

WOMEN'S RELIGIOUS AND CROSS-CULTURAL BURDEN IN THE SELECTED WORKS OF AFRICAN FEMALE WRITERS

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Abstract

Culture and religion have been the favourite subjects while discussing the problems of African women. Right from time, the culture of African societies operates within a patriarchal system that establishes norms and morals which favour the birth of a male child over the female. These norms defined the cultural value that guides the decision and behaviour of the society against the relevance of a female child. While culture might be entirely patriarchal in nature, religion shapes this cultural system. Of course, the religion of a people is defined through their cultural attributes. Culture and religion in this stead, have been the spearheads of the disadvantage women experience in African society. They are the founts of male chauvinism, infringing the rights of women as members of society. This study, therefore, explores qualitative textual analysis method to showcase religion and cultural influence on African women against the problem relating to motherhood, womanhood, widowhood and polygamy in Buchi Emecheta's "The Joys of Motherhood," Mariama Ba's "So Long a Letter," and Grace Ukala's "The Broken Bond." It also contributes to the understanding of these complexities and highlights the importance of literature in shedding light on these issues. The paper further examines the feminist literary theory to understand the intersection of gender, culture, and power in African women's experiences and redefine women's image within social and gender contexts.

Keywords: *Women, Religion, Cross-Culture, Burden, African Female writers, Motherhood, Widowhood, Polygamy, Abandonment*

1. Introduction

Literature being a reflection of the societal norms, culture and traditions have been used by many feminist writers to pioneer the struggle for women's rights across the world from time immemorial despite the diverse socio-political and cultural influence that tried to limit the early women writers. Historically, there have been a number of arguments on the exigency of women which dates back to the fourteenth century when women were restricted from participating and expressing

themselves in the strict patriarchal structure that predominantly minimized female intervention in social and political discourse (Moghadam, 2003; Bahammam, 2018). A wide range of socio-political norms were established against the rights of women such as the education reform, leaving them with a midget of cultural advantages so as to cater for the needs of men (Shaheen, 2009). In spite of this, many women expressed their views in social deviance and exposed the gender realities they faced, but in a most subtle way.

The early Europe and Africa gave women limited opportunities for participation; relegated largely to only domestic chores. Women were culturally compelled to focus on practical home life that would promote their family affairs, especially that of their husbands. Blanks (1999) puts forward the assertion that women in Venice in the sixteenth century were forbidden to flaunt their skills other than those of domestic chores. Defiantly, some women risked the ordeal and clamoured against the mundane abnormality of patriarchal system of gender role and injustice and were exiled from their communities, or hunted as witches. Among writers who came to the stage to argue against these patriarchal assumptions of female inferiority include Christine de Pizan. Her *Book of the city of ladies* (1999) debated closely for the change in the status of women so that female gender could hold same social rights and impetus like the opposite sex. *Monderata Fonte's Il merito delle donne* (1600) in the early sixteenth century, which was later translated as *The Worth of Women: Wherein is Clearly Revealed Their Nobility and Their Superiority to Men* (1998), was written to propagate the rights of women as opposed to male privileges. Anne Hutchinson compromised the Puritan clergy established system through her outspoken and chaotic actions. Anne Askew, also a vocal and intelligent English Protestant, was condemned as a heretic during the reign of Henry VIII of England. But this did not put to bed the struggle of women against male domination and social injustice as the rhythm of resistance beats through the sixteenth century.

Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication on the Rights of Women* publicly discussed the receptions for equal rights of education, life, job, happiness between men and women without discrimination towards the end of the

eighteenth century (Ferguson, 1999). Women involvement was not fully established but had started progressing with regards to the ideal of womanhood. There were also agitations for reforms in many established norms and laws, which were entirely created to give credence to patriarchal reign. Wollstonecraft criticized the effect marriage had on women and proposed a reform that would allow women to participate both in domestic affairs and civil society without affecting their motherhood roles (Ferguson 1999:446). Her books globally influenced other female writers such as Olympe de Gouges, Madame Roland, Phillis Wheatley, Toni Morrison and Rita Dove, who came to the centre stage to advocate for justice for women and equal rights in the male dominated society.

Women writings did not gain much cognizance in Africa until nineteenth century when writers like Nawal El Saadawi of Egypt, Flora Nwapa of Nigeria and Mariama Ba of Senegal began to criticize the widespread inequalities, oppression and male domination that dotted the African societies (Gruenbaum, 2001; Uimonen, 2020). Saadawi's writings advocated against various religious doctrines on patriarchy dominance that inspired the abuse of women in the Arab societies. Nwapa stood relentlessly against the injustice suffered by the Igbo women of Nigeria on the premise of cultural and religion ideology. Increasingly, modern African women writers have joined the canon of early women writer roles to address the sociocultural, religious and political inequalities that have caged women for centuries. They have tried to counteract the burdens that African culture and religion have placed on women, and men's false assumptions about sex, love, fecundity and society. This paper therefore showcases the realities of African women in the writings of the following women

authors: Emecheta (1979), Mariama Ba (1989), and Ukala (2001), through the explanation of recurrent themes of motherhood, abandonment, polygamy, widowhood and violence.

2. Review of relevant literature

2.1 Motherhood as a burden

According to Akinjobi (2011), motherhood can be defined based on sociocultural and religious identity of different societies. In some African societies, a motherhood integral relevance relies heavily on a mother's ability to give a child. From a religious point of view, Akinjobi (2011) sees it as a way of practicing one's faith (2011:1). Many societies define a woman's cultural and social purpose as being about being a mother. The failure of a woman to birth a child in such societies is often referred to as a curse that often threatens her bond with her husband (Donkor, 2008:22). Therefore, motherhood is observed as a core and central part of women's identities (Walker, 1995). A woman's ability to procreate equates the means to become an acceptable member of the society. Failure to do so would not only confront her with family hatred, but also with contempt, ridicule and isolation from society. This stigma breaks their joy and makes them desperate in the family, in which they should fully realize themselves as wives. Thus, women are contrived in the process of realizing her identity.

African societal belief that childbirth crowns a woman's glory, according to Kimathi (1994), is a major pressure on women (82). It is different in some other societies where childbearing might be subjected to agreement between couples. African societies hold the belief that bearing a child is God's commandment on humans (Mbiti, 1969:104). Therefore, irrespective of the skills, desires and the

talents of a woman, it is culturally viewed that the primary function of a woman is to be a mother (Akinjobi, 2011). This inspires Ngcobo (1988) to conclude that, Africans see motherhood as the ultimate goal for women who desire to have children.

Emecheta's *The Joy of motherhood* conveys a gloomy experience of African cultural and religious perspectives on women as the author displays the pressure and subjugation that engraves the reality of her protagonist. Nnu Ego lost her identity as a woman until she produces a child. According to Willey (2010), Nnu Ego's identity is destroyed in *Ibuza* because of the society and traditional premium placed on childbearing, (162). When she cannot conceive with her first husband, Amatokwu, despite the love she has for him, the marriage is dissolved and she is filled with apprehension and shame. Even though she feels relieved when she conceives for her second husband, a man she dislikes but marries in order to produce a child, the death of her child almost propels her to commit suicide by jumping off a bridge. She questions her womanhood thus:

*I am not a woman anymore....
and they all agreed that a
woman without a child for her
husband was a failed woman”
(Emecheta 1979:62).*

The concept of motherhood in African context is defined in such a way that barrenness often causes women to be domestically abused either by beating, Sophanna (2006) or by killing Baloyi (2013). A woman becomes nothing without children. Emecheta (1979) uses her protagonist to describe the dark world of African women who are always at the receiving ends of infertility in marriage. The African social and cultural belief structure, which is a product of patriarchal system, considers procreation as women's

responsibility. In the absence of a child, women become target of societal scorn. Kimathi (1994:83) concludes that this barrenness has been one of the major reasons why African culture encourages polygamy.

Widowhood Practices

The term is associated with harmful and dehumanizing practices in traditional African societies against women (Oloko, 1997). Though it includes practices that vary from culture to culture, the experience shares same attributes of women's victimization and emasculation. Widowhood rites are the most stressful events in a married adult's life (Holmes and Rahe, 1967). Sossou (2002) highlights South Africa, Nigeria and Cote d'Ivoire as some of the African countries that encourage widowhood rites. According to Okoronkwo (2015), widows in some parts of Africa are usually accused of their husbands' death which always result to her participation in certain rites such as lying in bed with her husband's corpse, drinking the remains of the water used to wash the corpse, swearing with charm in order to justify her innocence. He claims these practices endanger the life of widows by exposing them to such despicable health hazards (2015). Other rites include: a widow's restriction to leave the house during mourning (Rosenblatt and Nkosi, 2007:78), food restrictions, wearing specific dress to reduce her attractiveness, cleansing through sexual intercourse with a ritual cleanser (see Okoronkwo, 2015) etc. These rites amplify the chauvinistic ideals of the patriarchal system and compromise women's self-esteem, respect and freedom (see Kotzé et al. 2012). A widow who refuses to abide with the above rites could face the risk of being accused of killing her husband, which might lead to ostracizing her from her matrimonial home.

These harmful practices justify the question of women identity in African societies. Ramatoulaye in Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1981) has been married for thirty years and blessed with twelve children. Having been abandoned by her husband (Modou) who married her daughter's classmate (Binetou), Ramatoulaye is frustrated, deprived and ridiculed in widowhood through the weapon of Islamic culture. In the novel, Ba explains, through her protagonist, the social and religious cruelties on widows in Senegal. In the following exert, the protagonist recalls her experience as a widow who mourns for four months and ten days in the confinement of Islamic ritual doctrines as she cried she lives in "a monotony broken only by purifying baths...changing of my mourning cloths every Monday and Friday (Ba,8).

Another whim of the patriarchal system in relation to widowhood practices is the widow inheritance. A practice that subjected a widow to marry a close male relative or kinsmen of her late husband (Tengolzor Ba – et al, 2022). According to African religious and cultural norm, the widow's refusal to marry a relative of her late husband will deny her the right to inherit his properties. Ba deeply projects her rejection of this religious and cultural scourge through her protagonist as she denounces being offered as an object "...I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand...(see Ba,58)" and reinstates the importance of marriage as an embodiment of love and choice and not trade "...it is an act of faith and of love, the total surrender of oneself to the person one has chosen...(Ba,58)".

Pauw (1990) sees the norm as gender inequality. Widowers in Africa do not experience the despicable ordeals at the demise of their wives. They are neither subjected to this questionable rite for inheritance and indignities when their wives

die, nor compelled to mourn. A widower could sleep wherever he wants within the premise of the house or marries whoever he wants (Awoh, 2004).

2.2 Polygamy and Abandonment

Polygamy is a term that is often associated with cultural and religious practice in African societies that allow men to marry more than one wife. Elbedour et al. (2002) and Bergstrom (1994) note that 20% to 50% of marriages in Africa are polygamous in nature. In Nigeria for instance, 16% of married men between the ages of 12-49 marry more than one wife according to 2008 demographic and health survey. Polygamy maps that African system bears unimaginable hardships on the lives of women who by the virtue of the cultural and religious prescriptions find themselves in it. Kahiga (2007), however posits that the meaning of polygamy is inferred according to sociocultural context (p120).

About 83% of human societies allow polygamous marriage and if we could study polygamy practice critically, it would be discovered that the percentage of men having more than a wife is smaller than the societies that practice it. Thus, this reflects the inequality and discriminating patriarchal characteristic of how husbands treat their wife in polygamous marriage due to sociocultural and religious advantage (Thobejane & Flora, 2014:2 citing Berkowitz, 2007).

Polygamy endues men with power, Dangor (2001). *The Broken Bond* by Ukala (2021) reveals men are imbued with power to have concubines, marry more than a wife with a social privilege to abuse them. Using an impecunious African cultural milieu, Ukala (2021) unveils the most rampant problems puzzling women in the patriarchal domain of both their father and husband through the lens of the characters in her book. Ukala (2021) mirrors the

predominance of polygamy in Nigerian societies where men are permitted to marry in clusters to bolster their social and religious relevance. This explains the exigency of men's affluence and power over the women.

The practice of polygamy in Africa, especially in Islamic religion, stringently denies African women their fundamental human rights. It procures inferiority and puncture women's dignity, Ndabayekhe (2009). Polygamy deprives women of their marital satisfactions (Al-Krenawi and Slonim-Nevo 2008), depression sets in as a result of their husband's absence after pregnancy (Fatoye, et al, 2004), and causes division among co-wives (Ndabayekhe, 2009) etc.

Ukala (2021) sees polygamous marriage in *The Broken Bond* as a medium for patriarchal domestic abuse and injustice against women. She x-rays custom as a tyrannical vehicle through which women are imprisoned and domestically tortured. The protagonist is clad as a tyrannical man that authoritatively defines everything in his house and forces his wives to dance to the tunes of his cultural advantages. Chief Ojo constantly brags of his sociocultural right to marry as many wives as he can according to the prescription of his cultural right. He claims "I am a traditionalist... I can marry as many wives..." (Ukala, 2021).

The above exert justifies the belief that men greedily satisfy their sexual intuitions at the expense of the women. It is a perception that has worked out for many years, decorated women in such a way that they accept the subjugation of the prevailing patriarchal conditions in the society. Culture and religion are the perpetrators of women victimization and the weapons which affect women lives in a men wanted way.

Ba's definition of polygamy in *So Long a Letter* (1989) as the major orchestration to women's abandonment in Senegal are demonstrated in Kolawole's

analysis. She reveals that women still suffer abuses due to traditional beliefs and laws that make it impossible for them to be self-fulfilled in a male dominated world (96). The protagonist constantly suffers from the theme of polygamy as she frequently faces several humiliations due to her husband's abandonment (So Long a Letter, 46). Polygamy empties her life's worth and deprives her the human freedom she deserves. Her husband (Moudo) capitalizes on the customary freedom he has in the society to marry more than one wife as a way to appeal his sexual adventure.

Ramatoulaye is in the world of her own fighting with her life chaos at the hand of culture and religion. Even the Imam she reserves so much respect, sees Moudo's decision to marry another wife as God's intention (So Long a Letter, 7). This shows the glib concern the male clergy has on the negative effect Moudo's decision may have on Ramatoulaye's and their twelve children. Polygamy in this sense, is an embodiment of women submission to male chauvinism. The women in this novel are acquired as properties to whoever that marries them in a religious way. Aissatou captures all the themes of women subjugation cooked by culture and refined by religion in order to please the patriarchal demands in the letter below:

Mawdo Princes master their feelings to fulfill their duties, 'Others' bend their heads and, in silence, accept a destiny that oppresses them. That, briefly put, is the internal ordering of our society. With its absurd divisions. I will not yield to it. I cannot accept what you are offering me today in place of the happiness we once had... I am stripping myself of your love, your name. Clothed in my dignity, the only garment, I go away" (Ba: So Long a Letter)

3 Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis approach. The study focuses on selected works of African female writers, including Buchi Emecheta's "The Joys of Motherhood," Mariama Ba's "So Long a Letter," and "The Broken Bond" by Grace Ukala. The study examines the themes of motherhood as a burden, widowhood practices, polygamy, and abandonment in these literary works. The textual analysis is used to examine how these themes are portrayed and the socio-cultural and religious contexts that shape African women's experiences. The analysis draws on feminist literary theory to understand the intersection of gender, culture, and power and how they shape the experiences of African women in these works. The study aims to contribute to the understanding of the complexities of African women's experiences and to highlight the importance of literature in shedding light on these issues.

3.1 Theoretical framework

The study employs a feminist literary theory framework to examine the selected literary works. This theoretical framework highlights the role of gender in shaping literary works, and the ways in which gender intersects with other identity markers such as race, class, and religion. The framework also emphasizes the need to challenge patriarchal norms and power structures that limit women's agency and autonomy (Lépinard, 2011).

Feminist literary theory is a critical framework that emphasizes the social and cultural constructions of gender, and seeks to expose and challenge the ways in which gender roles and expectations have been used to reinforce patriarchy and inequality in literature and society (Evans and Pfister, 2021). Feminist literary theory emerged in the 1960s and 1970s as part of the broader

feminist movement, and it has since become a prominent area of study in literary criticism and cultural studies (Brantlinger, 2013; Chaudhuri, 2006). A feminist literary critic resists traditional assumptions while reading a text. In addition to challenging assumptions which were thought to be universal, feminist literary criticism actively supports including women's knowledge in literature and valuing women's experiences (Machmud et al., 2023).

3.2 Textual analyses and discussions

The selected literary works for this study include Buchi Emecheta's "The Joys of Motherhood," Mariama Ba's "So Long a Letter," and *The Broken Bond* by Grace Ukala. These works explore the themes of motherhood as a burden, widowhood practices, polygamy, and abandonment in different ways.

In "*The Joys of Motherhood*," Emecheta explores the life of a Nigerian woman named Nnu Ego, who is struggling to balance her traditional values with the realities of modern life. Set in the mid-twentieth century, the book is a powerful critique of patriarchy and colonialism, and it highlights the complex ways in which women negotiate their roles in society. One of the main themes of the novel is the idea of motherhood as both a source of joy and a burden. Nnu Ego is desperate to have children, and she believes that motherhood will bring her the fulfilment and status that she desires. However, she soon realizes that raising children is a difficult and thankless task, and that she is expected to sacrifice her own needs and desires for the sake of her family. This is exemplified in the scene where Nnu Ego is sent to live with her husband's family, where she is subjected to harsh treatment and forced to work hard to support her husband and children. Another important theme in the book is the tension between tradition and modernity. Nnu Ego

is raised in a traditional Igbo community, where the role of women is clearly defined and their rights are limited. However, as she moves to Lagos and becomes more exposed to Western values, she begins to question the limitations that have been placed on her. She becomes more independent and asserts her right to make her own decisions, but this also creates conflict with her husband and other members of her family, who view her behaviour as disrespectful and unbecoming of a wife and mother.

Ramatoulaye is the protagonist of Mariama Ba's novel, "So Long a Letter" published in 1981. The novel follows the story of Ramatoulaye, a widow who has been abandoned by her husband, Modou Fall, after he takes a second wife. Ramatoulaye's experiences shed light on the ways in which traditional African societies have treated widows and women who have been abandoned by their husbands. One of the key issues that Ba explores in relation to widowhood practices is the way in which women are often seen as the property of their husbands. This is evident in the novel, as Ramatoulaye is treated as a burden by her husband's family after his death, and she is forced to rely on the charity of others to support herself and her children. Additionally, Ramatoulaye's decision to reject her husband's infidelity and to raise her children alone is seen as a violation of traditional gender roles, and she is ostracized by her community as a result. Polygamy is also a central theme in the novel, and it is closely tied to the issue of widowhood. Modou Fall's decision to take a second wife leads to the breakdown of his marriage to Ramatoulaye and creates tension between her and her community. Additionally, polygamy is seen as a justification for the mistreatment of women, as men are often able to use their status as polygamous husbands to justify their infidelity and neglect of their families. Finally, abandonment is another theme that

is closely linked to widowhood and polygamy in the novel. Ramatoulaye's experiences highlight the challenges facing women who have been abandoned by their husbands, and the ways in which they are often left to fend for themselves in a society that does not value single motherhood. Despite Modou's unfaithfulness in marriage of thirty years by cheating and abandoning Ramatoulaye with twelve children, Ramatoulaye still considers him as her husband because she is conditioned to dance according to the rhythm of the societal norm. Additionally, Ramatoulaye's struggles to reconcile her traditional values with modernity underscore the difficulties facing women who seek to assert their independence in patriarchal societies.

"The Broken Bond" by Grace Ukala is a novel that explores the themes of motherhood, widowhood practices, polygamy, and abandonment in Nigerian society. The novel is set in a patriarchal society where men hold a position of power and dominance over women, and where cultural norms and traditions often limit women's agency and autonomy. One of the key themes of the novel is motherhood, and the challenges faced by women in balancing their responsibilities as mothers with their desire for personal fulfilment. The protagonist, Ngozi, is a woman who struggles to find meaning and purpose in her life beyond her role as a mother. She feels trapped by societal expectations that demand that she prioritize her children over herself, and this creates tension in her relationships with her family and community. The novel also sheds light on the harsh realities of widowhood practices in certain Nigerian cultures. After Ngozi's husband dies, she is subjected to a series of rituals and restrictions that limit her freedom and autonomy. For example, she is not allowed to remarry or engage in certain activities, and she is expected to mourn her husband for an extended period. Ukala

(2021) uses Ngozi's experiences to highlight the ways in which cultural traditions and customs can be used to control and oppress women. Another key theme of the novel is polygamy, which is a common practice in certain Nigerian cultures. Ukala portrays polygamy as a system that perpetuates patriarchal domination and subjugation of women. Chief Ojo, Ngozi's husband, is shown to be oppressive and abusive towards his wives, using his cultural rights to justify his mistreatment of them. The novel highlights the ways in which polygamy can be used as a tool for domestic abuse and injustice against women. Finally, "The Broken Bond" explores the theme of abandonment, both literal and figurative. Ngozi's husband abandons her and their children by taking a second wife and failing to provide for them adequately. Additionally, Ngozi's own mother abandons her as a child, which contributes to her feelings of insecurity and low self-worth. Ukala uses these experiences to underscore the importance of compassion, empathy, and mutual support in overcoming the challenges faced by women in Nigerian society.

4 Conclusion

This paper vividly examines religion and social cultural influence on African women against the issues relating to motherhood, womanhood, widowhood and polygamy. It is not an overstatement to underscore that culture and religion in Africa constitute, in greater dimensions, to all kinds of women victimization, emasculation and oppression due to its respect for patriarchal supremacy. The structure of cultural and religious systems in Africa is patriarchal in nature and this has led to discrepancy in the distribution of power which places women in uncomfortable positions where their human and social rights are compromised. Thus, women are subjected to accept every form

of abuse, violence and marginalization against them.

Many female writers such as the writers of the books employed in the study above, have tried to show these metaphors of female oppression in African societies by sending messages to all women especially African women to withdraw their submission from the despot of patriarchal positions, be responsible for their own destiny and refuse to be confined with their freedom. These messages will also check the religious and sociocultural beliefs of African societies on women with a view to showcasing the relevance of women as important members of the societies as well as projecting their image to the world by disrupting the predestined patriarchal hierarchies. More pungently, this paper admonishes African women to be role models, outspoken, performing roles that will enhance the predilection of gender equality and peaceful character.

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