

**LITERARY AND CULTURAL REPRESENTATION OF MOTHERHOOD
IN SELECT AFRICAN TEXTS AND CONTEXTS**

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Abstract

My paper attempts to explore the notion of motherhood and its varied implications in African socio – cultural paradigm. I have selected some seminal works like *A History of African Motherhood* by Rhiannon Stephens, *The Historical Struggle of African Womanhood* by Dwayne Wong Omowale and *Gender Sexuality and Mothering in Africa*, an anthology of essays. As far as the fictional representations of African motherhood is concerned, I would include Buchi Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* and *Second Class Citizen*, Miriama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, Ken Bugul's *Le Baobab Fou* (translated as *The Abandoned Baobab*) and Lauretta Ngcobo's *And They Didn't Die*. From a study of these literary and critical works, the research question that surfaces up is that whether the notion of 'motherhood' is culture specific? And if it is so, what are the implications of this issue in African culture? How motherhood is represented in Postcolonial African literature and how it emerges as a socioeconomically and politically loaded condition than merely a biological experience? My paper attempts address these issues pertinent in feminist anthropology or the ethnographic studies on the gender roles in African society and culture.

Keywords : Motherhood, Africa, culture, power, identity

Motherhood is often defined as a set of natural feelings and behaviours that is triggered in a woman's body and mind by pregnancy and the birth of a baby. It is an experience that is said to be profoundly shaped by social context and culture. Motherhood is also seen as a moral transformation whereby a woman comes to terms with being different in that she ceases to be an autonomous individual. The French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (1908 – 1986) argued that women are repeatedly told from infancy that they are made for 'childbearing'. Beauvoir points out the process of conditioning, pervasive socialization that shapes a woman's desire to choose and undergo the state of motherhood. In many societies, motherhood is wrapped in many cultural and religious meanings — cultural as in what the society thinks a mother should be, that is, some elements associated with a mother, and religiously, it what the practiced faith of a particular

society attaches to motherhood. Motherhood assumes different names and shapes depending on the society that is practicing it. Motherhood in some quarters is seen as a sacred and powerful spiritual path for a woman to take. In literature and in other discourses alike, motherhood is a recurrent theme across cultures. Religions all over the world whether Christian, Judaic, Hindu and Islam accord very important place to motherhood, it is widely an exalted realm for the woman hence religious imagery sentimentalizes and idealizes motherhood. The image of Madonna characterizes Christianity; there is the Devi - Ma in Hindu tradition. Although Buddhism does not give motherhood such overwhelming spiritual status and significance, maternal imagery and symbolism are present in the concept of the archetypal female Bodhisattvas, these are seen as supreme mothers. Motherhood as experienced and practiced in Africa is influenced by religious mythologies and folklores and it is juxtaposed with awe – inspiring goddesses, powerful creators and self – sacrificing nurturers who have little agency of their own.

Besides, the trope of motherhood gains further significance for its easy and recurrent association with the image of a country, continent or a nation state in a nationalist, colonial or postcolonial discourse. In most texts written in Africa both by male and female, writers refer to the ‘Mother Africa’ trope and it has remained a prominent subject in African literature and in the ‘Negritude’ movement as well. Love of mother and love of nation have been taken as essentially relatable and identical. The symbolism of the enslaved and exploited motherland was at the heart of the anti-colonial nationalist struggles in Africa in the 1950s and early 1960s up to the point of independence. Nationalist discourses such as Negritude have often portrayed Africa as motherland where her children come back to be nurtured and get strength. It was much more evidenced in South Africa especially after Mandela went to prison and in the 1980s and 1990s until the all - inclusive election that brought Nelson Mandela to power in 1994. While in Western imagination, the African women were always a dangerous virgin land --- a symbol of dark, secret and forbidden desire, in the narratives of the first generation African writers too they were largely eroticized, objectified and sometimes spiritualized and sanctified with the association with nation and motherhood. Such appropriations of African women in both colonial and nationalist male narratives have created the myth of ‘Mother Africa’ --- the pure, spiritual fertile woman.

Feminists in Africa, while conceding that motherhood may at times operate in an oppressive manner, have tried to read other meanings to motherhood, meanings that are empowering for women. Within these meanings, they agree that giving birth bestows a certain status on women – even mystical powers. Yoruba traditions point to this fact. Among the Yoruba people, motherhood is said to confer privileges that give credence to the very foundations of society and women's presumed roles in it and thus symbolize fertility, fecundity, and fruitfulness. The Yoruba saying, "Iya ni wura, baba ni jigi" ("mother is gold, father is a mirror") goes a long way in showing the importance of motherhood in African society.

Reputed Nigerian novelist Buchi Emecheta dwells on the concept of motherhood in most of her books, especially in *Joys of Motherhood* and *Second Class Citizen* and another Nigerian woman novelist Flora Nwapa mirrors this concept in her *Efuru*, where childlessness and failed marriages mandate a literary criticism that mirrors the importance of children in the African family. Although maternal ideals are entrenched and valorized in all cultures, patriarchal societies present a woman's central purpose to be her reproductive function and so motherhood

and mothering become intertwined with issues of a woman's identity. It is no longer a secret that the Nigerian woman considers herself a real woman only when she has proved herself to be fertile and the "halo of maternity" shines over her. This holds true for most women in Africa where the index of motherhood is used to define "real" women or responsible woman. This is so in the sense that motherhood is a prerequisite for social acceptance, many non-mothering women experience feelings of rejection and low self-esteem. Examples abound in African literature, especially that written by women. For example, Nnuego in Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* never considers herself a woman until she started giving birth, Efuru in Nwapa's *Efuru* is frustrated by her inability to procreate and as such becomes a priestess. In life as in literature, motherhood is the only thing in which a woman's worth is measured. A woman without a child is viewed as a waste to herself, to her husband and to her society. Nwapa's presentation of Efuru in her various roles and functions model the spirituality of women and by extension the spiritual powers embedded in motherhood. The question is what happens when the woman is without a child? Do women without children share in the power that motherhood confers on mothers in the society? In African society, having children confers a lot on the woman, but Nwapa thinks otherwise in her presentation of Efuru in that at the end of the novel it is Efuru's wealth that substitute for motherhood.

In Miriama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, the identity of the protagonist Ramatoulay is also constituted by the existence of her children. However, what makes Ramatoulay's story different from that of Nnuego is the fact that unlike Nnuego, Ramatouley did not experience a life of barrenness, rather she enjoyed a satisfying and interdependent marriage of many years.

Going further in this discourse, we see that most African communities have their own idea of motherhood and how a woman should experience it. In literature, different patterns and methods of motherhood are portrayed. Emecheta looks at how sexuality and the ability to bear children may sometimes be the only way by which femininity and womanhood are defined. Adah in *Second Class Citizen* has to work and support her family because the so-called bread winner cannot provide any bread for the family, so she is forced to support the family and at the same time be responsible for the children.

South African novelist Lauretta Ngcobo's *And They Didn't Die* (1990), set against the historical backdrop of the 1913 Land Act, depicts the powerful resistance put forth by rural women. The rural South Africa of Jezile (the female protagonist of the novel) is one in which men are mostly absent characters, making their existence known only by money being sent home or by letters to their wives or their mothers – in - law. Despite the physical absence of men, Jezile's society remains a patriarchal one in which married women maintain their status by having children.

The Senegalese writer Marietou M'Baye, who writes under the pseudonym Ken Bugul, explores in her semi – autobiographical work *Le Baobab Fou* (translated as *The Abandoned Baobab*) the complex and multilayered perspectives on a woman's relationship with location and identity. The cultural alienation of the narrator, abandoned by her neglectful mother, symbolically equates the complicated mother – daughter relationship with the problematic nature of the relation between a colonized African woman and her motherland – the so called 'Mother Africa'. *Le Baobab Fou* consciously deconstructs and demystifies the icon of nurturing mother often associated with the nationalist writings of Senghor and others.

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Of course, motherhood is a biological and psychological experience that a woman undergoes. But it is interesting to note how specific culture codes mould and formulate the psychological set up of an individual woman or a community in general and how motherhood defines and transforms the position and identity of a woman in different cultures. Besides the select fictional texts, many works on feminist anthropology or the ethnographic studies on the gender roles in African society like Lorna Marshall's anthropological works on Kung tribes like *Kung of Nyae Nyae*, in 1975 (Harvard University Press), and *Nyae Nyae ! Kung Belief and Rites* (Peabody Museum Press) examine the encounter between Western worldview and the mythical, folkloric vision of the African aboriginal tribes. Jennifer Johnson-Hanks' elaborate case – study on ethnic Beti women in southern Cameroon, entitled *Uncertain Honor : Modern Motherhood In An African Crisis* (University of Chicago Press, 2005) offers demographic as well as ethnographic studies on the effects of education on Beti women which leads to the introduction of contraception, abortion, and informal adoption among them.

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