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Gender issues in “*the Prize*”

Abstract

This paper attempts a critical analysis of Ademora’s children novel to expose the socio-cultural challenges which the female child faces in Africa. Through in-depth study, the paper explores feminist insights into Ademora’s philosophical reflections on the plight of girls in contemporary Africa. The paper draws its importance from the fact that literature is not just a mirror of society but can be a powerful vehicle through which change can be attained. This paper will examine the novel from the feminists perspectives. It would conclude that the novel provides insightful lenses through which we can see the state in which the female child finds herself going up in Africa and suggest meaningful ways by which we can dehorn these obstacles

Introduction

Feminist theory has so many angles and has evolved over the years. Dietz’s (2003) see feminism as follows:

Feminism is a historically constituted, local and global, social and political movement with an emancipatory purpose and a normative content . It posits a subject (women), identifies a problem (the subjection and objectification of women through gendered relations), and expresses various aims (e.g., overturning relations of domination; ending sex discrimination; securing female sexual liberation; fighting for women’s rights and interests, raising “consciousness,” transforming institutional and legal structures; engendering democracy) in the name of specific principles (e.g., equality, rights, liberty, autonomy, dignity, self-realization, recognition, respect, justice

O’Connor (2016) has outlined the broadness of feminist theory. The first wave of feminism is where men’s novels and writing had treated women in a demeaning ways. The female writer has been obsessed with the main character being woman. Examples of such novels are ‘Things fall Apart’ and ‘Arrow of God’. Elaine Showalter (1997) in her book; *A Literature Of Their Own*. talked about gynocriticism which is the examination of female writers and their place in literary history. A second aspect was study of the treatment of female characters in books by both male and female writers. Another aspect of gynocriticism involves the exploration of a canon of literature written by women. Thus gynocriticism seeks to appropriate a female literary theory.

Over the period, writers like Elaine have identified phrases in the study of gender in women's writing:

1. The first phase referred as 'feminine' phase is where female writers tried to adhere to male values, writing as men, and usually did not enter into debate regarding women's places in society. In most cases, female writers used pseudonyms.
2. The second phase known as the feminist phase is where female writers took upon themselves the work of critique of the role of women in society and the oppression of women
3. In the third phase women were no longer appendages to men or hide under pseudonyms. Neither do they fear to prove the legitimacy of women perspectives.

In Ghana, as in many parts of Africa, females face a lot of socio-cultural bottlenecks in various aspects of life (Amoakohene, 2014). These bottlenecks have largely hindered the contribution of the female in the national development agenda (Seema Jayachandran, 2014). African literature in its early days had followed this pattern too. For example, females were hardly protagonists; female characters were used to develop the male protagonists. In *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, for example the major characters and heroes were males. Feminist writers have however in subsequent years tried to project the course of women to correct the ills (Mariama Ba, 1987). The challenges of women start from childhood. One writer, who has not just shown the discrimination that the female child faces but how she can overcome the obstacles is Ademora.

Gender is now seen as key Development indicator. Not just because women are rightly human but constitute the highest populations in many nations. In Ghana, women constitute 52 percent of the total population. Recent government's efforts to achieve gender equality have not yielded the expected dividends partly because most of the challenges are socio-cultural. Again it is often difficult for the female child to overcome these challenges since she has little power to challenge the status quo. It is therefore important that efforts at promoting women's liberties look critically at the girl child. Traditionally, African women were meant for the kitchen and were seen just as child bearing tools. In the 21st century, these perceptions have not changed so much. There are still communities where the birth of a girl is not marked with so much happiness, as is the case with the birth of a male. Among some of the negative stereotypes that have long been attached to women are that they are weak, and not intelligent enough.

Feeding into these notions had been the forebears of modern Africa literature, whose writings had projected the major characters as men and the females as appendages (Sakshi Semwal, 2015). Ama Atta Aidoo (1942) and Mariama Ba (1978) had tried to rewrite stories to largely balance the earlier stereotyping- a move that saw male counterpart re-writing to correct their earlier male chauvinistic projections. For example, Achebe used *Anthills of the Savannah* to

redeem his long held presentation as a male chauvinist. Ademora's novel does not just recount problems but show that the female girl can overcome.

Background

Mr. Agu has two children, Agbonnaya (boy) and Onyema (girls). Both attend a local Community school. Mr. Agu has is traditional minded and a male chauvinist. He had long decided to marry Onyema to Onyia, an old and ugly man. The government scholarship examination is soon approaching. Mr. Nwiboko sees every reason why Onyema should sit for the examination. She is clever and can pass the examination. He discusses with Mr. Agu about the possibility of Onyema sitting the examination. Mr Agu tells him in the face that Onyema would not sit for the examination and that she would be married off after basic education. Mr Nwiboko gives her a lot of support and encouragement. Mrs Agu makes available money for the scholarship form. Meanwhile, Onyema's world is crumbling as her father clearly has no interest in her education. She weeps inside. She is also largely laughed at by her colleagues when she tells them she wanted to become an engineer. Onyema works hard in her studies. She emerges as the only one who passes the scholarship examination. Mr Agu rescinds his old decision of marrying Onyema to Onyea to allow her to further her education through the scholarship.

Tradition and Gender Discrimination

In most parts of Africa, the female child is largely seen as one to do household chores. This feeds into the general patriarchy that women should be "housewives" meant to clean the house, prepare meals and to "manage" the home in general. Onyema starts doing these very things at the very beginning. The novel starts with Onyema "opening melon seeds" to prepare super, while his brother Ogbonnaya is goes to play football with friends. Now there might not be any problem with the female child doing that, but the problem is that most of these things take a substantial time off from the female child's ability to engage in training for skills development. The hardworking teacher offers extra lessons to prepare the final year students. According to the novel only few girls could attend as they had to rush home to help their mothers in house whole chores and selling in the market. While Onyema is usually busied with household chores, Ogbonnaya is always free and he does attend all the extra classes. That is not the case for Onyema. Thus, the female child does not have the same time as the male child for learning. This could potentially affect her performances in school.

When it comes to opportunities for education and career development, the female child is usually at the disadvantage. In the novel, Onyema is easily labelled as one to be married off. His brother is however free to become whatever he wants to be. In Mr Agu agreeing to offer money for Ogbonnaya to buy forms to sit the scholarship examination, the writer depicts the extra efforts a parent could make to help his/her son to climb the educational ladder. In most instances, parents prefer the son to continue schooling when they cannot afford for both daughter and son. This

also feeds into the traditional mentality that the woman belongs to a different home since she would one day marry to another man.

In Ghana, even today there is gender prescription of jobs. You will still hear people talk of this job is for men only and or this job is for women. Some jobs are seen as less challenging and “soft” for a man to engage in. In other words, a male who takes such jobs is seen as undermining himself. Examples include, being an attendant in a bar or restaurant, being a cook etc. Again, some people think some jobs are for men only. That is why when Onyema says she wants to become an engineer she is mocked at by her classmates. The danger is that this situation has made women to quell back into their shelves. It has also has made job and career options narrow for women. For example, in Accra, Ghana`s capital, there are thousands of *trotros*, which are usually being operated by a driver and a mate. Most boys make a living by being driver’s mate. But since such jobs are seen as male jobs, few females venture into it. Like in the situation that Onyema finds herself, engineering, military and politics are still seen by some people as the preserve of men.

How does the female child succeed?

Success has never been easy, not even for the male child. One who wants to succeed in life needs to work hard. The female child needs a little more of that. This is because of the several barriers she has to dismantle. In the novel, Onyema has an unbridled confidence in herself. She knew what she wanted and what she does not want. She started emphatically,

“I don’t want to marry Onyia”

But what does she want to do. She wants to be an engineer. Therefore it is important that the female child from a background like Onyema`s has a clear picture of what she wants herself to be in the future. If Onyema did not have this conviction she would have fallen for the very demands of her father.

The female child also needs to be extra diligent and hardworking. It is these features that will put her at same level with their male counterparts or make them even better. Onyema’s diligence at work is noticeable right from home. She is also extra studious by using the least opportunity to study. In today’ s world of competition, women must not pity themselves but take it upon themselves to excel in whatever they do.

The female child also needs support and direction to be able to succeed. In most of the villages where forced marriages and other abuses are meted out to women, there are not usually enough role models. Girls who know what they want to do and are hardworking usually do not have people to look up to for encouragement and direction. In the novel, Mrs Agu`s love and encouragement has been crucial. In addition, Mr. Nwiboko’s belief in Onyema saw him follow up to ensure that Onyema sits for the scholarship. In presenting a father kicking against her own

daughter, the mother showing support and that of the teacher, the novel is telling us that there is and would always be the need for some kind of support to help the female child succeed

The female child who would succeed in life is one who also has a “big heart” to contain the discrimination. To overcome the pain therefore Onyema wept to relief the pain. She did not give up.

Conclusion

The female child in Africa faces discrimination in occupation choice, early marriage and sometimes lack of support in education. All these have largely continued to undermine efforts in achieving parity in gender development in the continent Secondly, success in life is possible for any one. Though the female child faces a lot of obstacles, determination and hard work would usually lead her to success. What she needs however is to be able to identify clearly what she wants in life and to resist bad influence. However the female child needs role models and people to encourage and support her in her resolve to pursue her dreams. The pain of discrimination is killing and can make the female child stop the pursue of her goals. It is personal conviction and support from good people that can help her overcome this emotional aspect of the discrimination

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