyond colonialism. The projection of womanist themes such as ‘Womanism’, ‘Motherism’ and ‘Femalism’ is a product of evolving research on how society shapes the psyche of women/females. Human society presents women literary writers with the opportunity of selecting themes from the numerous societal practices that ravish human existence, including gender discrimination and female subjugation. Women Literature is informed by ideologies, and such ideologies determine its classification or categorization. In this sense, Feminist Literature and Women literature share similarity. Thus, Feminists are classified as: humanist feminists, radical feminists, socialist feminists, separatist feminists, liberal feminists, democrat feminists, among other classifications. This study is poised to elucidate critical perspectives on Womanism and Women Literature.

2. Womanism, Feminism and Women Literature

As a contemporary literary term, ‘Womanism’ is deeply rooted in Feminism, although its coverage is more broad-based. Within the purview of Womanism, focus is on norms and social structures that relegate women to nothingness. Through literary writings across genres, women writers demonstrate that Womanism is a resourceful, insightful and articulate intellectual delivery poised to convey womanist themes. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines Feminism as ‘a state of being feminine or womanly.’ Thus, Womanism and Feminism have conceptual similarity. Feminism has to do with Women’s Movement that can be traced to the 1960s. As a movement, its core is agitation for gender equality with a radical posture. According to Rajeswari S. R. (1993, p. 101), ‘... the experience of women’s movements, especially in Third World countries, has increasingly pointed to the need for more direct control of policy and praxis by women’s interest groups. Though the success of women’s movements in South Asian countries, in recent decades, and especially the impact of the International Decade for Women (1975-85) has resulted in gains for women through better laws and increased opportunities, these have not significantly improved the basic indices of women’s status (literacy, wealth, life expectancy, employment and physical safety ... Women activists therefore have increasingly begun to perceive that it is only by gaining access to decision-making that women can influence issues.’ Peters et al. (2008, p. 8) reports that ‘Charles Fourier (1772-1837), a French philosopher and utopian socialist, is credited with having coined the word feminism in 1837 for supporting women’s suffrage ... The word ‘feminist’ also first arises with ‘feminism’ ... The first international congress held in Paris in 1892, used the word ‘feminist’ ... Feminists act, speak, write, and advocate on behalf of women’s issues and rights, and identify injustice against females in society.’ Peters et al. (ibid:8) aver that ‘a feminist approach allows that the origin of oppression is not personal but very much about power, men as well as women, may experience the effects of oppression...’

3. Discourse

Human communication is known as discourse. Characters in works of imaginative literature therefore engage in discourse. The structure of discourse can be analyzed in literary and non-literary writings. According to Brown and Yule (1983, p. 1), discourse is 'language in use.' Providing insights on the definition of discourse, Ibileye (2018, p. 1) posits that '...discourse has been variously conceived by scholars as the authentic product of human interaction as well as being the concrete aspect of the abstractness of communication. Scholars such as Stubbs, Coulthard, and Gee submit that discourse defines the human essence as it reflects what a speaker wants, who the speaker is and what the speaker does...' In Women Literature, the gender-driven conversations between intra-text characters do not only have topics, but are also situated (context-based). 'Topic' and 'context' are crucial notions in the definition of discourse, and explain why the term 'discourse' is often used in relation to the terms 'text' and 'discourse text'. As the plot of a literary text unfolds, different extracts operate as discourse texts that can be analyzed in relation to its extended body of discourse (poetry, drama or prose text). Ruth Wodak and Martin Resigl cited in Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen and Heidi E. Hamilton (2001, p. 385) assert that 'we obviously need to think about what our 'text' is about, since clearly what a person is talking about has a bearing on what is said and how it is said. We also need to think about who said it, or who wrote it or signed it, who is thought, in its particular socio-cultural context, to be responsible for what it says, who the intended audience was and who the actual hearers or readers were, because who the participants in a situation are and how their roles are defined clearly influence what gets said and how. We need to think about what motivated the text, about how it fits into the set of things people in its context conventionally do with discourse, and about what its medium (or justify a certain social status quo (and 'racialized', 'nationalized' and 'ethnicized' identities to it). Third, they are instrumental in transforming the status quo (and 'racializing concepts', nationalities, ethnicities related to it). Fourth, discursive practices may have an effect on the dismantling or even destruction of the status quo (and of racist, nationalist, ethnicist concepts related to it). According to these general aims one can distinguish between constructive, perpetuating, transformational, and destructive social macrofunctions of discourse.' For more insights on discourse and discourse analysis, see Burton D. (1982) and Chatman S. (1978).

4. Theoretical Frameworks

Two theoretical frameworks are explored in this study: Gynocriticism and Gender Mainstreaming.

4.1 Gynocriticism

Elaine Showalter propounded Gynocriticism. The theory explains Women Literature as a product of authors' background. Women literary writers are products of the environmental issues they write about. Gynocriticism is a literary theory that links women literature texts to authors' general background. According to Ofure Odele Maria (ibid:12), 'Gynocriticism was formulated by Elaine Showalter, as the theoretical process to examine women's writings from the writers' cultural perspective. The common theoretical framework used to evaluate women's writing is the popular feminist theory. It is an approach

that ‘re-visions women’s identity to disclaim customs and traditions that repress and oppress women – custom’s that have often been regarded as patriarchal in structure by a community of African and black literary critics ... It has been criticized for its silence on the history of racism and sexual marginalization defined by culture. With this drawback, several movements emerged. However, they are grouped into two interpretative approaches: the feminist theory from a reader’s interpretative approach and the feminist theory from a writer’s interpretative approach. According to Gayle Green and Coppelia Kahn, the task of the feminist theory for a reader is ‘deconstructing predominantly male cultural paradigms and reconstructing of a female perspective and experience in an effort to change the tradition that has silenced and marginalized us (women). It is concerned with the exploitation and manipulation of female sexuality, the omissions and misconceptions about women in criticism.’ Gynocriticism portrays Women Literature as a critical and intellectual endeavour characterized by the individual and collective experiences of women writers. Themes typical of Gynocriticism emanate from diverse fields of knowledge including sociology, anthropology, history and psychology. Commenting further on Gynocriticism, Ofure Odele Maria (ibid) reports that ‘... Gynocriticism came into being because of the shortcomings of the feminist theory. It identifies distinctively feminine subject matters in literature written by women – contexts of domesticity (experiences of gestation, giving birth, or mother-daughter and woman-woman relations). Also, it highlights distinctive feminine modes of experiences or subjectivity in thinking, feeling, valuing and perceiving one’s self and the outer world ... Gynocriticism thus emphasizes that women’s writing is a reflection of their oppression, repression and expression defined by culture and location. Drawing upon culture and location, it recognizes women’s dynamic nature and complementary involvement in a general culture through the various contexts of lived experiences. The theory is a conflation of four theoretic models – the biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural variants – in the exploration of female literary expressions and experiences. Culture and location are major interpretive parameters of the Gynocritical theory. Michelle Rosaldo views culture as an institutionalized mode of behaviour or thought expressed in socially recognized rules in which members of a given society conform.’

4.2 Gender Mainstreaming

As a literary theory, Gender Mainstreaming focuses on gender discrimination of all kinds. It agitates for gender equality. This implies that it is broad-based. The enterprise of Gender Mainstreaming is the strengthening of the principles and ideals that underpin female struggle for emancipation from all forms of gender bias. Within this construct, such principles and ideals are conveyed through literary genres. Sarah Delaney McDougall’s (2012, p. 153) comments on Gender Mainstreaming:

... gender mainstreaming can have a greater impact on the generation of more gender-equal society to the extent that it is capable of incorporating feminist perspectives in the political debates ... Gender mainstreaming implies shift towards a broader concept of gender equality, that explicitly targets patriarchy by tackling the multiple interconnected causes that create an unequal relation between the sexes in the areas of family, work, politics, sexuality, culture and male violence ... It requires a focus on

gender and not only on women, which implies that changes in men's lifestyles are also necessary ... Reference on gender issues and considerations on how to limit the differential impact of provisions on women and men should be found in all policy areas. There must be evidence that the mainstream political agenda has been reoriented by rethinking and rearticulating policy ends and means from a gender perspective and prioritizing gender over competing objectives...

5. Literary and Discourse Perspectives on Womanism and Women Literature

5.1 Patriarchal Tendencies

A discourse perspective of Womanist Literature implies that extracts from literary texts are similar to instances of language use in real life human interactions. The intra-text characters have one or more topics to address through choice of words. In this sense, language picks womanist themes (phenomena) from the 'universe of discourse'. Like Feminism and Womanism, discourse is ideological, bringing to the fore, themes such as power, sexism, subjugation, etc. The subjugation, oppression and repression of women has reached an unimaginable inhuman proportion in Africa societies. For example, Ofure Odele Maria (ibid:56-61) notes that 'the pre-comprehended suppression or effacement of the clitoris relates to every move to define woman as a sex object, or as a means of reproduction – with no recourse to a subject function except in terms of those definitions as imitators of men ... investigating the clitoris's effacement is therefore a passage into understanding the historical and theoretical suppression of women ... To the extent that male domination is based on women's sexual subordination to and within the family...' Women literary writers have the herculean task of changing the psyche of men who already believe very strongly, in their patriarchal mentality. According to Mahnaz Afkhami (1995, p. 225), 'because virtually all existing (countries) are structured patriarchal mentality, the standard for being human is being male – and female human beings per se become 'other' and invisible...' The limitations placed on women in patriarchal societies are attacked by women writers. Such attacks become inflated and comprehensive through the works of prolific women writers who detest the pains suffered by females in general. As el Sadaawi, Nawal (2002, p. 3), rightly notes, 'words should not seek to please, to hide the wounds in our bodies or the shameful limits in our lives ... they may give us pain but they can also provoke us to question what we have accepted for thousands of years...' A society that imposes limitations or restrictions on women does not uphold the view that females have right to personal improvement and positions in domains of society where their self-development can translate into services to their immediate and remote societies. Ofure Odele Maria (ibid, pp. 40-56) states that 'gender gaps between males and females predate the postcolonial period. Interestingly, women in traditional Afrian societies before British rule were highly visible, influential, and acted as custodians and transmitters of cultural heritage. From this traditional frame, pioneer African male Negritude writers developed their concepts of the feminization of Africa's cultural identity by addressing Africa as 'Mother Earth', 'the hub of culture' and 'the black woman'. The relevance of African women in traditional societies is documented

in essays by anthropologist like Niara Sudarkasa as one of complementarity ... the traditional African definition of woman as culturally delineated and further reflected in male child sex preference. However, such preference was subject to cultural norms. In the Igbo ethno-cultural locale, the male child was preferred to the female due to the occupational interests. The traditional occupation of Igbo women was 'relegated' to cassava farming, while yam cropping was a male-dominated activity.' Womanism is immersed in the view that male dominance and female discrimination are unjustifiable. Like men, women are intelligent. Like males, female are resourceful and articulate. Patriarchy in Africa is comparable to colonialism which dehumanizes Africans in the sense that it treats women as inferior human beings in spite of their natural endowments, which as a matter of fact, many men are not endowed with. It is quite sad that patriarchal tendencies are transferred from one generation to another. Gender discrimination takes different forms including the belief that certain jobs are for males and certain titles befit men. Arguably, these beliefs are not God-created status-quo. The quest for freedom from patriarchy remains in the minds of womanist literary writers. Their writings project freedom, independence and liberation as not being one-sided. They are not truly enjoying gender equality if they have access to education but are exempted from holding significant political positions. Ngugi notes that 'the heart in Gikuyu tradition carries several meanings but is hinged on the Mau Mau struggle for psychological, political and economic or social independence.' It is quite unfortunate that the evils of patriarchy are same as the evils of colonialism. Before and after colonialism the oppression and repression of women remain a worrisome issue. Contemporary womanist writers therefore bring gender-related themes to the front burner. In *The Promised Land*, Grace Oget ponders on the dawn of colonialism and its unfolding neo-colonial practices that affect people individually and collectively.

5.2 Complementarity

African Women Literature presents Complementarity as a common theme. Within the Complementarity construct, communal living, mutual co-existence, humanity and supportive attitudes are emphasized in society. Female bonding and personal development is emphasized. Women writers contend that the era of patriarchy or male-dominance is gone, and replaced by a more dynamic, flexible and civilized models of male-female existence, which includes co-existence in marriage. In the contemporary post-colonial era, women can develop themselves along educational and career lines as they manage their homes with standards that are more universal than traditional. In many womanist 'literatures', these tendencies are conveyed as themes. For example, in her classical/pioneer texts, Flora Nwapa's female characters are in control of their worlds, as evident in *Efuru* and *Idu* which show Flora Nwapa's attack on the claim that African women are invisible. Women literature attempts to address unacceptable status-quo (womanism) alongside its appendages such as ethnicity and race. Ruth Wodak and Martin Resigl, cited in Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen and Heidi E. Hamilton (2001, p. 385) posit that 'discursive practices are socially constitutive in a number of ways: first, they play a decisive role in the genesis and production of certain social conditions. This means that discourses may serve to construct collective subjects like 'races', 'nations', 'ethnicities', etc. Second, they might perpetrate, reproduce, or justify a certain social

status quo (and ‘racialized’, ‘nationalized’ and ‘ethnicized’ identities to it). Third, they are instrumental in transforming the status quo (and ‘racializing concepts’, nationalities, ethnicities related to it). Fourth, discursive practices may have an effect on the dismantling or even destruction of the status quo (and of racist, nationalist, ethnicist concepts related to it). According to these general aims one can distinguish between constructive, perpetuating, transformational, and destructive social macrofunctions of discourse.’ Complementarity can be construed as one of the social conditions that Women Literature, as a body and tool of discourse, should seek to ‘entrench’ in the fabrics of patriarchal Africa. So long as women can also do the good things that men can do, it is logical for both sexes to play cross-domain complementary roles in society. Being profoundly ideologically-rooted, Women Literature reflects the theoretical perspectives in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). For example, it elucidates gender-driven dimensions of socially realistic phenomena such as roles, status, power and positions in patriarchal value systems. Critical Discourse Analysis explains value systems of society with regards to power, ideologies and their underlying principles and anchorage. In Women Literature, themes are developed and language is used on the basis of the sociocultural nuances they pick from the real world of humans. According to Stubbs (1983, p. 1), ‘discourse is defined as (1) concerned with language use beyond the boundaries of a sentence/utterance, (2) concerned with the interrelationships between language and society and (3) concerned with the interactive or dialogic properties of everyday communication.’

5.3 Identity

Dahunsi Toyese Najeem (2016, p. 174) asserts that ‘the central focus of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is to see ideology as inherent in language use, and to see language use as a reflection of certain ideologies, beliefs, perceptions and affiliations.’ Women Literature projects the ideal identity of women. The features, interests and ordeals of women define them, just as any group in society. Groups in any human society have their peculiarities which constitute their identity. Like in womanist literary writings, other aspects of society reveal that groups agitate for the good of its members or folk. Identity is construed beyond biological features of humans. Patriarchy is so entrenched in African tradition that women who do certain things which are strongly believed to be men’s acts, are seen as no longer being women; they are regarded as flouters of the natural order. Poised to ‘crush’ patriarchal practices, Women Literature deploys a wide range of literary devices to lampoon, educate, correct and reshape societal norms to promote women’s identity’. In addition, Nasta Susheila (1991, p. xv) notes that ‘in countries with a history of colonialism, women’s quest for emancipation, self-identity and fulfillment can be seen to represent a traitorous act, a betrayal, not simply of traditional codes of practice and belief, but of the wider struggle for liberation and nationalism...’ Corroborating the claim the Women Literature is potent and achieves its basic objectives, Showalter (1988, p. 345) states that ‘the ways in which women conceptualize their bodies and their sexual and reproductive functions are intricately linked to their cultural environments. The female psyche can be studied as the product or construction of cultural forces. Language, too, comes back into the picture, as we consider the social dimensions and determinants of language use, the shaping of linguistic behaviour and cultural ideals.’ Lidwein Kapteins and Maryan

Owner Ali's (1999, p. 44) report accentuate the view that women's identity is actually greater than how patriarchal society portrays them. Lidwein Kapteins and Maryan Owner Ali's (ibid:44) report that 'in Somali orature, married women also found voice for their anger at men's power over them through the curse. Although the power of the curse was not only women's, it was one form of powerful speech used in their relations with men. Curses did not have a powerful literary form, but women often employed 'serious genre' and the favored genre for addressing intimate emotional issues was that of the Buraanbur.'

6. Discussion and Conclusion

This study examines critical perspectives on Womanism and Women Literature, thus showing different dimensions of the discrimination and stigmatization that women suffer. Characterization remains a potent way of projecting womanist themes across genres of literature. Stephanie N. (1997, p. 194) asserts that '... Chinua Achebe's and Cyprian Ekwensi's constructions of women's experience as tangential to the 'masculine' world have been challenged in the Novels of Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta, whose heroines are vital and viable individuals, engaging in a world shared with men, defining their own spaces and contributing the social reality of that world. They present the woman-as-insider's experience of the world and are therefore able to portray women's struggles and triumphs as they intersect with the reality of that world, not only through sexual roles but also through other self-actualizing ventures.' The thematic concerns of womanist writers do not only capture women's ordeals. They capture what females generally suffer. Ofure Odele Maria (ibid:10) notes that '... in Africa, 'female' is used in a different sense from 'woman'. Though the two terms refer to the same sex and are often used interchangeably as gender reference, the former is a biological label while the latter is a social construct. Woman as a social construct evolves from traditional descriptions and involves a number of gender roles and responsibilities. In other words, the term 'woman' in Africa connotes submissiveness, obedience, maturity, and social responsibilities such as motherhood or wifehood. 'Woman' as a social concept in Africa is more encompassing than the term 'female' as a subjugated person ...' Women demonstrate gender fraternity on issues revolving around gender discrimination, oppression and repression in pre-colonial and post-colonial Africa. Published works in African women literature accentuate this claim. Innes and Rodney (1997, p. 11) submit that 'when women began publishing their works in the mid-sixties in Africa, they faced the problem not only of speaking for the experiences of women in their own right ... but also of combating the orthodoxies of colonial and anti-colonial discourse.' It is worthy of note that Women Literature can be regional, and in this case, regional perspectives of gender-related themes tint regional women literary writings. Stephanie Newell (ibid:11) submits that 'West African societies overflow with local, culturally specific constructions of gender which circulate in literature and popular representations. Novels, soap opera songs and newspapers regularly stage controversial gender debates, creating narratives around issues such as marriage and divorce, polygyny, love, female infertility and prostitution.' In characterization, language and theme, Women Literature reveals the nexus between perception (how women are portrayed) and its source (social structures) in the African space. Ann Adams Graves (1986,

p. 25) submits that ‘whether from the Negritude movement with its romanticization of women or from the more recent years in which she is depicted with greater fidelity – the images (of African women) are ... less than whole incompletely formed, images imposed on women by others, or otherwise unrealistic. All, however, are seen through the eyes of males who are the dominant figures in the literary works as well as in the lives of women characters in the works...’ In the conversations of intra-text characters in women literary writings, arguments are presented with referents (indices of female images) from the universe of discourse (their real world). Women writers have the huge task of recreating the true picture of women in spite of the traditions that relegate and subjugate them. Through diverse literary devices, women writers form backgrounds for projecting themes. The immediate and remote audience are able to invoke the worlds captured by the writers. Allan (1986) holds the view that readers should be able to know writers’ worlds-spoken-of.

Womanist writers reveal their critical stance against male domination and gender inequality. Criticism is crucial in Women Literature since it is essentially agitative. According to Saadatullah Safi and Saeedullah Rahmatzai (2020, p. 2796), ‘the word ‘criticism’ derives from the Greek *kritike*. It is the art of interpretation, analysis, classification and ultimately the judgement of the literary works ...’ Literary criticism concerns explaining literary writings from ideological stance toward acceptable universal classification/categorization, particularly on the basis of themes. This explains why ‘literary theory’, ‘critical theory’ and ‘cultural theory’ definitively overlap in the discussion of theme. Saadatullah Safi and Saeedullah Rahmatzai (ibid:2797) submit that ‘modern literary criticism is written in a variety of genres, including the article, review, survey, essay, literary profile, and bibliographical explanation.’ Woman literature has developed so much that its influence on society-imposed gender inequality has assumed an almost ‘spiritual dimension’. Chioma Opara (ibid:76) argues that ‘... spirituality is the radical way we think, perceive, experience and act. It is an exclusive way of looking at and moving in the world.’ Peter et al. (ibid.) notes that ‘... from the earliest eras of human civilization, it is seen that feminism is one of the oldest social activities that try to abolish or reduce discrimination and establish gender equality in society ... The roots of feminism are buried in ancient Greece. Athenian philosopher Plato (427-347 BC), in his classic ‘Republic’ advocates that women possess ‘natural capacities equal to men for governing and defending ancient Greece’, but everyone had not agreed with Plato...’ Like feminist literature, Woman Literature reveals polar dimensions of human existence and experiences. For example, while patriarchy favours men, women suffer from the ‘fall-outs’ of patriarchy. Bhabha (1994, p. 5) rightly notes that ‘there is a deep hunger for humanism, the dark side of Man within the binaries of difference; of black/white, coloniser/colonised; and object/subject, a consciousness or ‘dual narcissism’. Indeed, Women Literature is poised to liberate women from the shackles of oppression and repression induced by social structures. Scholars hold the view that ‘the instinct to narrate’ is connected to ‘the instinct to liberate’. Women Literature is an escape route; it gives women and females the opportunity to see the changes and progress they want to see in their immediate and remote societies/environments. Women literary writers view themselves as victims of the oppressive tendencies typical of patriarchal African

societies. However, literary scholars hold the view that victimization is a global/universal phenomenon. Therefore, its victims cut across race and colour. This study concludes that womanist ideologies are used to explain and condemn the different forms of oppression, discrimination and subjugation that women and females suffer in the web of patriarchal tradition. In this regard, the identity of women is brought to the fore.

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