

# **GENDER AND HIGHER EDUCATION IN AFRICA: EMERGING ISSUES**

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INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCE**

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**Gender Inequality: African Feminist Fiction  
Reflecting Scientific Data**

**Wumi Olayinka**

**Abstract**

*When one mentions the situation of women anywhere in the world today, certain issues inevitably come to mind. Issues such as oppression of women, feminism and women's struggle for liberation, woman as liberated-subaltern in organisations, sexuality and sexism, among others. These are issues that have often trailed humanity. Available answers do not yet adequately address the woman question. We are in a complex situation, a complex world that smacks of gender war in the midst of gendered rhetoric.*

*The matter of Sub-Saharan African women's evolution calls to mind immense, complex and culturally multifarious questions that surround women in the region and the fast changing world of African culture, relating to issues of family, education, work and lifestyle. The compass of women development in the region is therefore multidirectional. This necessitates knowing her pre-colonial past, her colonial status and her post- or neo-colonial condition. This paper therefore looks at the African woman under the three stages above, with particular attention on the Nigerian woman of today.*

**Introduction: Pre-colonial African Woman**

The traditional African Society is an agrarian society predominantly and socially organised around production. The woman in this society is controlled through gender discriminatory practices and exploitation such as sexuality control, girl-child commodification, marriage (e.g. forced marriage), motherhood, and widowhood. Of all these gender-discriminatory practices, marriage, is

an institution through which woman becomes a producer of producers. Control over women legitimises control over the reproduction process. The control over African woman therefore implies some sort of social stratification that brings the woman under some sort of male authority. However, there are divergent views on the status of the African woman. Some researchers hold the view that African women are subordinated to men while some emphasise the independence of

women and their own control over their own lives and resources.

There are historical insights into the fact that African women play prominent roles in African societies. For example, women in Nigeria are central to the nation's politics, culture and economy. In Yorubaland, for example, the Iyalode traditionally heads the women's councils in their respective localities and participates in decision making processes. She settles disputes in her wards and compounds, and equally helps to maintain law, order, peace and harmony in her community. She also plays crucial roles in the appointment of Obas (kings). For example, the Lobun of Ondo town is responsible for the installation of the Osemawe (the king of Ondoland) and in Ilesa, the Arise is one of the kingmakers (Bolanle Awe, 2005). Their offices are at par with those of the rulers of both towns. Queens are also influential in state affairs (Raji, 1998).

Looking beyond the Yoruba state, one notes that generally in West Africa, women are associated with governments of their different ethnic groups (M. Kolawole, 1998; Bolanle Awe, 2005). There exist the institutions of the Queen Mother of the Ashanti in Ghana and the Edo in Benin, Nigeria, the female heads of the Mende in Sierra Leone, the Sagi and Sonya of Nupe in Nigeria, and the Royal Princesses of the Kanuri in Northern Nigeria (Bolanle Awe, 2005). These are proofs that the widely acclaimed oppression of women is not conclusively cosmopolitan in nature. Instead, what we witness in regard to that is that through the weight of traditions, women have been forced into socially constructed gender stereotypes, and traditionally assigned gender-defined roles. But the changing trend in women's work today through formal education that

has afforded women the opportunity to compete with men in fields such as engineering, medicine and all other fields, proves, that women perform no worse than men and are not intellectually inferior as philosophers such as Rousseau, Otto Weininger, Anthony Storr, Boccacio, Freud, Strindberg, John Stuart and Sir John Newson (Eva Figes, 1986) have claimed. The trends have also indicated that men are found in professions classified as 'effeminate'. For centuries, men have been seen occupying so-called 'effeminate' positions in organisations as nurses, chefs, cooks, cake bakers, tailors and hair dressers.

Furthermore, during the colonial era, certain influential women in Nigeria such as **Madam Efunroye Tinubu, the first Iyalode of Egbaland**, were active opponents of the British Colonialists in Nigeria. As a result of Madam Tinubu's activism, she was banished from Lagos to her native Abeokuta. She built her financial empire through her endeavours in trading in arms and salt. She even got involved in slave trade. However, when she realised the differences between domestic slaving and the inhuman treatment of slaves in Europe and the Americas, she became an active opponent to all slave trade activities. She is considered an important figure in Nigerian history due to her political significance as a strong female leader. Efunsetan Aniwura, the Iyalode of Ibadanland, was another woman that was reckoned with during her life time. History has it that she had strong business acumen and succeeded in her business enterprises to the extent of holding men in her society to ransom. She audaciously confronted male warlords of her time and conquered them during several conflicts. Notably, the Aba women, in 1928-1930, rose against the



colonial government (Simidele Dosekun, 2007). Aba women became unhappy with the arbitrary and excessive taxation of their husbands and sons which they felt was pauperising them and causing economic hardship for the entire community (Van Allen, 1972). They also resented imposition of abusive and extortionist tendencies of British colonialists which the warrant chiefs imposed on their communities; for instance, the practice of obtaining wives without paying the full bride wealth and engagement in seizure of properties. **Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti**, a teacher, political campaigner and women's rights activist, was also a woman of repute in Nigeria. Her political activities led to her being described as the doyen of female rights in Nigeria and, today, is still regarded as The Mother of Africa. She was a very powerful force in advocating for women's right to vote. She was described in 1947 by the *West African Pilot* as the "Lioness of Lisabi" for her leadership of Egbu women on a campaign against arbitrary taxation of women. Eventually, that struggle led to the abdication of the then Egbu King, Oba Ademola II in 1949. The Inkpi of the Igala associated with the land cult, Moremi of the Yoruba who rescued the people of Ife from Ibo invasion between 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, and Daura of the Hausa who ruled before the 10<sup>th</sup> Century A.D. (Bolanle Awe, 2001) were all women activists. All these instances provide additional proofs that African women before and during the colonial era did not absolutely lack a voice in African societies.

### **Colonial African Woman**

With what has been discussed above, one can infer that the public domain in West Africa was one in which men and women played important roles. It was not until the advent of colonialism that distinction of who functioned or not in

the public and private domain came into existence in West African history (Niara Sudarkasa, 2005). West African women, from studies conducted, were in charge of their own worlds. The same can be said about women in other parts of Africa.

During the colonial era, the traditional West African family system was eroded and became disrupted leading to the forced evolution of traditional societies into a capitalist economy. Hence, the need for geographical mobility of the West African labour force to urban centres arose, as well as the birthing of the nuclear family alien to the traditional West African family setting. The interference of the colonial system in the affairs of the traditional West African setup has serious implications for the West African woman (Sam Ojo Ade, 2000). The greatest of this is her marginalisation in the socio-political and economic system. With denial of access to Western education at the same time as the African man, West African women lost their position on the social ladder. They could no longer actively participate in public domains of economic and political activities as dictated by the white man. The only rightful place reserved for them was in the home front where they served as housewives, producers and minders of children.

This change in the West African woman's condition has been described as a passing phase, although traumatic (Awe, 1989). The intrusion of the

colonial master did not only have negative connotations for the West African woman, but also meant for her, alleviation of stultifying traditional patriarchal practices such as widowhood rites, widow inheritance, levirate, forced marriage, female genital mutilation, among others. Positive impact of colonial settlement in West Africa of women is also noticeable in economic domains which translated into greater wealth for them. For a large number of West African women, however, colonialism and colonial administration meant a lowering or total loss of means of livelihood because they lacked the skills to cope with mechanised farming introduced by the white man. Many women also lost their political statuses to men as they could no longer participate in the hybridised colonial political system of governance.

In the area of Western education, the West African woman also lost out as little or no attention was paid to the education of the girl-child. However, a minute percentage of forward-looking and forward-thinking families seized this opportunity to send their daughters to school. The usual accusation was that the white man did not encourage the education of the girl-child in West Africa since he was believed, rightly or wrongly, to discountenance education of girls in his Western society. This was premised on the belief that a girl-child would naturally end up playing supportive role to her

husband. Therefore, when West African female children had access to education at all, it was only in the domain of domestic arts of cookery and home keeping, unlike their male counterparts who had access to higher academic training. For example, female students were less than 10 per cent of the overall student population of the University College when it was founded in Ibadan by the British administration in 1948. One other factor that saw the Nigerian woman retreating from the public domain back into the hearth was the need she perceived to supplement the inadequate subsistence wages her husband earned from the formal sector created by the colonial master (Ekejiuba, 2005).

The notion, sold to us by the White man, that the family unit in West African society comprises the father, mother, and children, and that he is the sole breadwinner is diametrically divergent from the reality of traditional African family setting. It has since then gradually engendered the transformation of gender ideology in the region. Having thus redefined the typical African family setting, the family concept in West Africa and in Nigeria today no longer reflects the true status of the father and mother in the African society. Ironically, it has informed policy-making decisions embarked upon by African governments. For example, policies on salaries and taxes in Nigeria have favoured men as 'head of households'

to the detriment of women in the sense that the financial, social, emotional economic contributions of the Nigerian woman to her family's well-being are regarded as being inconsequential. Another important factor that these policy makers tend to ignore is the fact that in West Africa and, by implication, in Nigeria, there are female heads of households who play the roles that men would play in their households. Another instance of discrimination against woman is the extant law that stipulates that for a Nigerian woman to obtain an international passport, the written consent of her husband is required.

These phenomena have far-reaching consequences for the socio-political and economic situation of the Nigerian woman. It meant that during the colonial era, women, who formed more than half of the population, became marginalised in the various processes of decision making and in the different professions. The African woman's position became inferiorised to that of the African man as she is displaced from her position within the traditional African social structure (Sanusi and Olayinka, 2011/2012). As Ekejiuba (2005) notes, despite the challenge posed by some West African women to some colonial policies of women exclusion, by organising cooperative credit and work groups, "the colonial denial of women's active participation in socio-economic and political processes prevails, despite the reality of women's active economic production in agriculture,

and their role in processing and distribution of products through trade" (42).

### **Neo-colonial Nigerian Woman**

In the post-colonial era, the myth of the invisibility and silence of the West African woman persists as can be observed from statistical data on global gender gaps in all significant spheres of human endeavour. Many theories have failed to reflect the reality of the West African woman because they have continued to be biased and to lend credence to the super ordination of man over woman; especially through marriage. In this regard, Sanusi and Olayinka (2012) note:

In patriarchal African societies, marriage is the key space where the woman has no rights of her own and where she is expected to be reduced to a productive body. Marriage is the psychological and physical space within which power relations between man and woman are acutely pronounced, man being the dominator and woman the dominated. It is a space where woman is supposed to be blindly devoted to her husband and children, (without a life of hers), and her sexuality subdued (204).

A major factor for this is the considerable discrepant gap that exists in male and female education. The consequence of this is that women are often excluded from planning and execution of development

programmes that affect their lives. This is a plague that eats deeper than cancer into the socio-political and economic fabrics of the nation. Research has shown that women hardly have access to productive developmental resources (Awe, 1989) because they are denied equal educational opportunities with the Nigerian male children.

In view of the foregoing, African feminist movements have emerged in the region to protest the invisibility of women. Nigerian women are not left out of these struggles for the emancipation of the female folk. These efforts have not yielded adequate result because there have not been consistent and concerted efforts by various Nigerian governments to address the status quo (The Nigeria CEDAW NGO Coalition Shadow Report, 2008; World Economic Forum, 2010). One may be cajoled into believing that the situation of the Nigerian woman has changed in the face of modernisation and more access to education. It is important to note that opportunities have not been equally shared to Nigerian men and women. More males still do have greater access to education than females (The Nigeria CEDAW NGO Coalition Shadow Report, 2008). Moreover, in Nigerian organisations and behind the curtains, the Nigerian woman still very much finds herself caught in the web of hierarchies dominated by men (The Nigeria CEDAW NGO Coalition Shadow Report, 2008).

The African version of feminist uprising raises questions about and against male domination. Therefore, the roles played by African women to oppose colonialists and male domination in general tell of the fact that women in these communities must have enjoyed autonomy and had a voice in the traditional setting. It also confirms that women were able to take their destinies in their own hands; albeit not absolutely. It is on

this basis that West African women were idealised by Negritude writers like Léopold Sedar Senghor, Camara Laye, Birago Diop, and David Diop. This idealisation is one argument usually advanced to support the view that the African woman occupies a revered position in the society and does not need to be liberated because she is already free. For this category of male West African writers, African women occupy a pre-eminent status in their societies (Brown, 1975). This view must belong to the era before technological advancement and pre-colonial era of the African past when women's and men's roles were said to be complementary despite overt and covert cultural practices that subjugate women. Even a feminist deconstructive reading of Senghor's *Femme nue, femme noire* (16) readily depicts phallogentrism. The kind of African women Senghor paints are those that are subjugated, exploited and disrespected. The imageries used to represent woman typify Spivak's dark continent (Andrade, 1992). An analysis of the verses below from Léopold Senghor's *Femme nue, femme noire* proves this:

*Femme nue, femme noire*  
*Vêtue de ta couleur qui est vie,*  
*de ta forme qui est beauté*  
*J'ai grandi à ton ombre; la*  
*douceur de tes mains je te*  
*découvre,*  
*Terre promise, du haut d'un haut*  
*col calciné*  
*Et beauté me foudroie en plein*  
*Coeur, comme l'éclair d'un*  
*aigle.*

*Femme nue, femme obscure*  
*Fruit mur à la chair ferme,*  
*sombres extases du vin noir,*  
*Bouche qui fait lyrique ma*  
*bouche*  
*Ta voix grave de contralto est le*  
*chant (Adebayo, 1996: 40)*

[Naked woman, black woman  
Clothed in your colour that is  
life, of your form/stature that is  
beautiful

I grew up under your shadow; I  
discover you with the  
succulence of your hands,  
Land of promise, from height to  
height your sun-scorched neck  
And beauty strike (thunder  
strike) me down to my heart,  
like the greased lightning of an  
eagle.

Naked woman, obscure woman  
Ripe fruit with a firm skin,  
sombre/dark ecstasies of black  
wine

A mouth that brings lyrics to my  
mouth

Your deep contralto voice is  
melodious.]

(Translation mine)

Agreed that Senghor claims in this seemingly epical poem that the African woman is beautiful and that her complexion portrays life, but contrarily, her image as a naked woman, her burnt or sun-scorched neck, and her beauty that strikes like thunder in the poem cited above are connotations reminiscent of the image attributed to the African woman in pre-colonial cultural practices and colonial tradition with patriarchal undertone. Referring to Yisa Kéhinde Yusuf's claims (in Kolawole, 1998), hidden behind the imageries used by Senghor are pictures of the African woman who is destructive, oppressed, subaltern and exploited. It is a fact that thunder strikes cause calamity; in essence, one can as well interpret that line to mean that the beauty of the African woman strikes the heart of man like thunder capable of bringing about man's electrocution and, ultimately, his death. Senghor's poem simply tells us that the African woman's beauty spells calamity. That he describes the African woman's neck as burnt or sun-scorched typifies the African

woman as a suffering woman, an exploited woman, who dwells in the sun perpetually belaboured by marriage, motherhood, social, and economic exigencies on her life.

Saying the black woman is "obscure woman" goes a step further to confirm that the African woman is not a visible being. She exists to validate men from behind the scene, a subaltern who acts incognito. Referring to the woman as a ripe fruit tells us that the black woman is a being ready for consumption, be it as a wife, a mother and, in other cases, as daughters. Exploitation is the brick wall that surrounds her. She is exploited for her beauty, her emotional, spiritual and physical strengths and the natural resources that she possesses. The black woman is presented as a "sombre ecstasies of black wine". Of a truth, wine causes ecstasy. But for Senghor to refer to the black woman as sombre ecstasies calls to mind the fallacious claim that the black woman is a doom-causing agent (Yisa Yusuf Kehinde in Kolawole, 1998), the unfortunate fatal being!

In music, contralto means pitched below. The woman's voice is pitched below that of man. When her voice is pitched below that of man, then the woman is automatically overshadowed. This is akin to the voicelessness that feminists cry out against. Why can the woman's voice not be heard like that of the man? Why should her voice be pitched below that of man? It is this subdued existence of the black woman in a patriarchal world that African feminists challenge. Her voice, of course, in patriarchal societies, is only melodious when it does not contradict that of the African man and when it is subdued underneath the man's voice as the Other, the subaltern, and the angel in the house. Applicable here is Eva Figes' (1986) argument that "woman had no public voice" (152) and she is excommunicated from public affairs.

This analysis is only at the literary domain dominated by males before women like Mariama Bâ of Senegal; Flora Nwapa,

Buchi Emecheta of Nigeria, and so many others, gained their feminist voice and seized pen and paper to counter the negative image of women portrayed by West African male writers in the fictions. African fictions written by males before the advent of African feminist consciousness are best described as prototypes of what obtains in different facets of the Nigerian society. In essence, therefore, whatever happened in academia, business, and the professions, were replicas of what male West African writers produced as being epitomic of the African woman until the latter began to produce her own history, culture, and literature.

One should therefore bear in mind that to totally agree with Negritude writers who romanticise and idealise African women will mean engaging in a one-sided, if not myopic, enterprise. Senghor's *Femme nue, femme noire* merely places the Black woman on an "artificial" pedestal and relegates her to the lowest rung of the social ladder at the same time. It is the "common ploy employed by misogynists (emphasis mine) to disarm the woman with flattery and get her safely out of harm's way by placing her on a pedestal" (Eva Figs, 1986: 29). It is indeed an idyllic view and an illusion that the Nigerian woman should not allow herself to get carried away with. This is because recent data, which I will talk about shortly, have proved that the Nigerian woman is far from being equal to the Nigerian man (Gender Equality Team, 2007; Sanusi and Olayinka, 2011/2012). Paradoxically, the adoption of the National Gender Policy by the Nigerian government in 2006 for the purpose of comprehensively addressing all issues that border on discrimination against women remains a mirage because the language of the Nigerian constitution is highly insensitive and unfavourable to women. In reality, poverty is still highly feminised in the country with women forming 65% of the 70% who subsist on less than US\$1.00/day (The Nigeria CEDAW NGO Coalition

Shadow Report, 2008). Moreover, Goal 3 of the World Bank Gender Action Plan (GAP) aimed at economic empowerment of women, among others, is yet to be fully achieved (The Nigeria CEDAW NGO Coalition Shadow Report, 2008). There is also the double jeopardy that denies a Nigerian woman married to an indigene of another state, other than that which she hails from, employment or appointment into political offices. This denial is based on the argument that she is deemed to have acquired the right to claim her husband's indigeneship by the reason of her marriage, whereas, she is not socially and politically recognised as an indigene in her husband's state. (The Nigeria CEDAW NGO Coalition Shadow Report, 2008). This sort of denial is classified as a type of gender-based violence in the 1993 UN General Assembly Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (Baumgarten and Erdelman, 2003). Nigerian Women should not be lured away with the praise songs of Negritude writers, but should read the deeply buried and pungent connotations of the imageries, metonyms, and metaphors portrayed in the writings of Negritude writers.

The fact that Nigerian women, especially the educated ones, are aware of the wretched state of the majority of Nigerian women and have been crying out against gender inequality and discrimination, from which they seek emancipation, shows there are obvious traits of oppression they are reacting against. Nigerian women are still largely regarded as sexual objects and tools exploited by men for their natural endowments to meet the selfish ends of the latter in most cases. A quick look at the way the Nigerian government uses women during political campaigns and dumps them soon after their political agenda is achieved, is a typical example. This phenomenon reflects why the proportion of women who actively participate in the legislative process is a far cry from the number of Nigerian men.

Available data prove this fact. The 2011 Human Development Report (HDR), claims that

Beyond the Millennium Development Goals, the world needs a post-2015 development framework that reflects equity and sustainability; Rio+20 stands out as a key opportunity to reach a shared understanding of how to move forward. ... shows that approaches that integrate equity into policies and programmes that empower people to bring about change in the legal and political arenas hold enormous promise. Growing country experiences around the world have demonstrated the potential of these approaches to generate and capture positive synergies (iv-v).

The Nigerian nation state, based on the 2010 Global Gender Gap Report (GGGR), is yet to eradicate gender inequality going by the recommendations of the 2011 HDR. The GGGR clearly demonstrates that the gender gap between the Nigerian man and Nigerian woman in all spheres of life is disparately distant. Out of the 134 countries sampled for gender gap in 2010, Nigeria ranked 118<sup>th</sup>. The country ranked 94<sup>th</sup> in 2006; 107<sup>th</sup> in 2007; 102<sup>nd</sup> in 2008 (a slight improvement); and 108<sup>th</sup> in 2009. Of the twenty-five Sub-Saharan African countries listed in the 2010 GGGR, Nigeria ranked 19<sup>th</sup>, where the Republic of Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, The Gambia and Ghana were among the first ten countries. This picture shows a disheartening slide in the condition of the Nigerian woman. While we may think, as I mentioned earlier, that the situation of the Nigerian woman is improving, that policies have been and are being put in place to checkmate the deplorable situation of the

Nigerian woman, the stark reality has been presented to us by the 2010 Gender Gap Index (GGI).

The GGGR 2011 sub-indexes of Economic Participation and Opportunity (see Table I) are sub-divided into: Labour force participation; Wage equality for similar work, Estimated earned income; Legislators, senior officials, and managers; Professional and technical workers. On the Educational Attainment divide (see Table II): you have Literacy rate; Enrolment in primary school; Enrolment in secondary education; and Enrolment in tertiary education. In the area of Political Empowerment (see Table III), you have on the list: Women in parliament; Women in ministerial positions; Years with female head of state. These measures and indexes, indicate that Nigerian women, the half of the population of country, rank kilometres behind the Nigerian men, especially in the area of political empowerment. This in essence is to say that when compared with her counterparts in the West, the opportunities are not fully there yet for the Nigerian woman, despite indications that more Nigerian women are making progress on the march to equality with Nigerian men. For instance, Nigeria ranked 120<sup>th</sup> with a score of 0.6011 out of 135 countries surveyed in the 2011 GGGR. Nigeria's Human Development Index score in 2011 was 0.459 bringing her to the 156<sup>th</sup> position out of 187 countries. It is to say also that the right environment for the positive synergies advocated in the 2011 HDR is a mirage that the Nigerian society may never achieve if concerted efforts are not made by the Nigerian government and citizens. However, the GGGR 2012 presented an improvement on GGGR 2011 on Nigeria with an overall ranking of 110<sup>th</sup> with a score of 0.6315 among 135 nations.

**Table I: Economic Participation and Opportunity**

	Rank	Score	Sample average	Female	Male	Female-to-male ratio
Economic participation and opportunity	93	0.596	0.588	-	-	-
Labour force participation	115	0.53	0.68	40	75	0.53
Wage equality for similar work	14	0.77	0.65	-	-	0.77
Estimated earned income (PPP US\$)	112	0.41	0.52	1,283	3,119	0.41
Legislators, senior officials and managers	-	-	0.26	-	-	-
Professional and technical workers	-	-	0.64	-	-	-

**Table II: Educational Attainment**

	Rank	Score	Sample average	Female	Male	Female-to-male ratio
Educational Attainment	125	0.809	0.928	-	-	-
Literacy rate	122	0.69	0.86	50	72	0.69
Enrolment in primary education	125	0.90	0.98	58	64	0.90
Enrolment in secondary education	124	0.77	0.90	22	29	0.77
Enrolment in tertiary education	111	0.70	0.86	8	12	0.70



**Table III: Political Empowerment**

	Rank	Score	Sample average	Female	Male	Female-to-male ratio
Political Empowerment	121	0.038	0.185	-	-	-
Women in parliament	124	0.04	0.22	4	96	0.04
Women in ministerial positions	90	0.11	0.18	10	90	0.11
Years with female head of state (last 50)	52	0.00	0.16	0	50	0.00

**Source: Global Gender Gap Report, World Economic Forum, 2011.**

Furthermore, from the 2003 Nigeria Demographic and Health Survey, UNICEF reports that Nigeria has a projected population of 126 million, with a total of 61.5 million women. The practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), a cultural practice described by IGWG of USAID (2006) as a form of gender-based violence, is rife in the country as it is one of the African countries with the highest number of females who undergo one form of FGM or the other. The South West has the highest rate of genitally mutilated females while the South East has the lowest record. Although, these facts are from a report released ten years ago, there is no proof that the phenomenon of FGM has been stamped out. Efforts in this direction are being made by various international, national and non-governmental bodies namely: IAC/Nigeria, DFID, WHO, UNDP, among others. Dattijo, et al (2010), opine that, although there is a high rate of awareness and willingness for the practice of FGM to stop in Nigeria, FGM is still a prevalent phenomenon.

Many reasons advanced for this obnoxious practice are culturally based ranging from psychosexual, sociological, hygiene and aesthetics, religious,

enhancement of fertility and promotion of child survival, better marriage prospects and ease of child delivery. It is yet to be proved that these factors set in place to justify this injustice done against the Nigerian female specie have achieved any of these purposes. Rather, it does disservice to the Nigerian woman, inhibits her sexuality, leads to death as a result of excessive bleeding, trauma, and infections. FGM has also been positively correlated to high prevalence of HIV/AIDS. According to UNICEF, the negative health effects are numerous, cumbersome and deadly. Failure of FGM to heal causes abscess formation, cysts, hepatitis, urinary tract infection, painful sexual intercourse, reproductive tract infection, pelvic inflammatory diseases infertility, increased risk of bleeding and infection during childbirth, susceptibility to HIV/AIDS, among others (UNICEF, nd).

The eradication of FGM calls for urgent attention in the context of all these diseases especially HIV/AIDS because the use of contaminated instruments in the process of FGM could be a mode of transmission. This is due to the fact that the operation is mainly carried out by quacks who make use of insanitary knives and other

unhygienic instruments. The risks are higher in the case of infibulations because of the need to cut open the infibulated area for childbirth. Use of crude, unsterilised instruments without administering anaesthesia to the victim, during reopening operation causes intense pain and could result in infection and heavy bleeding (rainbo.org, 2009). Vesico-Vaginal Fistula (VVF) can also occur in infibulated women, as well as Recto-Vaginal Fistula (RVF) in underage pregnant girls because their pelvis and birth canal are not mature enough to support reproductive activities (UNICEF, nd). Little wonder then that mother and child mortality rates are high in the country, and female infertility rate notorious (UNICEF, nd). Unfortunately for the poor creature, she is blamed for being unable to bear her husband a child, especially, a male child, to continue the lineage. She is blamed for a problem she most certainly did not cause. The Nigerian woman is indeed a troubled specie.

Villainous images of African women are painted in African male chauvinist fictions. Such images succinctly reflect androcentric notions about women as panders used in securing landed property. This, to any truly African citizen, is not the true image of the African woman. To them, African women are fatal, accursed and fickle beings who smack of evil omens. Sanusi and Olayinka (2011/2012) remark that Ojo-Ade (1983) rightly condemns African male writers' tendency to portray negative images of African women as quoted below:

African literature is male-created, male-oriented, chauvinistic art. Male is the master; male constitutes majority. The fact is well documented in our colonial history. The white civilizer, as cunning as ever, carefully chose his black counterparts to run the affairs of the "Dark Continent."

Woman is considered to be a flower, not a worker. Woman is supposed to be relegated to the gilded cage; she is not the contributor to, the creator of, a civilization (158).

In furtherance of the foregoing position that a feminist deconstructionist interpretation of Senghor's *Femme noire* reveals that African women are not necessarily idealised by Negritude writers, it is pertinent to note Adebayo's (1996) argument that the African woman has descended from the position of power to that of an underdog as opposed to the claims of the Negritude writers cited above. Truly, the African woman and, by implication, the Nigerian woman, has lost her lofty position of power and privilege. One should not be too excited when Adebayo (1996) comments on Sembène Ousmane's *La Mère*, that the African mother is the liberator, the symbol of resistance to oppression, the purveyor of truth and justice even when and where men are subdued by circumstances they should stand up to. To my mind, and in my view, the African woman these days is simply being exploited to play these roles; for, as soon as she accomplishes these roles, she is dumped and not compensated for her heroic contributions to the society. This trend largely accounts for the wide gulf between the African man and the African woman in the Nigerian society of today.

The question then is: what is responsible for this relegation and lack of equity of the sexes in present day Nigeria? Has the position of Adeleke (in Adebayo, 1996) that African women have attained emancipation to a certain degree been proved in the writings of African feminist writers contrary to Adebayo's (1996) view above? In the course of history, African women have attained some degree of emancipation in the sense that with Western education, African women have become exposed and are better able to engage in writing about the

oppressive conditions under which they live (Adeleke in Adebayo, 1996). It has also been proved that Nigerian women are gaining more access to the professions and are making classical headways in businesses of their choice. However, the glass ceiling syndrome and the social castigation that women have to live with because they dare to break the yoke of subalternity indicate that Nigerian women are not fully emancipated yet. The Nigerian woman is still more often than not ostracised for breaking the silence imposed on her; that silence which impoverishes her psychologically, socially, economically, and politically.

Examples reflecting the deplorable conditions of African women abound in African Literature. The domain is consequently a fertile ground for obtaining data on gender inequality in the continent. The unscientific nature of Literature makes it more accessible by lettered and unlettered Nigerian women out there. For instance, before you care to go to psychiatric hospitals anywhere in Africa, you read of her in adult and children literature books. Replete in these literatures are sexism and images of women battered emotionally, economically, socially and politically. The Nigerian woman is not any different from these women portrayed in fictions. She is, in fact, the one being fictitiously presented to us. She is the neurotic being that we seem not to pay attention to yet, until she takes to the street naked. Even when she takes to the street naked, what her other neurotics do is laugh at her. What her family members do is ostracise her and call her a witch suffering for her witchcraft. The Nigerian woman is the woman psychologically beaten and raped by her lawfully wedded husband, who for the sake of self-preservation and culture, will not speak out her chagrin, be she a market woman in Bodija or an Executive seated with fellow male board members (Odimegwu, 2006). The Nigerian woman is the schizoid woman who still has all her fundamental human rights denied her on the

basis of her biology. The life of the Nigerian woman resonates that of Adah, Nnu Ego, Aku-Nna, Ojebeta and Nko of the Nigerian feminist, Buchi Emecheta, in *Second Class Citizen*, *The Joys of Motherhood*, *The Bride Price*, *The Slave Girl*, and *Double Yoke* respectively; her daily life typifies that of Philomena Bassek's Mama Ida in *La Tache du sang*, and Ka Maïga's Rokheya and Rabiadou in *La Voie du salut*, to cite but a few examples. The voices of these characters are clearly echoed in the following painful outcry by Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood*:

God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage? After all, I was born alone, and I shall die alone. What have I gained from all this? Yes, I have many children, but what do I have to feed them on? On my life. I have to give them my all. And if I am lucky enough to die in peace, I even have to give them my soul. They will worship my dead spirit to provide for them; it will be hailed as a good spirit so long as there are plenty of yams and children in the family, but if anything should go wrong, if a young wife does not conceive or there is famine, my dead spirit will be blamed. When will I be freed? ... The men make it look as if we must aspire for children or die. We women subscribe to that law more than anyone. Until we change all this, it is still a man's world, which women will always help to build (186-187).

The palpable denial of the Nigerian girl's/woman's fundamental right to love and be loved is what Aku-nna voices out in Emecheta's *Bride* when she declares:

A girl belonged to you today as your daughter, and tomorrow, before your eyes, would go to another man in marriage. To such creatures, one should be wary of showing too much love and care, otherwise people would ask, "Look, man, are you going to be your daughter's husband as well?" (*Bride*, 17).

The Nigerian woman is counted among the African women that African feminist writers and critics sympathise with and struggle to liberate when Awa Thiam (1986) writes in protest:

As far as we are concerned, this human race consists of social classes and two categories of individuals: men and women, whose relationship to each other is that of dominating and being dominated. But that is not all. People, or rather men, have often reduced the problem of women to a problem of complementarity. Who defines this complementarity? The men who prescribe it for us. This complementarity has been systematized, giving excuses for all the forms of oppression and exploitation that the patriarchal system imposes on a woman, by virtue of her sex, both in the family and in organized labour. Should this complementarity not only be challenged but also REDEFINED? (13).

Underscoring the unifying theme of gender gap between the African male and female that pervades the works of African feminist writers, Sanusi and Olayinka (2012) note that feminist texts do not only "reveal the male-oppressor/female-victim dynamics but, they also show cultural and patriarchal dominance women are subjected to" (185).

The effects of the inequality that exists between African male and female is what Patrice Gahungu Ndimubandi (2009) succinctly captures as debilitating psychological and physical conditions of Calixthe Beyala's female protagonists in his classic titled *Angoisses névrotiques et mal-être dans Assèze l'Africaine de Calixthe Beyala*. In his words,

*De fait, s'il existe un thème fédérateur de l'œuvre romanesque de Calixthe Beyala, c'est bien le mythe de la déchéance, de la dégradation. Si cette corruption de l'être et de l'univers beyalais se révèle dans la décadence sociale et des mœurs, dans une Afrique et un Cameroun en pleine déliquescence, dans un climat atmosphérique dérégulé, où des pluies intempestives se déchainent en pleine saison sèche et des chaleurs mortelles en celle de la pluie, c'est surtout à travers le corps et la psyché des acteurs, éternels zombies errants, en mal de vivre, dans cet espace aux horizons tragiquement plombés, qu'elle se dévoile le plus dans tout son horreur (6).*

[De facto, if there exists a unifier theme of Calixthe Beyala's novels, it is the myth of decline and degradation. If this corruption of the beyalian being and universe comes to light in social and moral decadence, in an Africa and a Cameroon falling into utter decline, in an unsettled atmospheric climate, where ill-timed rains rage during dry season and deadly heats during rainy season, it is particularly through the body and psyche of the actors, perpetually wandering zombies, yearning for life, in this space with

tragically leaden horizons.]  
(My translation)

As earlier mentioned, there is the tendency to claim that Western intrusion through the colonial system came to accentuate the Nigerian woman's dilemma. However, we fail to recognise the fact that the white man left us alone to our destiny more than half a century ago. Looking inwards, the truth should be faced, for it is inadequate to pass the buck to the white man and blame him for the utter backwardness of the Nigerian woman. It is rather the neo-colonial situation of the Nigerian state that we should begin to investigate, while not losing sight of history. The Nigerian government has not been consistent with its policies on women. Consequently, gender equality in Nigeria remains and will remain a mirage if the Nigerian state fails to be sincere with herself.

### **Conclusion:**

#### **Charting the Pathway for Nigerian Woman's Total Emancipation**

Nigeria was a signatory to the U.N. Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) signed in 1979. In the 2012 GGGR, Nigeria ranked 110 out of 135 countries. This means that the journey to the total liberation of the Nigerian woman and her equality with the Nigerian man is not far-reaching yet, 34 years after. It reveals that the Nigerian woman is yet to be at par with her white counterparts. Nonetheless, the journey of a thousand years begins with one step one day. This step has been taken already in terms of government policies, proclamations and efforts. There is still much to be desired, even at that. Constructive and definite efforts need to be

made by both the Nigerian populace (male and female) and the Nigerian government.

On the part of the Nigerian woman, she needs to overcome her low self-esteem and poor image of herself as lesser, weaker, passive, more trivial, incapable of coping with men and other women as equals; incapable of getting big jobs done; and her tendency for approval-seeking from others. In essence, she should transcend "patriarchal pedagogy" (Sanusi and Olayinka, 2012: 185) by stopping others from defining her roles and personality in the office, the society, and the home for her. She is required to endeavour to reach for equality with men and the rewards of her capacities in socio-political and economic arenas of life in order to attain equitable position with men.

On the part of Nigerian men, it is suggested that they erase from their minds the myth that women are inferior, passive, and incapable of achieving big things. The idea that women lack ideas and creativity should become a thing of the past because these claims cannot be substantiated where women and men have equal opportunities to prove themselves. Men should disabuse their minds of the notion that women in offices, government, and industry should hold housekeeping and office-wife related jobs.

As for the Nigerian Government, since gender equality is a prerequisite for development (Johnson-Latham, 2007), this should be seen as the most propitious time to focus on UN charters, resolutions and policies, geared towards the realisation of human rights and fundamental freedom for all, without discrimination on the basis of race, sex, language, religion, or any other matter concerning human rights (Acholonu, 1999). More specifically, the Nigerian government should ensure that female children are given equal opportunities to education with males. Policies that discriminate against women in the Nigerian society should be annulled and reformulated

to favour women as well as men as stipulated by the UN in order to actualise and enhance equal rights and access to socio-political and economic participation of both genders. It is expedient that Nigerian government transforms the Nigerian concept of masculinity and femininity to facilitate socio-political empowerment of Nigerian women in housework, child care and general care-giving activities. These gendered roles

assigned to women have contributed largely to constraining them to the hearth and have prevented them from making use of opportunities when such are available and practicable (Tamale, 2005). It is only with these, among others, that meaningful development can take place in Nigeria; that is, when half the population, the women, formerly excluded, are included in all issues that border on human rights and the right to live.

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