

**WOMEN AND NATION BUILDING: A STUDY OF NGUGI AND MUGO'S
THE TRIAL OF DEDAN KIMATHI AND TESS ONWUEME'S *TELL IT TO
WOMEN***

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Abstract

This study examines the role of women in nation building as seen in Ngugi and Mugo's *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and Tess Onwueme's *Tell it to Women*. It analyses the functions of literature in the society and women's participation in nation building which is an important ingredient in achieving an equitable, peaceful and more prosperous society in a male constructed world. The role of women in nation building can no longer be overlooked in this contemporary African society; this is why many African writers try to remould and project the image of women in their works by presenting them as advocates for social change in a disintegrated and disorganized society. Ngugi, Mugo and Onwueme in their above mentioned plays present women as gents of social consciousness, mothers and advocates for change; these women are also represented as symbolic figures of nationalism and patriotism as they engage in the fight for a better and well ordered society. Therefore, these women are represented in the plays as reckoned forces of struggle for independence and social development.

Key Words: Women, Literature, Nation Building

Introduction

Women are very ambitious and eager to rewrite history, reform societies and participate actively in politics. Many African nations have produced women professionals and intellectuals whose leadership qualities catapulted the nations to greater heights. These women have made their impact felt in issues of nation building and national development. They have participated actively from different angles of human endeavour such as wives, mothers, teachers, politicians, lawyers, traders, to mention but a few.

The task of national development and nation building commences from the

home, which is the primary constituency for all women. Hence in discharging their duties as wives, mothers and home builders, women unconsciously lay the foundation of a solid nation.

Emordi, Joy in her paper entitled *Women Empowerment and Nation Building: The Role of Unity Colleges* defines 'Nation Building' as a "legitimate political process to establish a system of governance and ability to maintain order , guarantee the fulfillment of international obligations and human right and deliver essential social services. It is the establishment of equitable, democratic and egalitarian society in which the rights of men and women are respected"(1).

Emordi further states in her above mentioned article "that the woman is a citizen, a worker, a professional, a director, a nation builder, a mother and a home maker. A nation is a conglomeration of homes and the woman is fully involved from its cleaning to its full management. She should be fully involved and participate in key decision both in the home and in political structures. The role of women in the family which is the unit of society cannot be overemphasized. This also goes to the larger society in the nation" (2-3) .

In this contemporary African society, women have been participating actively in nation building and have also in different capacities effectively contributed to the development of different sectors in society. In Nigeria, women like Okonjo Iwuala (Finance Minister), Obiageli Ezekwesili (Education minister), Dora Akunyili (Director, NAFDAC) and others have contributed their quota in building the nation (Nigeria). They have made efforts to revolutionize different sectors under their care. Many countries in Africa are encouraging women professionals who possess leadership potentials that can help in nation building. Some of these leadership contributions and efforts are documented by literary artists in order to expose varied experiences of women in society. Thus, these women are brought alive to their challenges making then resist all forms of subjugation.

Literature and Nation Building

The role of literature in constructing and inventing national identities cannot be overlooked because Literature does not grow or develop in a vacuum; it is given shape, direction and concern by social, political and economic forces in an existing society. Hence, it is an important tool in the process of building a nation and creating national identity. In an attempt to explore these identities,

writers have exposed the various roles fictional characters play which are geared toward developing and constructing national identities. The concept of identity is one subjective element that has raised questions among contemporary writers. It gives an insight into how literature presents the roles or contributions of men and women in building the nation. Over the years, men's roles and contributions in national development are well projected by fictional artists, while little has been said about women's participation in building the nation. Contextualizing historically and culturally, feminist writers have explored the achievements and contributions of exceptional women characters who contributed immensely to the nation. These achievements have been marginalized and misrepresented in literary records which also triggered a debate on the roles and contributions of women in nation building.

The literary discourse on women begun in a novel (*Efuru*, 1966) written by a female African writer, Flora Nwapa, the first black African writer in the English language. Her works (*Efuru*, *One is Enough*, *Women are Different*, *Idu*) portray women in a credible and realistic light. Women explored their potentials in her works not withstanding any form of opposition and attained their climax. Some writers have also presented their views on women's roles but emphasized more on the collective efforts of men and women in reshaping the society which can lead to a more organized, peaceful and equitable society

The place or position of the African women in society has aroused a lot of controversies in written African literature. Many feminist writers believe that African women's potentials and contributions are not fully represented or documented; this explains why they try to represent these experiences in their fictional works for literary documentation and public awareness. This paper does not tilt towards agitation for women's right or the equality of men and women; rather it suggests that men and women can work together for a better and well ordered society.

Literature has been a vehicle for enforcing social change in any given literate society. Many contemporary writers present women as the heroines for social change as they try to create the dynamic and resourcefulness of women in their literary works. Hence women's role in nation building can no longer be overlooked in the social circles of every society, and this gives the new generation of African writers a better chance of representing women as advocates for social change in a challenging world. Based on this view, Iheukwueze in "Triumph of the hero": *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* gives a

heroic view of female characters stating:

I feel that we cannot talk of total liberation for Africa unless the women are also completely liberated...I am more concerned with a waste of women in a neo-colonial society. Their energy is completely wasted or imprisoned if you like, between the bed and the kitchen – we are the losers for imprisoning or confining our women in that position. Take it this way, since women form above half the population of their total abilities, you are in fact, not making use of the abilities of the population.(2)

In some African societies, the issues of women's role and development are still determined by men. Women are regarded as mere figures rather than assets in different levels of development or sectors of life. However, there is need to improve and change the image of women in society as this will help create a better and diversified society. In view of the above statement, Uchendu Patrick comments that:

Men cannot claim exclusive right to shape the future of our world. It is time for them to accept challenges and share with men in decision making process. It is high time they acknowledged that the denial of women's right and opportunities, is the root of our developmental problems and social economic ills...(64)

Women and Nation Building as seen in Ngugi and Mugo's *The Trials of Dedan Kimathi*

Ngugi Wa Thiong'o and Mugo Micere are among the major playwrights in Africa that created awareness on the importance of women's participation in their plays/works.

The play, *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* is one of such plays that projected women as 'strong willed' individuals in the face of struggle and political upheaval. The play depicts the colonial struggle and historical events associated with the Mau-Mau struggle in Kenya. Ngugi notes that the play explores the struggle of the peasants, "Who for the last seven years stood opposed to foreign interference and oppression" (46). However, this struggle is perceived as historical efforts of men, women and young children in the Kenyan society. This simply shows that the fight for a better society in Kenya

was not left for men only, since women actively participated in the struggle. *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* is written by Ngugi Wa Thiong'o with the collaboration of Mugo Micere Githae in 1976; their play is a response to colonialist writings about the Kenyan society and the Mau Mau movement which depicted the fight for political independence in the fifties. Ngugi and Mugo have built powerful and challenging views of the circumstances surrounding Dedan Kimathi in this play. Their mastery is seen in their ability to expose the role played by women in the struggle and determination for self liberation in postcolonial Kenya. This is an aspect neglected by many prominent African writers on the struggle for independence which has attracted feminist attention. In the *Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, the plot of the play shows the efforts of a nameless woman, who is the symbolic figure of nationalism and patriotism. The woman is a symbolic representation of all women and mothers in general. The nameless woman educates the boy and girl on the plight of their society as well as the evils of imperialism and colonization. She believes that selfless struggle cannot be based on sentiments, therefore, she urges Kimathi to be courageous; not to be weighed down by his family problems and challenges. As a good mother and mentor (elder), she rebukes the boy and the girl who represent the ignorant citizens of Kenya as they fight over gain. The woman teaches them the importance of love and unity and sends them on a great mission in the struggle. She gives them the gun wrapped with home-made bread for the liberation of kimathi during the trial. By doing this, she instills the spirit of nationalism into the boy and the girl as they embark on a mission to salvage the Mau Mau leader. This scene reveals the woman's role as a reckoning force in effecting change in the colonial Kenya. She calmly tells the young boy and girl:

The day you understand why your father died. The day you ask yourself whether it was right for him to die so; the day you ask yourself "what can I do so that another shall not be made to die under such grisly circumstance?" that day, my son, you will become a man... (19)

The woman is very active in the play and her role is very indispensable. Her activities add to the strength of the struggle towards independence and liberation/release of Dedan Kimathi. Thus, the woman is projected as a force of change in a changing society. This can be inferred from the woman's statement: "In the struggle, you learn to adapt to change circumstances...;

there is not a place I have not visited, create risks but the task once started must be completed” (60).

The woman emerges as an ordinary citizen in Kenyan society to become one of the reckoned forces of the struggle for independence. It is important to note that the woman’s roles as a mother, teacher and a strategist go a long way in buttressing the role of a woman in a disintegrated society. She showcases her self-will and courage when she disguised herself as an orange seller in order to smuggle a gun into Kimathi’s cell.

The woman’s role as a strategist is not underestimated in the first movement when she is caught and interviewed by the White soldier. The great wits and intelligence exemplified by the woman during this interview and tensed situation show that women have a unique way of handling serious issues. The woman’s roles in the play are dynamic in nature; her role as a soldier is evident in the scene in the forest where she fought as a Mau-Mau guerilla fighters and she is also a ceasefire member of the counsel in the jungle.

The woman’s role as a teacher is seen where she tries to educate the guerilla fighters on the modern concept of kinship. She also plays the role of a mother when she advised Kimathi to hold fast and be focused in the fight for independence. She states:

*Thinking about the past and the dear ones
We left behind can weaken our resolve;
You are a leader of a revolution, you must
decide. But remember all others have left their
wives,
their children, their mothers behind.(77)*

The significance of the woman’s role as a teacher is very symbolic. It suggests that Kenya is ripe for nationalistic struggle and liberation. It is also important to note that the nameless woman represents every woman in Kenya who engages in the struggle for liberation. The woman’s wits and feminine nature enables her to penetrate all the white men’s security zones. She disguises herself as a fruit seller to make sure that she accomplishes her mission .This action makes her a good strategist in the struggle. Her fight doesn’t stop there; she totally committed herself to the struggle for independence. She directs the boy and the girl on their specific roles in the court room. She says:

*I shall first go in dressed to kill, you will follow dressed
as you are. I will speak to Kimathi with my eyes.
When I cough you start shouting. In the confusion
Dedan
will follow me.(61)*

The woman is full of courage, strength and intelligence. The woman, girl and the boy are willing to give their lives for the liberation of Dedan Kimathi. However, the woman's role is very dynamic in nature; she represents the figure of a revolutionary mother in Kenya as well as leadership role of women in the society. We should also mark her role from an ordinary prostitute to a nationalist fighter. This nationalist energy, she transfers to the boy and girl as they attempt to liberate Kimathi from prison.

Women and Nation Building as seen in Tess Onwueme's *Tell It to Women*.

Tess Onwueme's play *Tell it to Women*, written in 1992 also deals with women's recognition, solidarity and empowerment. The playwright's play falls in the category of ideological consciousness. She emphasizes that for human beings to achieve peace and suppress human oppression, there must be a collective struggle. In view of the above statement, Otukunefo states that:

*...Her thematic fixation has not merely been conditioned
by the fashionable stance of presenting female angle but
rather a more liberal approach of focusing attention on
typical issues in the contemporary Nigerian society.
This is perhaps her way of contending that the African
woman writer like her male counterparts is a member
of specific society whose experiences discriminates
between the sexes.(53)*

The play is an ideologically and politically powerful work. In this work, the reader travels back to a Nigerian village in post-colonial Africa which is an epic drama for women. The play explores the role of women within the Nigerian rural setting. It educates the audience about different aspects of traditionalism and modernism as well as how different cultures are viewed. It is important to note that the play presents women as agents of social

consciousness, mothers and advocates for change. The play explores the emergence of rural and urban women who came together to address their perceived oppression by a patriarchal social system. It reveals an attempt by women to unite and present a common front in improving their living conditions which brings to light the great discrepancies in a universal ideology. The writer's primary aim is the empowerment of the female gender. The government through the proposal made by the nation's First Lady to launch a "better-life program" tries to improve the quality of lives of the rural women who have suffered abandonment and marginalization both in domestic and public spheres for many years. The rural women believe that this project would bring change and development as well as improve their lives in the village.

The play centers on Yemoja, the principal character of the play and two feminist western –educated scholars, Daisy and Ruth. These women are also seen as the antagonists in the play because their actions negate the culture of the Idu society. Daisy and Ruth are leaders of the "Better Life for Rural Women Campaign" which encourages women to believe in themselves. Yemoja is nominated as a mediator between the village and city women which broadened her view and understanding about her immediate society. This programme causes a great misunderstanding between husbands and wives; men and women and different personalities in the village. Yemoja's husband and father revolt against her participation in the movement which she vehemently rejects by her strong determination. Also, in Daisy's home, her husband Okei disagrees with her passion for the feminist movement and they always quarrel about it.

The playwright through the character of Adaku emphasizes on the need for men and women to work together for the good of the society. In the play, Adaku, who is the leader of Umuada Council of Idu has the wisdom of a good mother. She advises that women should not try to replace the men in their roles nor men replace women; rather, they should compliment each other for the growth of the society. Adaku states:

...this thing about taking power from men and giving it to women

is where I have a problem. If you concentrate power in one part male or female, think of the problem that will cause... What becomes of the family...And now the family head must be turned upside down and men for and women...to live

and a better life.(35-38)

Adaku also expresses the women's happiness for a positive and new change when she states "... At last we shall reap the fruits.... Something new and bright is here to bring light into our lives!" (28) However, these women look forward to a new phase in their lives where the government through its female representatives, will improve the standard of living in their community.

Yemoja as an agent of social consciousness in the play is chosen by the rural women to be a middle person between the rural and urban women. She accepts the leadership role despite great opposition by the members of her family. But she maintains:

*Why must I be afraid to set out when I know that all
there
is in life is the journey? I am ready. Let me go! I love the
family and want to remain an integral part of the
circle....
If when I return, my father tells me there is no place
for me in his homestead ;I shall understand, If I return,
and my husband tells me there is no place for me
on his bed. I shall understand. But for now let me
go....(77-78)*

Yemoja resists her family's disapproval of her new post and holds on to her decision. Her family tries to prevent her from gaining social recognition but her zeal for change and transformation carried her on. Tess Onwueme presents Yemoja as a rebel; she plays the role of a leader and at the same time revolts against all factors that do not promote their tradition. At the last movement of the play, Yemoja who sees herself in the city defeats her oppressors (the urban women) at the launching ceremony of the "Better Life Program". She succeeds in creating awareness in the society, and also instills consciousness in her father, mother, husband and Bose, who is Daisy's daughter.

In the city, Yemoja distinguishes her personality as a promoter of the Idu tradition and cultural values rather than the western value. She leads the women well in the city and through her good leadership, the launching of the better life program emerges successful as they promote the native Idu new yam festival. Onwueme tries to show that the rural women are always relegated to the background by the civilized women, thus, the arrival of the

rural women in the city as seen in the play reshapes them from the ignorance of rural life to greater awareness. This is seen in Adaku's statement:

*We too have our own wisdom, we have our own
power
We have our magic. If they proclaim freedom, why
must
they not let me define for myself what that freedom
means?
Why must we be forced to view the world with only
their
eyes? Are we blind? (234-238)*

With the support of Yemoja and Adaku, the rural women revolted against the modern women as they changed the launching ceremony to the victory of the Idu women and the traditional values. The modern women are utterly disgraced. We should note that the modern figures are represented by Daisy and Ruth. Daisy, a Director of Women Affairs in government, and Ruth, a feminist scholar, are two urban women who become the rural women's "mouthpieces" for the new project. They made promises of equal partnership between the rural and urban women as well as ensuring that there is no form of discrimination in the new project. According to them, these projects are made to encourage women to realize their potentials and self worth and also...break boundaries of confinements and compartmentalization of our potentialities in the oppressive, despotic and tyrannical hegemony of patriarchy imposed on women these many years... (30). Yemoja, one of the rural women, is chosen to represent the rural women in their political, economic and social welfare in the city. She accompanies Daisy and Ruth in order to learn and prepare the other rural women when they come to the city for the launching of the better life project. The attempt to bring equality among women and improve the life of the oppressed ones proved futile. Through the help of Yemoja and Adaku, the rural women are able to revolt against the urban women.

According to them, 'they cannot drown our steps with a marching song. Why must we abandon our own dance to march to another's steps'. Bose, Daisy's daughter is incorporated into the native ritual dance; Daisy and Ruth try to stop her but the rural women forced them to dance. This is very symbolic as it denotes the triumph of the rural women and their tradition over everything modern especially the urban women and their adopted western values. Daisy

and Ruth are two female characters that the playwright employed to symbolically represent the radical nature of women in the city as she tries to create gender imbalances in their social relationships with the rural women. These women are deceptive, inconsiderate, intolerant and arrogant with no respect for their Idu culture and customs. Yemoja later realizes that all women are not the same as exemplified in the characters of Daisy and Ruth. The negative attitude of these two women is contrary to the perception which acknowledges that 'all women are the same'. It is very important to note that Onwueme presents her female characters as people who rise above cultural and family limitation as a means of realizing self. Yemoja who is termed rural in nature moves from her rural environment to the city where she devised her own strategy for survival. However, she later triumphed over the urban women as a result of her strong nature and quest for change. In the play, it is also important to note the roles of the women as a unit called the 'umuada'; the Umuada' in the play simply acts as political rural group that checkmates wars, quarrels and also maintains peace in the Idu society. However, Onwueme in her play attempts to warn women against imitating western values, especially modern ones that affect positive traditional ways of life and human relationship as seen in the characters of Daisy and Ruth.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has brought to light that both dramatists depict women's role as complementary to that of men in society. They also present a situation where women's roles contribute to social change and growth for sustainable development. The thematic thrust of the plays *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* and *Tell it to Women* hinges on the issue of women's active participation in nation building at different levels in society for change and peaceful co-existence. Ngugi, Mugo and Onwueme through their presentations in their various plays justify that women like their male counterparts are great forces for social change. The roles and struggles in the above mentioned plays explore the heroic dimensions of these women to their societies at large. The dramatists are also of the opinion that women who are very rural, passive and docile can be pushed by circumstances around them to struggle for social justice and change. Finally, the playwrights view women as mothers, iconoclasts, strategists, soldiers and promoters of social consciousness and these qualities are well represented in their various plays.

Ngugi, Mugo and Onwueme did not just empower their female characters in their male dominated literary thoughts but explored their strength, talents, skills and potentials. It is therefore imperative for women's participation and contributions in nation building to be documented in written literature as this would encourage women's interest in contributing positively to national development.

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