The Role of the African Woman in Life and Fiction

A Constructed Perception

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Content

Introduction.

Last year, I invested a continuous amount of time in Africa, specifically, in my home country Nigeria. Whilst there, I was confronted with a reality of extraordinary complexity — as is the case with everything Nigerian —, I found myself intellectually stimulated by thoughts of the infinite challenges that my country was (is, and have been) facing. The year 2014 in Nigeria was dominated by talks of the upcoming presidential and gubernatorial campaigns and elections; candidates and political experts were relentlessly overwhelming the national consciousness. Every issue (religion, family, sports, social events, business, economy etc) regardless was conquered by political references. While politics was occupying the public opinion, other matters of no less importance were involuntarily relegated to secondary priority. Although conscious of the inadvertent display of indifference towards non-political matters, I was ill-equipped to battle against the tide, and soon was involved in perpetrating the trend, however not before deciding to act upon my indifference with all means available to my person (very limited means I might say) once I am equipped enough to do so i.e. i was going to write about my experience in Nigeria whenever I had the opportunity.

The opportunity presented itself in a university class on "Gender Policies". The class required an original research and an essay, based on a gender related topic at the end of the study course. This was the platform i needed to express myself regarding the issues that had bothered me immensely during my stay in Nigeria, one of which was; "The stereotype of African women and their roles in a patriarchal environment".

I was once referred to as "a young African male with feminist tendencies and concerned with gender issues, now that's weird", as I voiced my opinion among my colleagues and defended my reason for attending a university class on gender policies, surprisingly it came from a girl. I embarrassingly laughed off this comment in camaraderie fashion, however it was evident that it struck a cord in my reasoning. I began to wonder if I was so different from the stereotypical African male, and if so why? I tried to convince myself that I am so due to the way I was raised, — in a multi-generational, femme-centered, highly matriarchal and gender oriented family. My familial composition is not remotely in odds within the Nigerian cultural costume; where numerous families are like mine. However, in Nigeria I perceptively noticed and observed various norms of illogical socio-cultural incompatibilities which intrigued my attention, as I wondered; "*When has Culture ever been Logical?*"

My Eurocentric upbringing made it challenging to understand the reasons behind the widely uncontested acceptance of numerous cultural and traditional roles imposed upon women by the

Patriarchal African society, and once again I find myself responding to my own paradox; "*The reason must lie within the culture*." however Chimamanda Adichie in her typical form, disputed those doubts from my thoughts.

> *"Some people will say that a woman being subordinate to a man is our culture. But culture is constantly changing. I have beautiful twin nieces who are 15 who live in Lagos. If they had been born 100 years ago, they would have been taken away and killed because it was our culture, it was our culture, the Ibo/Igbo culture to kill twins. So, what is the point of culture? I mean, there is the decorative — the dancing — but also culture is really about the preservation and continuity of a people. In my family, I am the child who is most interested in the story of who we are in our traditions and the knowledge of ancestral lands. My brothers are not as interested as I am, but I cannot participate. I cannot go to 'Umunna' meetings, I cannot have a say, because I am female. Culture does not make people. People make culture. So if it is in fact true that the full humanity of women is not our culture, then we must make it our culture." (Adichie 2013).*

This course on gender policies was instrumental because it provided the necessary academic and intellectual surrounding required in addressing the sensitive world of Gender and stereotypes concerning women. This paper draws its academic inspiration from the material and topics discussed in class, and also will provide some instances which will illustrate why certain stereotypical African practices lack sensitivity in gender issues, and more importantly explain why such practices are widely accepted and simply excused as culture and tradition within the African community.

It is widely assumed that the African culture is homogenous across the continent, therefore the reader can safely assume that most traditional practices mentioned in this paper are similar and attributable in context to most of the continent's tribal activities in the Pan-African sense. Based on this assumption, the socio-cultural context of historical and contemporary Nigeria will be the primary reference for any indication in the paper. To properly conduct this research, I decided to approach this writing from a personal perspective, this paper can be viewed as an observation of my personal experience during my stay in Nigeria, reinforced by my historical understanding of the continents cultural practices and details from fictional facts from books by proficient and recognized authors of African literature.

The Fictional Perception

The recent interest, which has engulfed African literature, is not new; African writers have registered before the accomplishing experience that follow successful literature during the Colonial and early post Colonial phase. Writers like Chinua Achebe, Pius Okigbo, Wole Soyinka just to name a few, have all been successful critically acclaimed best-selling authors and Nobel laureates. However, the critical excitements that surround the canon of work produced by African authors both fictional and non fictional body of work have given laudable recognition to women. Women in Fictional details have always been somehow marginalized and limited in her roles, much as in reality. However partial, the male writers fictional portrayal of the African woman is negligent as it is omissive and limiting in overall perspective, it does not totally correspond with the historical reality of the African woman's experience, especially when considering her pre-colonial roles and status. In addition to her primary tribal roles of wife and mother, pre-colonial African women have always played significant social and political roles within her society. Only a handful of literary contents can be accounted as having a correct fictional representation of women outside of her primary traditional roles and cultural expectation.

The Colonial introduction of western ideology shares the responsibility of this paradoxical corruption of the African female perception and its subsequent relegation to a marginal position in today's Africa. Modernization contributed to the deterioration of the status of women in various African societies, whom previously were "Managers", like lionesses, they held various responsibilities and obligations for their families and community for instance; land cultivation; food preparation with its customary significance; religious rituals concerned with fertility and matrimony. In a certain sense the African woman had her own realm in which she discharged her primary and secondary duties with fierce authority and regulated collaboration and support from her male counterparts. The colonial influence operating in a typical Victorian fashion, assumed that female roles were to be limited in their primary function of wives and mothers. The repercussion of such blatant ignorance saw women discriminated against by the colonials whom customarily accorded preferential treatments to men, evidence of these claims are present in all colonial policies enacted during that time within various sectors of society: education, agriculture and politics[1].

These African women found themselves in uncharted territory of social disadvantage and cultural limitation. Traditional African Female assertiveness became subordinate to the advancement of male aspiration and euro-centric notion of civilization. The previous cultural collaboration and social competitiveness in partnership with men was gone, they found themselves challenged in

[1] See page 2, Gloria Chineze Chukukere, *Gender Voices & Choices* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1995).

every aspect and sector, and the *Men in charge* made decisions for them. The Colonial era valued hierarchy above all, there was an implied class of citizenry that categorized members of the society in ascending order — The Colonials, the men, the children (boys), and the Women (wives and girls) — and women were at the bottom, their needs as women came last, and so did their rights as citizens.

The misrepresentation of women by men, and the uncontested acceptance and transition of these norms into tradition supports the widely enforced stereotypical male perception of what a woman is expected to be can be better demonstrated by analyzing thoroughly the collection of fictional work produced by male writers over the years. In particular I will analyze and compare some female protagonists in the works of both male and female African writers in contemporary African literature.

Male writers and the Female protagonist

> *"The Unsatisfactory appreciation of the significance of women in life has spilled into imaginative literature. Through their own points of view, the majority of male writers often present their cultural reality as the cultural reality." (Chukukere 1995).*

The above reference examines the purpose of this subchapter. A selected few of African male writers will be examined in regards to their portrayal of female characters in their works. Male writers have often presented women in a coated display of ethnological theories and generalizations, which perpetuate female stereotypes through unverified truths of the male point of view. Male writers find ways to justify the overall conception of women and represent the female collective personality and inner reality through a camouflaged lens within the realm of unchallenged myths in the homogenous consciousness of male perception. On occasions when such beliefs are publicly disputed by female response, it is seen as unwarranted exaggeration of critical response and under-appreciation of art. "*The paucity of African female writers and critics has equally encouraged the perpetuation of an unbalanced perspective*". (Chukukere 1995). Before examining the nature of female response, an overview of male imaging of women in fiction is required, considering since the male writers perspective has to a large extent, influenced the female writers reaction.

The ideal female protagonist portrayed in fictional works of male writers often act in her traditional role as wife and mother, the lack of which often portray her as not woman enough. The degree of respect a woman earns is directly proportional to her willingness to adapt into these pre-established roles. For Instance, in the acclaimed classic "Things fall Apart"[2], The primary male protagonist celebrates one of his wives for producing three sons in a row, while in "The Concubine"[3], the main character is demoralized and berates his wife for failing to produce a male heir and proceeds to discipline her physically. The Wife displays a spirit of independence via an obnoxious attempt to poison her abusive husband, however this rebellious display of revolutionary resolve against injustice is condemned as unacceptable as can be noted through how the writers communicates the act in the book.

> *"Thus a woman's honor and dignity often consist in her adherence to idealized norms of wifehood and motherhood. Legitimate as this viewpoint is, it fails to reflect much of the complex and analytical perspectives of the reality of her situation." (Chukukere 1995).*

[2] Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1975).

[3] Amadi Elechi, *The Concubine* (London: Heinemann, 1966).

Male African writers often operate fictionally in-between two domains, the Urban and the Rural, and both contexts represent two different sets of value, morals and stereotypes antithetical to each other. The previous represent degrading morality, the Gomorra of social decadence and corrupt inputs, while the latter is coated with virtue, purity and conservative norms that validate the woman's existential grace.

> *"Male writers who examine women in the urban areas also assist in endorsing an institutionalized and one-sided vision of female heroism in African fiction." (Chukukere 1995).*

Writers the likes of Cyprian Ekwensi[4] who is keen on female characters in contemporary urban life depicts them through a pre-conceived stereotypical comparison of values, roles and status — Prostitution against motherhood and wifehood.[5]

Leopold Senghor[6] goes even further in his writings, he elevates the image and significance of motherhood to something ontological. This metaphysical representation of the mother by Senghor is now in fact the default image with which, Africa is often conceived. A continent where Mothers are supreme mythical beings representing the cycle of birth and regeneration — this notion is also perceived in other forms of art and not only in fictional literature; paintings, poems, music. These artists fail to recognize the woman in the mother with all the difficulties and complexities that partially constitute her dilemma. Part of this dilemma lies in the ambiguity in the perception of her roles, and failure to perform in such roles limits her transcendence and status. In typical Chinua Achebe theatrics, the writers draws attention to this paradox of supreme and yet subordinate position of women in his "Things Fall Apart";

> "*We all know that a man is the head of the family and his wives do his bidding. A child belongs to the fatherland and not to his motherland. And yet we say Nneka- Mother is supreme! Why is that?*". (Achebe 1975).

Lloyd Brown[7] has attempted to resolve this ambiguity by dismissing the notion of supreme motherhood. According to him, this notion is a recycled myth subjugated by a primarily patriarchal society that refuses to acknowledge the struggles and realities of a woman as a wife and mother with limitations, but rather venerate her unto a supreme pedestal insofar as she does abides by her preconceived role.

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[4] Cyprian Ekwensi 26 September 1921 – 4 November 2007 was a Nigerian Short Story writer of children's books.

[5] See page 8, in Gloria Chineze Chukukere, *Gender Voices & Choices* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1995).

[6] Senghor was 9 October 1906 – 20 December 2001) was a Senegalese poet politician, and cultural theorist who for two decades served as the first President of Senegal (1960–80).

[7] Lloyd Brown, «The African Woman as Writer,» *Canadian journal of African Studies* 9, n. 3 (1975): 500.

Although some male writers have created protagonists whose traits and mannerisms mirror the female reality closely upon careful observation, the degree of precision and authenticity are acute and recommendable. Therefore it will be erroneously biased to conclude that all male writers are guilty of portraying their female creations as totally limited characters trapped and defined by stereotypical expectation. Sembene Ousmane[8] for example, offers an exhilarating sight of women in his fiction; they are soundly active politically and morally tough. In his book "Gods bits of Wood", he states that:

> *"... And the men began to understand that if the times were bringing forth a new breed of men, they were also bringing forth a new breed of women." (Sembene 1970).*

[8] Sembene was (1 January 1923 – 9 June 2007), often credited in the French style as **Sembène Ousmane** in articles and reference works, was Senegalese film director, producer and writer. The L.A Times considered him one of the greatest authors of Africa and has often been called the "father of African film"

Female writers and the Female protagonist.

The previous subchapter exposed the diversified images of the male perception of the African womanhood in fictional works by male writers. However fictional, various, and interesting these characters are, it does not excuse the fact that these female creations are of male imagination and thus put into question whether the representation is close to being correct. For an outstanding understanding of the African woman in Fiction, it is imperative to channel the female writers experience; therefore this section of the paper will compare the previously analyzed male production to the artistic response of the female fictional writers. How does the female writer represent female experience especially regarding their self-perception in fiction?

First and foremost the arena of African fictional literature and literary criticism is a demographically catholicized institution in structure and orientation. A cult dominated by men, where interest in the African woman as a writer and protagonist has been limited, inconsistent, discouraged and sporadic. In addition to women intellectuals in Africa having had challenging and limited opportunities being introduced and operating in this male oriented sector, they also have to worry about establishing a lasting impact and legacy for future women writers. For the female writer in Africa, her dilemma partly constitutes in her desire to make her voice heard. This handicap has a historical origin, the colonial and postcolonial period registered low percentage of women in schools, and only a handful of women in that period, acquired university education which is a great advantage for creative writing in European languages.

> *"Apart from her educational handicap caused by her late arrival on the educational scene, the trivialization of her role in the society and the colonial experience with its attendant effects, the female African writer has the added disability that men have blazed the literary trail and pointed in particular directions. Often therefore women are forced to respond to this literary tradition and frequently insist upon correcting the imbalance in the portrayal of women." (Chukukere 1995).*

Early female fictional writers in Africa have been caught lacking in the race, with the participating few seemingly occupied with playing catch-up to their male counterparts, however, a new class of female African fictional writers are excelling in the world nowadays, there seem to be a reversal phenomenon, where the best-selling authors are women and interests in women writers are in growth. Writers like — Chimamanda Adichie, Binyavanga Wainaina, Dambisa Moyo, Noo Saro-Wiwa, Pumla Dineo-Gqola and Ayaan Hirsi Ali — just to name a few are all leaders in this sector. This section however considers the works of forerunners to these group of contemporary female writers, the so called First generation African women writers, the likes of — Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Ba, Grace Ogot and Bassie Head Aminata Sow Fall, Ama Ata Aidoo and Efua

Sutherland —.

These set of writers often adopt a concentrated view of the female experience, that is to say they ensure that women play essential roles in the unfolding of the plot and the overall appreciation of the story being told. In their books, when appointed to a position of importance, their female protagonists often exhibit traits of initiative independence and dynamism. When operating within the confines of her traditional primary roles of mother and wife, she displays an enduring compound quality of dignity and industry, and if placed in the urban sector, she transcends the stereotypical limiting roles attributed to her character in male creative fiction, by being politically emancipated and dynamic.

These novelists treated the fictional world of women within the traditional African society, and specifically challenged the myth of the monotonous, docile and naive rural women who uncontestedly accept the social norms binding her to her male oriented society. While they accept the importance and significance of Motherhood and wifehood, they however attempt to demystify her sacredness in the Senghor terms by exposing her difficulties, which are instigated by conflict between personal aspirations, and limiting behavioral expectations endorsed by social norms.

Flora Nwapa: In "*Efuru*"[9], the protagonist is portrayed as a dignified and responsible woman with problems who finds a solution. Efuru decides to abandon an unhappy and unfulfilling marriage in service and worship of the river-goddess, thereby showing that a traditional confining woman could revolt against unacceptable conditions within her society. The same conditions are applicable to *Idu*[10], the protagonist flouts social conventions that entrain parenthood and chooses to die for the love of her departed husband.

Buchi Emecheta: In "*The Joys of Motherhood*"[11], the writer provides a unique dimension that also challenges the myth that motherhood is synonymous with female self-fulfillment. The protagonist's dilemma is reinforced by her inability to rise beyond the social belief that venerates motherhood to seek her own salvation. Her weakness is limited by her lack of inner strength, much in the same way that other protagonist in different books by the same writer are limited. By showing this lack of strength and will, Buchi Emecheta tries to establish the need for traditional and modern women to fight against oppressive social codes that confine them into third class citizens. It is an attempt to debunk the myths surrounding the African Woman and to depict a more realistic exhibition of her

[9] Flora Nwapa, *Efuru* (London: Heinemann, 1966).

[10] Flora Nwapa, *Idu* (London: Heinemann, 1970).

[11] Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* (London: Heinemann, 1980).

condition, which lends belief to the true commitment and resolve of the female writer in modern and contemporary Africa.

Not to be criticized as lacking in objectivity, or unbalanced in their attempt to contradict the male generalized perception of the woman by male writers — however, by exposing these inherent weaknesses of the woman — these writers often risk assisting in perpetuating the subjugation of women in a male dominated field.

Despite the above point, however, the role of the female African in all this is as clear as spring water, by dramatizing the injustices against women, they attract the attention of society, which in turn should lead to an evolution of sort; a new humanistic order tasked with the examination of the old tradition, that will emphasize the social differentiation and discriminative roles, which leave women at a disadvantage. Through the nature of their protests, they are often categorized and considered to have aligned themselves to the classical mainstream Eurocentric feminist movement.

In "*The Female Imagination*"[12] Patricia Sparks discusses the 20th century experience of women as seen by an assembly of female writers. Her argument in brief suggests that there are discernible patterns in the imaginative world of female writers, suggesting that in matters concerning women, it is wise to refer to that exclusive insight of female experience which when consulted should reveal unique additional dimensions previously unknown. However this notion does not suggest necessarily that fictional productions by female authors differ vividly from those offered by men — male writers can be as sensitive as their female counterparts can be as knowledgeable — both groups deal with the same universal preoccupations, however it would advisable to fetch inspiration from the source for a more concentrated vision and approvable experience.

The exclusivity in the female perception of herself will provide self-analysis, auto-projected graphics in concrete and dependable terms, which when considered collectively with the male point of view should offer a useful framework within which, it is acceptable to portray the female fictional protagonist in African literature.

[12] Patricia Sparks, *The Female Imagination: A literary and physiological investigation on women's writing* (London: Allen and Unwind, 1976).

Women Writers in Non-Fiction Literature.

For a continent of its size and history, Africa it would seem has a lot to offer in regards to popular creative non-fiction. According to consulted sources, the majority of already published creative non-fiction books on Africa that have enjoyed critically acclaimed success both on local and international scene are by non-Africans[13] or by white Africans[14]. The reasons for this struggle, which favors a Eurocentric bias, can be vague and clear at the same time. African writers — women and men — currently lack the support systems and publishing opportunities that were available to them during the booming era of colonial domination that encouraged intellectual growth regardless of race and class (so was the case in Nigeria). The publishing business nowadays are still primarily located in the West where business are flouring as always, and the premises needed to create a vibrant culture of public intellectual consciousness is a challenge for societies struggling with socio-economic emancipation, technological advancement and historical consequences[15]; which would be the case for most African Countries.

Unlike popular creative fictional writing, where a new class of African women novelists like seem to have taken the bull by the horns, and doing well[16] in comparison to their female predecessors. The progress of these ladies show great uncompromising feminine effort both in resolve and dedication to artistic craft, by contributing their compelling findings to the collection that is today representing the African canon of literary compilation and intellect. However in the field of creative non-fiction, masculine dominance is as active[17] as ever; setting trends and shaping the overall conception of Africa than their female counterparts. Writings by African women suffer unevenly in this realm due to their lack of participation — or encouragement to apply themselves — in the non-fiction genre.

> "*Gender inequality in the African non-fiction literary scene remains an unambiguous and crippling problem…A reason for this could be the simple fact that "like women everywhere*[18]*, African women are systematically discouraged from probing intellectual matters*". (Salami, Aljazeera English Blog- Opinion

[13] *Best of Africa Non-Fiction*, http://www.amazon.co.uk/Best-of-Africa-Non-Fiction/lm/H517YD2WTQMV (consultato il giorno June 14, 2015).

[14] The Guardian, *The Guardian Uk Books*, 22 March 2002, http://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/mar/16/news (consultato il giorno June 14, 2015).

[15] Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, a cura di Angela Davis, http://fahamubooks.org/book/?GCOI=90638100164710 (consultato il giorno June 14, 2015).

[16] Minna Salami, *7 great novels by African women writers*, 14 March 2014, http://www.msafropolitan.com/2014/03/review-books-african-women-writers.html (consultato il giorno June 14, 1015).

[17] Dike-Ogu Egwuatu Chukwumerije, *Top Books on Contemporary Africa- Non-Fiction and Fiction*, http://www.amazon.co.uk/Books-Contemporary-Africa-Non-Fiction-Fiction/lm/RA5GBGUI00CJH (consultato il giorno June 14, 2015).

[18] Amanda Filipacchi, Sunday review: Wikipedia's Sexism Toward Female Novelists, 24 April 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/28/opinion/sunday/wikipedias-sexism-toward-female-novelists.html?_r=0 (consultato il giorno June 14, 2015).

2014)

According to Minna Salami[19], her experience during a workshop in Gambia where she led sessions about communication as a tool for feminist activism with a dynamic group of women, was centered on discussions on how challenging, if not dangerous, it can be for African women to write about social, political and cultural situations. She recollects on how women risk imprisonment for writing about how the regime oppresses women, or even worse being ostracized by family for protesting against the experience of female genital mutilation.

> *"Indeed, due to deeply ingrained patriarchal beliefs about women's self-expression, women who write about society may become subject to persecution, ostracism and imprisonment. In addition, female creative non-fiction writers are habitually underrepresented in critical discussions: They are largely excluded from awards, power lists, references and so on. Furthermore, the public sphere of creative non-fiction generally favours "masculine" topics. Books by women writers, especially those that include gendered analyses, are dismissed as tackling "women's issues" even if it is also a book about, say, conflict in a nation. As this type of reasoning goes: If gender is emphasised in a text, then it is feminist and lacks gravitas." (Salami, Aljazeera English Blog-Opinion 2014)*

The same critical admiration that is currently being attributed to women fictional writers should be equally encouraged towards the women in the gasping non-fictional writing domain. Governmental Policies should be put in place through the educational system, to cultivate the surrounding that will germinate the discipline of non-fictional writing by women. Neglecting this domain of literature under the care of men alone would be a repetitive of the historical condescending attitude suffered by women in the fictional writing department.

African women's participation and impact in the field of non fictional writing should be encouraged immensely, because contemporary issues that dominate the world's attention — like development, globalization, citizenship, politics, economy, sports and social event and public affairs etc — affect men and women alike in different ways, more so when applied to the context of developing countries i.e. say African countries. Therefore, delegating the responsibility to construct stabilizing narratives that will decipher the situation and give direction to the communities in the Black continent to the intellectual competence and literary creation of men alone is a failure to consider the impact of the debated questions on half of the populace — women.

[19] Minna Salami writes, speaks and advocates on a broad range of Africa, Diaspora and feminist issues. She writes the award-winning blog, MsAfropolitan (http://www.msafropolitan.com/) and is a member of the Duke University's Global Educator Network as well as the Guardian's Africa Network.

> *"Great literature has no gender, (nor race, class or sexual preference), but men's centrality in African creative non-fiction writing is an expression of how male dominance is systemically and culturally reinforced and how women are made to feel that their ideas do not matter…My point is that there is no such thing as a "feminine" or a "masculine" topic when discussing society. Rather most social affairs - when addressed thoroughly - are gendered." (Salami, Aljazeera English Blog- Opinion 2014)*

Speaking of the importance of narratives applicable to the African context, although non-African writers have dominated the scene, and some have on occasion produced great non-fictional analytical materials on African society, and should continue to do so. However, it is imperative that African writers lead the charge for progressive transformation in Africa and compound narrative standard setting. This is not a suggestion of discriminatory practice against non-African writers;

> *"However, writers whose identities are vested in Africa are prone to approach issues with all the nuance, balance and attentiveness needed…Also it is equally crucial that African women become actively consulted and involved in shaping the discourse of the continents image in both Fictional and non-fictional literature. Women must be encouraged to step forward as thought leaders and authors of creative non-fiction…To enable that, it is key that we understand that it is not because women have not had something to say or because their writing about society is less popular than men's, but rather because they have been written out of the "malestream" literary sphere. It's high time to write them back in." (Salami, Aljazeera English Blog- Opinion 2014).*

A Social Perception

It is widely assumed that pre-colonial African societies are primarily patriarchal, this assumption is disputable and varies evenly with the tribes that inhabit the lands to which this conception is attributed. The Colonial and contemporary times however, have shown otherwise, as women's roles are widely structured to fit a pre-conceived expectation of the male agenda.

After almost a decade living in Europe as a teen and young adult, I went back to my home country of Nigeria as previously stated in the introduction. In Nigeria, I was almost immediately confronted with the diversity of cultural practices and social behaviors that I was once accustomed to as a kid living in the country, which I found myself having difficulties readjusting into. My ever questioning attitude sought out every possible reason to justify, contrast and understand these Nigerian mannerism — like the proliferated prejudice of dismissing a character based on appearance; The need to add a honorific title of "*Sir*" or "*Ma*" when addressing and elderly male and female respectively regardless of professional hierarchy, familial seniority or complimentary admiration; The automatic assumption that one must have faith in the religious sense; The widely accepted and expected practice of male financial sponsorship of women; The overwhelming lack of personal aspiration in young girls beyond matrimony; and finally the achievement of legitimate and outstanding social status in married women through Motherhood.

As I observed, the last two examples had an overwhelming grip on the social consciousness. This is not an attempted generalization — because not all Young Nigerian girls lack aspiration beyond marriage and motherhood, some are quite industrious and financially stable and needn't support of a man. However, that would be the case of a registered few, whom are privileged to be in that position — rather a widely accepted status quo of the way things are and have been in Nigeria.

Matrimonial Aspiration

Considering that the African context is predominantly patriarchal, a society that recognizes male supremacy in all its ramifications, a woman is conceived as a means by which a man satisfies his needs and fulfils his ambition. A truly virtuous woman should neither question nor revolt against these conventions that categories them. The most alarming consequence of this notion is the lack of conception by men of a possibility that women in their traditional roles can also aspire personal ambitions. Both in reality and fiction, men tend to believe the lack of protest by women to signify they are not necessarily diminished by their limiting cultural attributes, but view their femininity to be interconnected and inseparable as well as consisting in their acceptance and fulfillment of these obligations. The almost irreversible consequence is not that men believe this to be true, rather nowadays young Nigerian women are starting to believe this too.

There is a proliferation of uncontested misconception that there are limited options for young women outside of marriage, that they stand little to no chance of "making it" on their on, without the support of a husband. In Nigeria, socialization exaggerates differences, and perception to a point where it becomes a self-fulfilling process. This context gives people the right to act legitimately disappointed when their prophecies are proved wrong, or become condescendingly dismissive in treating a positive achievement against improbable odds as an exception. It is no surprise that a society like this has been slow in it orientation to gender equality. However I was preoccupied by the lack of attempt in act and reason by girls to prove this overall passively accepted notion wrong both publicly and domestically. I found out that, where there have been such thoughts and attempt, the effort is neither enough to make it an inspiring example capable of uplifting the whole community of Nigerian women to socio-cultural emancipation or there are institutional obstacles reinforced by the conservative socio-cultural and religious limitations that prevent emancipatory activities.

On a certain occasion I was forced to eavesdrop on a conversation between a group of young female graduates as they enlisted their immediate and possibly long term goals; The one girl was bragging on how (assuming) when she gets married she would immediately move into the husband's house (assuming the husband has a one), because she is tired of dating boys her age, who lack objective and are unwilling to construct a solid relationship. All of her friends to whom she was boasting her master plan were all very supportive and seems to share the plan and equivalently wishing the same fortune upon themselves except for one. As noble as her immediate ambition for a husband was, I found it limiting, as the absenting girl would prove. This particular exception, voiced her opinion in contrast to the collective aspiration as of her friends; "*I mean why would you move into your husband's*

house, have you considered the possibility that you might be richer than him or have a bigger house before getting married? So you get married and move-in together, then what next"? She earned my immediate admiration for expressing that opposing thought.

> *"Because I am female, I am expected to aspire to marriage. I am expected to make my life choices always keeping in mind that marriage is the most important. Now, marriage can be a good thing. It can be a source of joy and love and mutual support, but why do we teach girls to aspire to marriage and we don't teach boys the same?" (Adichie 2013).*

I believe the amounted pressure placed on women in the African society is constructed by the absolutist male conception of; what a girl should do, who a woman should be; what a wife is and which acts constitute a good mother. When little margin is left for alternatives, and any form of contrary expression beyond the pre-established norms are repressed, people accept the stereotypical perceived status quo as the standard of living, which in turn become a popular habit hard to breakaway from.

> *"[She] had always wanted to be married…and when at last [he] decided to marry her, she was on top of the world. She was going to show everybody that a woman's ambition was marriage, a home that she could call her own, a man she would love and cherish, and children to crown the marriage. But [she] will soon discover that a woman has no home she can call her own unless she builds a house for herself. And that loving and cherishing a man signifies subjugation, self-abnegation and humiliation". (Nwapa, Efuru 1966). Emphasis added*

In the traditional African society, marriage has always been a source of competition among young women who approach it with idealized concepts of marital life and motherhood. It is almost sportive the way women brag to each other when they excel by accomplishing the roles culturally assigned to them as wives and mothers. The community also endorsees these superfluous and unyielding accolades by celebrating these achievements and sanctioning it as acceptable social norms, thereby gratifying it as a woman's natural ambition to which all women should aspire to. Contemporarily, in Nigeria marriage has become a business and the influence of social media, Internet sites and blogs[20] has contributed in promoting the superficial aspect of the scared union. Girls compete to appear on the most glamorous publicity platforms and magazines for the complimentary benefits of instant popularity and bragging rights.

> *"We raise girls to see each other as competitors, not for jobs, or for accomplishments…but for the attention of men." (Adichie 2013).*

[20] *bellanaija/Weddings*, http://www.bellanaija.com/weddings/ (consultato il giorno June 14, 2015).

Apart from the superficial fulfillment a marriage brings to the woman among her peers and social surrounding, another reason for the desperate need to get married stem from the social repercussion that arises from not getting married. If a wife and mother represents the virtue of a woman and legitimizes her status in the community, an un-married woman is destined for the opposite reaction. No woman wants to be categorized as unvirtuous, lacking in appeal or rumored to be associated with a curse as a reason for her "misfortune". Unmarried women in Nigeria are desperate to acquire social legitimacy to the extent they are willing to subject themselves to all kinds of dealings and risks to ensure an unquestioned and elevated social status.

> *"I know a woman who decided to sell her house because she didn't want to intimidate a man who might marry her. I know an unmarried women in Nigeria who, when she goes to conferences, wears a wedding ring, because according to her, she wants all the participants in the conference to give her respect. I know young women who are under so much pressure from family, from friends, even from work to get married, and they're pushed to make terrible choices. A woman at a certain age who is unmarried, our society teaches her to see it as a deep personal failure. And a man, after a certain age isn't married, we just think he hasn't come around to making his pick." (Adichie 2013).*

Few young women however have managed to establish themselves as outstanding prime examples of female leaders — albeit not being married yet, without having a husband, or support from their husbands, fathers or brothers — through personal resourcefulness and ambition. And a few have also managed to achieve their aspired personal ambition albeit being married. These women are the new collectives challenging the narrative of a patriarchal conceived role delegated to women in the contemporary Africa.

Motherhood Status

If there were a list of what constitutes a woman, the achievement of motherhood would be primate. It is a widely accepted belief within African culture that a woman with children is a complete woman. Fictional works have served as channels for the diffusion of this belief, only because cultural practices have corroborated such conception in the social sphere as acceptable norms.

The quest for social recognition in the typical traditional African woman's psyche does not end once she is married. To consolidate your status as a woman one must be able to conceive and bear children, preferably male offspring to guarantee the uninterrupted generation of paternal bloodline, since female children are valued less than males for breaking the genealogy of the man. They are welcomed in the family only in view of their future bridal dowries as compensation to their father's for not being born male and for his investment in raising them. Hence the establishment of pattern to validate her existence begins with the young girl's feeling of inadequacy that her only purpose is to serve the male agenda; i.e. become appealing enough to be considered a good bridal choice — thus make your father proud, and be shipped off to matrimony—, become a good wife to your husband and produce male heir, because only through motherhood can you existence be dignified.

There is an immense preoccupation almost an obsession within African societies in regards to children, particularly male issue. Sons are the ticket that consolidates a woman's position in her marriage and endear her to her husband and her husband's family, and the inability to bear sons ultimately condemns her. To some extent an unmarried woman is more esteemed in the community than a woman incapable of bearing children, or one who has only daughters.

> *"Although virtuous before marriage, her sterility challenges the view that, 'when a woman is virtuous, it is easy for her to conceive', and since barrenness is equated with failure, [she] soon experiences the tragic consequences that befall a social outcast. [He] insists that he makes way for a new wife and condemns her to working in the fields in the manner of a slave. Denying her the basic conjugal rights, he insists that his 'precious male seed is not to be wasted on a woman who is infertile'. [She] cries out in agony, 'o my CHI, why do you have to bring me so low? why must i be punished'. Since she has failed in her basic function to propagate her husband's line, she is forced to return, humiliated, to her parental home." (Chukukere 1995). Emphasis added.*

In the immediate reference above, the implied male's treatment of his wife, especially in his authoritative brutality towards her and the negation of her marital right represent the stereotypical insensitivity and indifference in most traditional African male. The unfairness in attributing the blame solely to the woman for being unable to produce male offspring gives the premises for polygamy as an acceptable cultural practice, uncontested even by women.

> *"Don't you know that according to the custom of our people you are committing an unforgivable sin…I know you have children but they are all girls who in a few years time will go and help build another man's immortality…the only woman who is immortalising your husband you make unhappy…if i were in your shoes, I should go home and consult my CHI to find out why male offspring have been denied me." (Emecheta, The Joys of Motherhood 1980).*

The crises that plague the existence of women is evident in both fiction and reality, it reflects the intransigence of norms and the mechanics in which these norms, in turn, become afflicted by contemporary values.

> *"God when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage." (Emecheta, The Joys of Motherhood 1980).*

Twenty first century African mother's although still grounded by the patriarchal expectation of their roles as mothers and wives, — an itch they just can't scratch, but now are realizing they don't have to sit and tend to it, the itch can be scratched on the go — however have managed to establish themselves and achieve their personal goals notwithstanding the demanding task of motherhood and wifehood. No longer entirely satisfied to attending their traditionally assigned roles, the new wave of women are incredibly politicized and dynamic, they are mangers, civil servants, industrious and independent business women with exemplary careers to show for; a feat they are managing to achieve without neglecting their instinctive role of motherhood.

In Nigeria for example, through collective resourcefulness and personal ambition women — particularly wives and mothers — have emerged to occupy high-ranking reputable government offices (senatorial and ministerial chairs). Also a collective female consciousness is sweeping the nation, there are various associations and NGO's dedicated to furthering women agenda and challenging discriminatory practices against women in a primarily male fostered society like Nigeria. These women are the new collective challenging the narrative of a masculine conceived role delegated to them in the contemporary Africa.

The Paradox of Emancipation and Prestige

This section displays the depth, which surround the dilemma of emancipation and prestige, tradition and modernity. It will paint the narrative highlighted in a simple and straightforward manner, by employing the plot in Buchi Emecheta's fictional masterpiece "*Destination Biafra*", and the female protagonist "*Debbie*". Women suffer all kinds of injustices and endure numerous slaving sacrifices in an anxious attempt to sustain the prestige offered via marriage and motherhood. While other women also challenge the stereotyped condition that permit such injustices. I will try to show how the demanding this conflict between the desire for *Personal Goals and traditionally modulated Roles* is, and how it continues to assail the contemporary African woman. I chose to consider the protagonist of Emecheta's Novel referenced above as the ideal model of female emancipation that contradicts the passive yearning of prestige gained through pre-conceived traditional female roles in service of men. Debbie states her ideological beliefs quite early in the novel, in which she is described as;

> *"…Loved both her parents very much. It was just that she did not wish to live a version of their life — to marry a wealthy Nigerian, ride the most expensive cars in the world and be attended by servants… No, she did not want that, her own ideas of independence in marriage had no place in that set-up. She wanted to do more than just child breeding and being a good passive wife to a man whose ego she must boos all her days, while making sure to submerge very impulse that made her a full human. Before long she would have no image at all, she would be as colorless as her poor mother. Surely very person should have the right to live as he or she wished, however different that life might seem to another." (Emecheta, Destination Biafra 1982)*

In my opinion she is unique as she is fierce in fictional comparison to other female heroines created by various African women writers. She is a toughened rebel who denounces pre-established socio-cultural structures and expectation. Her philosophy is significant for several reasons, she challenges the stereotyped images of African women both in fiction and reality, and her credo of individuality excuses her from all expectation to emulate her parents way of life which does not fascinate her interest, especially the passivity her mother displays.

This is a new woman who snubs wealth and extravagant lifestyle, rather preferring to prove her existence by demonstrating her significance through her choices of more concrete ambitious aspirations. She exercises her right to choose whom she wants to marry and when to do so, by dismissing her parents' choice of a marital partner, and rejects the easy and submissive roles her expected of her. In a society that is unwaveringly patriarchal, her total liberation, expression and independence of mind represent a woman who has finally shed the burden of subordination and obedience, which conservatively constructed into social value that oppress feminine expression.

She takes advantage of her rich family background to elevate her social status, which grants her access to socialize with elite ranking military personnel. The ultimate display of her rebellion culminates in her decision to join the army, in defiance of her mother's protest and legitimate concern for her safety. Her introduction into the man's domain serves to prove that a woman is just as capable as a man, regardless of gender. She discharges her duty as a military officer with efficiency, in equal proportion to her changing circumstance, her actions show a determination in character and intentions, while her shapeless uniform obliterates her prior exuberantly charming feminine qualities of grace and elegance.

Debbie is romantically involved with a distinguished gentleman of British descent; Captain Alan Grey, the ubiquitous representative of the empire's exploitative ambitions. Her intimacy with the Briton creates a woman who asserts her independence in a most radical manner. Debbie's choice of a white lover is meant to be metaphorical in reference to total female emancipation. Debbie believes and insists that the nature of the relationship with her majesty's representative should be purely of convenience with no aspiration or commitment to matrimonial achievement.

Although she has grown into a sophisticated tough independent woman, who insists upon her right as such to determine the course of her life, her emancipation however often lacks legitimate recognition by men or risk becoming a means to sexually exploit her. Grey is guilty of this as well, as he exploits her independent ideals to his own sexual advantage. He enjoys the leverage of intimacy with her without any possible commitment to marriage, that is until he learns of her Rape, and ceases to associate with her on that level. However, spurred by pity, he apathetically proposes marriage in order to dismiss remorse and show his benevolence. But Debbie is already aware of his intentions, and rejects him precisely because of those reasons for which he proposed marriage in the first place. In a dramatic and captivating fashion she breaks-up with him and the exploitative tendencies he bagged along:

> *"Goodbye Alan. I didn't mind being you being my male concubine, but Africa will never again stoop to being your wife; to meet you gain on equal basis, like companions, Yes, But never again to be your slave." (Emecheta, Destination Biafra 1982)*

This a powerful and compelling thesis as anyone can make on the need of equal partnership in matrimony. Her Struggles did not condition her to a state of passive acceptance, neither did they gave rise to reason to take advantage of the opportunity offered her and make the best of an already compromised life according to the standards of a male dominated society. Debbie's rape is significant for two main reasons. Firstly; It represents a major catastrophe in her existence, a scaring experience that reminds her of the callous nature by which men obstruct the progress of an

emancipated woman. Secondly, albeit her liberation, and independence, it also reminds her of the extent of her own vulnerability as a female in a man's world.

The emancipation of Debbie however, is continuously achieved at the expense of her emotional and physical stability. Society looked down on her for her romantic association with a white man, and her rape cost her a convenient stable romantic getaway. The collection of all her bitter experiences serve as a channel to replenish her resolve, and objectify the nature of the forces in place meant to subjugate her and device a way to overcome them.

Realistically is easy for one to claim Debbie's resolve, and say no with revolutionary conviction, however, in practice against a highly masculine dominated society like Nigeria, it is easier said than done. We are all social beings. We internalize ideas from our social context, utilizing every form and pattern without even knowing it, especially in dialectics.

> *"Even the language we use in talking about marriage and relationships illustrates this. The language of marriage is often the language of ownership, rather than the language of partnership. We use the word "respect" to mean something a woman shows a man, but not often something a man shows a woman. Both men and women in Nigeria will say — 'I did it for peace in my marriage' —. Now, when men say it, it is usually about something that they should not be doing anyway. Sometimes it is something they say to their friends in a kind of exasperated way. You know, something that ultimately proves how masculine they are, how needed, how loved. Oh, my wife said I couldn't go to the club every night, so for peace in my marriage I do it only on weekends. Now, when a woman says, — 'I did it for peace in my marriage,'— she is usually talking about having given up a job, a dream, and career. We teach females, that in relationships, 'compromise' is what women do." (Adichie 2013).*

In the face of a tragic event involving a female victim, for example rape, the typical response within a male dominated society would be something like; "Yes, rape is wrong, how does a girl get raped in the first place, she must have provocative the situation by doing something she wasn't supposed to be doing". But what is a girl doing in a room with four boys?" disregarding the obvious inhumanity of that response, we find out that;

> *"[People] have been raised to think of women as inherently guilty. And they've been raised to expect so little of men that the idea of men as savage beings with out any control is somehow acceptable. We teach girls shame. "Close your legs. Cover yourself." We make them feel as though being born female they're already guilty of something. And so, girls grow up to be women who cannot say they have desire. They grow up to be women who silence themselves. They grow up to be women who cannot say what they truly think. And they grow up — and this is the worst thing we do to girls — they grow up to be women who have turned pretense into an art form. I know a woman who hates domestic work. She just hates it. But she pretends that she likes it*

because she has been taught that to be good wife material she has to be — to use that Nigerian word — very "homely." And then she got married, and after a while her husband's family began to complain that she had changed. Actually, she had not changed. She just had gotten tired of pretending." (Adichie 2013)

The Reversal Phenomenon in roles

> *"It is evident therefore that the consciousness of the female novelist is extremely varied and sometimes complex. Since these writers are placed in the unique position of responding to the images of women created by men they are highly concerned with the faithful portrayals of their visions. Often departing from male fantasies and monolithic stereotypes, they explode myths about women through their realistic and in-depth exploration of their heroines fictive lives." (Chukukere 1995).*

The above reference embodies the uncompromising attitude with which women in life and fiction are pushing to have a more accurate response in regards to matters that concern them. A new wave of collective confidence is dominating the consciousness of people in regards to the perception of roles, and the degree of aggressiveness to which female novelists attach importance to the feminine viewpoint displays how effective this suit of activism has been.

Traditionally, the female characters in fiction were often perceive and portrayed in their roles as wives and mothers by both male and female African fiction writers. In that degree although both class of novelists accepts her secondary status in the family, the female writers often more than male writers display a greater intuitive knowledge of her experiences. The advantage of the feminine point of view enables the female writer to transcend the romanticized portraits introduced by men to explore her frustrations within those traditional confining roles. Early fictional writing by African authors both male and female alike was obsessively centered on the female protagonist search for personal fulfillment in a society founded upon roles and social taboos. In Efuru[21], the protagonist's marriage is considered a failure due to her lack of motherhood achievement and subsequent protest against the social sanctions that circumscribe a childless woman. And the Joys of motherhood[22] is a scathing attack on the wild populated belief on the sacredness of motherhood, and its misconception that maternity necessarily leads to a woman's self fulfillment.

The social context in which these writers operated both fictionally and realistically was one, which celebrated masculine privileges and recognizes female submissiveness as the widely accepted social norm. By raising awareness regarding the difficulties encountered as both women wives and mothers, they suggest that women have alternative means of achieving self-fulfillment outside of these pre-established expectations on their primary roles.

This is the role in which the new class of fictional female writers is conceived. Their primary mandate is to continue the literary activism showed by their predecessors. Just like their

[21] 9

[22] 11

forerunners, they acknowledge the importance of wifehood and motherhood in contemporary African society, and by the virtue of this acknowledgment undertake the exploration of the psychological trauma engendered by traditional roles on the educated and emancipated urban African woman. The new class of women in emulation of their elderly colleagues shares the common concern of liberating women from traditionally limiting roles and to make them equal partners with their male counterparts. Their education and exposure to different cultures and values enable the contemporary female fictional writer to present some of the problems which confront the urban woman; for instance the rift between old and new values and morals in regards to sexual code and romantic conduct. As always the woman tends to become victimized in suffering if these conflict are not addressed, and certainly female fictional writers have a role to play in tackling these questions.

Realistically the reversal in roles is happening — mostly in the more advanced gender oriented western societies like in the Nordic countries of Europe —, however the trend has not been registered quite effectively to mirror the fictional emancipation occurring in women's writings especially in Africa. The need for gender sensitivity is in Africa is high, and so is the demand for female recognition and industrial emancipation on a mainstream platform. The late Kenyan, Nobel Peace Laureate, Wangari Maathai, put it simply and well when she said; — *"the Higher you go, the fewer women there are"*— since most of the positions of power and prestige in the world are occupied by men, in a literal sense, its safe to assume that men still rule the world.

> *"And this made sense a thousand years ago. Because human beings lived then in a world in which physical strength was the most important attribute for survival. The physically stronger person was more likely to lead. And men in general are physically stronger; of course, there are many exceptions. But today we live in a vastly different world. The person more likely to lead is not the physically stronger person, it is the more creative person, the more intelligent person, the more innovative person, and there are no hormones for those attributes. A man is as likely as a woman to be intelligent, to be creative, to be innovative. We have evolved, but it seems to me that our ideas of gender have not evolved…the problem with gender is that it prescribes how we should be rather than recognizing how we are". (Adichie 2013).*

Gender sensitivity is crucial for the future, it matters everywhere in the world, and the generation shaping this century's future need start cultivating the seeds that will also meliorate the world. As previously stated, other countries are already advancing the gender initiative, and Africa, Nigeria in particular needs to focus on what it needs to do to catch up to the rest of the world, be it through legislature, education, culture etc. Chimamanda Adichie suggests;

"What matters even more is our attitude, our mindset, what we believe and what we value about gender. What if, in raising children, we focus on ability, instead of gender? What if, in raising children, we focus on interest, instead of gender? …We must raise our daughters differently. We must also raise our sons differently. We do a great disservice to boys in how we raise them. We stifle the humanity of boys. We define masculinity in a very narrow way. Masculinity becomes this hard small cage and we put boys inside the cage. We teach boys to be afraid of fear. We teach boys to be afraid of weakness, of vulnerability. We teach them to mask their true selves because they have to be…'hard man'…In secondary school, a boy and a girl, both of them teenagers, both of them with the same amount of pocket money would go out and the boy would be expected always to pay, to prove his masculinity…What if both boys and girls were raised not to link masculinity with money? What if the attitude was not, 'The boy has to pay,' but rather, 'Whoever has more, should pay'…If we start raising children differently, then in fifty years, in a hundred years, boys will no longer have the pressure of having to prove this masculinity…But by far the worst thing we do to males, by making them feel that they have to be hard, is that we leave them with very fragile egos. The more 'hard man' a man feels compelled to be, the weaker his ego is. And then we do a much greater disservice to girls because we raise them to cater to fragile egos of men. We teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller. We say to girls, 'you can have ambition, but not too much. You should aim to be successful, but not too successful, otherwise you would threaten the man'. If you are the breadwinner in your relationship with a man, you have to pretend that you're not, especially in public, otherwise you will emasculate him. But what if we question the premise itself? Why should a woman's success be a threat to a man…I know a woman who was the same degree and the same job as her husband. When they get back from work, she does most of the housework, which I think is true for many marriages. But what struck me about them is that whenever her husband changed the baby's diaper, she said, 'Thank you' to him. Now, what if, she saw this as perfectly normal and natural that he should in fact care for his child… Gender is not an easy conversation to have for both men and women. To bring up gender is sometimes to encounter an almost immediate resistance. Some of the men here might be thinking, 'Okay, all of this is interesting, but I don't think like that.' And that is part of the problem. That many men do not actively think about gender or notice gender is part of the problem of gender. Now, imagine how much happier we would be, how much freer to be our true individual selves, if we didn't have the weight of gender expectations. I'm trying to unlearn many of the lessons of gender that I internalized when I was growing up. But I sometimes still feel very vulnerable in the face of gender expectations. I have chosen to no longer be apologetic for my femaleness and my femininity. And I want to be respected in all of my femaleness because I deserve to be." (Adichie 2013).

Gender issues are important, not matter how uncomfortable, they are discussions the a society must address, because it affects the experience of both men and women, as their differences is responsible on how they experience the world. I believe that, for change to occur in our contemporary perception of the woman in society in regards to gender, and equal opportunities, external revolution must be accompanied by women's personal growth. Women may often be

victims of lack of sensitivity and societal intransigence operated by men, but often they are also victims of their own making, and lack the inner strength and will to challenge their imposed subordinate position.

Western Feminism v. African Feminism.

There is a generalization to the word Feminist that automatically calls upon the advocacy of women's rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes. This notion refers to the rally of western women regarding issues of rights, a protest that first became prominent during the French and American revolutions in the late 18th Century. However, the significant political change attributed to Western feminism today, emerged in Britain during the suffragette movement in the late 19th Century. A 'second wave' of feminism arose in the 1960's, with an emphasis on unity and sisterhood.

It is a misconception to relocate the activism by African women in general, past and present to the collective female consciousness to protest against injustice which swept Europe in the 19th, and 20th Century; categorized in waves. Women have always fought for what is there, it is difficult to pin point the exact historical moment that feminism was activated, however the choice to represent the collective choice of Western women to rebel and revolt against their subordinate status, and protest for their rights as depicted in contemporary history is symbolically useful. I believe that every non-submissive, highly politicized and dynamic woman is a feminist. The Nigerian fictional writer Chimamanda Adichie in her Ted talk[23] defined her grandmother as a feminist and proceeds to give her own definition of the word as:

> *"A man or a woman who says, "Yes, there's a problem with gender as it is today, and we must fix it, we must do better'. My great-grandmother, from the stories I've heard, was a feminist. She ran away from the house of a man she did not want to marry and ended up marrying the man of her choice. She refused, she protested, she spoke up, whenever she felt she was being deprived of access of land, that sort of thing. My great-grandmother did not know that word, "feminist." But it doesn't mean that she wasn't one. More of us should reclaim that word." (Adichie 2013).*

Some Africans ignorantly dismiss feminism as something un-African introduced by the West to corrupt our culture. The fact the African feminism is not militantly and aggressively pursued by feminist oriented Africans in emulation to the mainstream movement of western feminism does not imply its lack thereof in African society. The African society has its own way of approaching matters. It is quite a task to explain to a non-African or a person who has no ties to Africa, or lacks academic experience in the arts and culture of African expression, societal norms and historical identity the nature of African feminism, however one can only try.

There have been streaming links of strong feminine identity in the African culture, especially in the pre-colonial era. The pre-colonial civilization of African tribes and culture was inclusive to women,

[23] http://www.ted.com/

there was more to an African woman sense of identity and self-fulfillment than just the mere attributes of reproducing and caring. Women were perceived as equals and had their own say in matters of importance, like; war, diplomacy, harvest, marriage, mating rituals and religious ceremonies. In Nigeria for example;

> *"…Through the Igbo Women's association of mitiri or mikiri interests are articulated and redress is often sought for injustices against its members. In Yoruba areas of Nigeria, women chiefs hold important political, ritual and religious powers over their subjects. The ebbe Iyalode of Oyo and the Iyalode of Ibadan are important historical figures. Yaa Asantewa, an Ashanti Queen mother in Ghana, was a powerful political figure whose unique status enabled her to control both men and women. She wielded a lot of authority and power that she is believed to have led her people against the British in the 1890-1901 Anglo-Ashanti War. Women have also served as chief in Sierra Leone." (Chukukere 1995).*

To associate African female writers — as "feminists", — to the mainstream of the feminist movement just because the nature of their literary protest cry out for female liberation from all sort of social injustice and cultural subordination, is not wrong, just misguided. It is not a cry for something they never had, or something they lost, rather a protest to re-establish something that was taken away from them.

Gender Policies in Nigeria.

Nigeria is a highly patriarchal society, where men regulate all spheres of social life and determine the contextual roles, which women have to endorse. Women are found in a subordinate position (particularly at the community and household levels), and male issues are generally preferred over female children. The influential roles played by parents are particularly significant in shaping and perpetrating patriarchy; mothers provide the role model for daughters, while the fathers have to prove and teach their sons what it means to 'be a man'.

Nigeria is a Federal Republic constituting of states, and its government claims to be gender oriented. In mandate Nigeria, is committed to gender sensitivity and equal opportunity, however, forty-five years of governmental instabilities has contributed to its struggle to uphold her international obligation and national commitments to gender equality; — still there persists discrimination in national and state statues, social norms and more importantly within customary and religious laws — Evidence and testimony stand to show that several negative aspects of gender relations, such as gender-based division of labor, disparities between males and females access to positions and resources, and gender biases in rights and entitlements, are still perpetrated within the country. With regards to gender equality and sensitivity, Nigeria as a member of the United Nations, has signed and ratified relevant international instruments, treaties and conventions without reservation.

The fundamental nature of these human rights instruments demand an active and positive reinforcements of all which it entails, ratifying nations ought to make available all the necessary mechanisms required to achieve the stated objectives of the concerned treaty i.e.; eliminate gender discriminations, ensure equal opportunity. To further this agenda, The Federal Government of Nigeria houses a Ministerial department, "The Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development", whose mission is to serve as the national unit for fostering equal opportunity and gender equality — to bring about speedy and healthy development of Nigerian women and men in the mainstream of the national development processes and ensure the survival, protection, development and participation of all children in preparation for meaningful adult life. In 2006, under the administration of President Olusegun Obasanjo, then Honorable Minister for Women's Affairs and Social Development, Mrs. Inna Maryam Ciroma, had this to say:

> *"The Government of Nigeria is committed to building a nation devoid of gender discrimination, guaranteeing equal access to political, social and economic wealth creation opportunities for women and men; and developing a culture that places premium on the protection of all including children. In furtherance of this goal, government shall promote the full participation of women,*

men, girls and boys by involving both the public and private sectors as agents of development… We all know that in Nigeria, traditions, customs, sexual stereotyping of social roles and cultural prejudice continue to militate against enjoyment of rights and full participation of women on an equal basis with men in national development. The National Gender Policy, which supersedes and replaces the erstwhile National Policy on Women would help to eliminate all such barriers…The Policy is aligned with relevant regional and international protocols and instruments such as the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA), New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) AU Solemn Declaration for Gender Equality, African Protocol on People's Rights and the Rights of Women (APPRRW), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), International Conference on Population Development Plan of Action (ICPD PoA), NEEDS/SEEDS, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and a wide range of sectors. The Policy seeks to equip stakeholder with strategic skills for engineering the levels of social change required for achieving the desired empowerment of all citizens. For effective implementation of this policy a National Gender Strategic Framework (NGSF) will be developed. The NGSF will outline explicit implementation, monitoring and evaluation guidelines for achieving measurable targets and enhancing accountability to gender equality and women's empowerment…As a nation and a ministry, we are challenged by values and we will use global standards as instruments to formulate and assess our progress and achievements. These instruments are goals in themselves and tools for raising standards and informing the way policy and institutions work on the issues of gender equality, women's empowerment and child protection." (Ciroma s.d.)

Notwithstanding the above statement, the history of development policies in Nigeria has been that of a general neglect of the gender variable. The first twenty years of development planning in Nigeria, as a Republic remained largely welfare oriented, whereby gender concerns and women's interests were absorbed within the national interest, and a trickle down approach to development practice. Under such arrangement, development policies remained gender-blind, thus gender was never an issue of development planning. Despite a general commitment to the principle of non-discrimination as enshrined in the present Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria under section 2, the sub-Saharan Giant still falls short of the aspired result of providing gender based equal opportunities for the social, physical, educational, political and economical advancement of its people. A large proportion of women in Nigeria are barred from owning land due to customary laws of inheritance, which clearly contradict constitution[24], which permits Nigerian citizens — both male and female — to own and acquire movable and immovable property. Also according to the Nigerian Constitution, civil and political rights[25] are actionable in a court of law whilst economic,

[24] The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Section 43.

[25] The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Chapter 4.

social and cultural rights are not[26].

The Ministry of Women Affairs was created through a transformation of the commission on Women in 1980, following the pressure on the Nigerian government to respond to efforts by women's rights activists' advocating for a solid agenda to further the promotion and protection of the rights of women and concrete commitments to women's issues. These international commitments and local responsibility failed however to translate into constitutional obligation and legally binding provisions. This is perceivable through government's failure to adopt into its legal framework the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which was ratified by the Nigerian Authority in 1985. The return to democracy in 1999, did nothing to rectify past mistakes and failure, several unsuccessful attempts were made to incorporate the provisions of CEDAW into Nigerian law in accordance with section 12 of the Constitution which mandates for provisions of international treaties, regardless of their status of ratification to be implemented into municipal law in order for the treaty to become applicable in Nigeria.

Contemporarily, as efforts by Civil Society Organizations campaigned for the adoption of CEDAW into law, the African Union adopted the Protocol to the African charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa in 2003 and Nigeria ratified this treaty a year later in December 2004. This domestic Protocol, which was cultivated on the continent of Africa, has been globally acclaimed as the most progressive document on women's rights. As expected, Civil society Organizations in Nigeria that were associated with the lobbying party for the new treaty, began several engagements at achieving the domestication of this treaty within the federal territory of Nigeria. Meanwhile, the Federal Executive Council in 2006 approved the National Gender Policy (NGP). This policy, details only the aspiration of the Federal Government in line with the principles of its national and international commitments. The NGP has clear commitments, however, it was lacking in legal support, a situation which legal experts say limited its capacity and utility for eventual judicial enforcement.

In 2010, the Nigerian government sort of unified these two instruments (CEDAW and NGP) and their union produced a legal proposition document which has now been enacted into law as; "*A Bill to incorporate and enforce certain provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa, National Gender Policy, and other matters*

[26] The 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria Chapter 2.

connected therewith" also know as the GENDER AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES BILL (GEOBill). The Bill incorporates certain aspects of CEDAW, the African Union Protocol and the National Gender Policy into a model law that achieves the aspiration of the elimination of all forms of discrimination on the basis of sex and gender in the private and public spaces, affirms women's rights to equal opportunities to realize their full potential and provide protection for their bodily integrity and human dignity.

The decision to weave all these instruments into the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill (GEOB) was born out of the desire to bring together similar initiatives to avoid overlapping and duplicating efforts as well as to channel the full potential required for the promotion and the protection of the rights of Nigerian women. The GEOBill is a direct response to the concerns on the delays in the domestication of gender focused international treaties/conventions particularly CEDAW and the African Union Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa. The goal of the GEOBill is to:

1. Provide a legislation that seeks to eliminate all forms of discrimination on the basis of sex Gender and provide gender oriented equal opportunities in private and public spaces, guaranteeing women's rights and access to realize their full potential and provide protection for their bodily integrity and human dignity.

2. It seeks to give effect to; Chapters II and IV of the 1999 Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

3. To implement the international Covenants on Human Rights, which affirms the principle of non-discrimination and proclaim that all human are born free and equal in dignity and rights, and that everyone is entitled to all the rights set out without distinction of any kind including distinction based on sex. I.e.; The domestication of certain aspects of the CEDAW, and the Maputo Protocol and the National Gender Policy.

The Bill is structured into 3 parts:

Part A: contains the substantive sections covering all forms of discrimination against women. It entails sections covering prohibition of discrimination on various sectors; health, education, family relations, politics and public life, and adoption of temporary special measures to eliminate discrimination on grounds of socio-economic and marital status. There are also sections dealing with promotion of equality, full development and advancement of all persons and the modification of socio-cultural practices that discriminate against women. The right to choose an identity and indigene; the rights of persons in rural communities;

Part B: Provides for the establishment of a Commission responsible for guaranteeing equal opportunities; which among other things will monitor and supervise the implementation of the bill as well as investigate and apply to the appropriate court or tribunal for an order of assessment of practices of any person, organ, body, institution, private or public organ in accordance with the bill. This part of the draft bill also details also the technical composition and structural functions of the commission. It entails the funds and membership of the commission as well as the appointment of a secretary and tenure of office. Other provisions include resignation from office; power to appoint, dismiss or exercise discipline; meetings of the commission; legal obligations to give information to the commission; rules and regulations of the commission; failure to comply with direction for reversal of discrimination; jurisdiction; procedure and a miscellaneous section.

Part C: seeks to innovatively enforce the National Gender Policy.

An in-depth observation at the history of eliminating gender based discrimination and promoting equality in Nigeria shows that there has been considerable delay in the process. Perhaps this is due to the result of the high level of apprehension, misrepresentations and manipulations on issues of women's rights and gender equality; perhaps it is a simple case of institutional incompetence. Whatever the case, the passage of the GEOBill will fast track these processes and give women's rights and gender equality the priority they deserve in contemporary Nigeria.

Conclusion.

Archetypical of as most male dominated societies, the social relations and activities of Nigerian citizens, — women and men alike — are governed by the patriarchal system of socialization and cultural practices which favor the interests of men above female aspirations. However I am proud that the contemporary Nigerian society is striving in effort to demystify the contextual social norms that oppress the feminine expression of women in Nigeria. The government also are equipping to ensure the eradication of ender-based discrimination against women and girls. Women need to be encouraged to actively participle in the socio-economic, political and cultural affairs of the state. The wave of gender-based campaign sweeping the global consciousness is affecting Africa as a continent. The importation, exchange and confrontation of values via globalization have enabled a positive enforcement of cultural change and eradications of anti-feminine bias.

Gender equality and women's empowerment continue to be central themes in global treaties, covenants, and declarations, and as a result of such campaign and publicity, the importance of gender equality is now a globally accepted phenomenon, acknowledged as catalysts to people-centered development strategies. Gender based policies are now being devised as a tool in development strategies for reducing poverty levels among women and men, improving health and living standards and enhancing efficiency of public investments and providing men and women with equal voices in decision-making and policy implementation. The attainment of gender equality no longer merely a question of human rights, but also as a prerequisite for the achievement of sustainable development.

African governments have responded positively to gender based policies by instituting continent-specific development goals and strategies, while also recognizing the firm commitment to gender equality as the bait to development. These are expressed in the African Charter on Human and People's Rights (ACHPR), adopted in 1981 and its Women's Rights Protocol of 2003; the ECOWAS Protocol on Democracy and Good Governance, 2001; and the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) adopted in July, 2001.

Also with the UN introduction of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG), more vigorous global and national attentions are now drawn to pursuing gender sensitive policies. Goal number 3 of the MDGs specifically aims at achieving gender equality and women's empowerment. Its inclusion is not only of intrinsic value in itself, but also central to the attainment of all the other MDGs, therefore a cross section relationship of complimentary policies must to operate.

The feverish consuming political tension, which dominated Nigeria throughout 2014, has been restored back to normal, and the outgoing president — Goodluck Jonathan, whom was defeated in Nigeria's presidential election held in March 2015 by Muhammadu Buhari — before relinquishing office, the former president made sure his legacy boasted fighting for women's rights and protections. As one of his final acts as leader, he signed into law, a prohibition of all practices involving Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) in the country. The newly introduced federal law, which was passed by the Senate on 5 May, although primarily banning this inhumane practice, — which involves removing part or all of a girl's outer sexual organs —, also prohibits men from abandoning their wives or children without economic support. The practice was already banned in some states, but now it will be outlawed throughout the country. "*This is fantastic news and a landmark moment. We are now one step closer to ending this harmful practice,*" said UK international development secretary Justine Greening via her social media Twitter Account profile.

However, activists say that relaying on legislation alone is inadequate in the stretch to abolish the practice, which a systemic cultural sensitization is required to make sure women and girls are no longer subjected to the harmful procedure. According to 2014 UN data, around a quarter of Nigerian women have undergone FGM – a practice that can lead fertile complications, maternal fatality, genital infections and the loss of sexual pleasure. Writing in the Guardian Stella Mukasa[27] says;

> *"It is crucial that we scale up efforts to change traditional cultural views that underpin violence against women. Only then will this harmful practice be eliminated". What is encouraging is that gender mainstreaming is absorbing the African consciousness in recent years, practices like FGM are being talked about, this intensity of socio-political activism and cultural awareness is crucial to break the taboos around the subject and to help ensure that, in future, girls can live free from the risks it brings. (Mukasa 2015)*

Mary Wandia, FGM programme manager of Equality Now, believes; that Nigeria, a cultural and political powerhouse and the most populous country in Africa, carries undeniable, significant, and influential weight with her policies, affairs and decisions. However her involvement in continental and global issues would need to be implemented effectively especially regarding women. She said;

> "With such a huge population, Nigeria's vote in favour of women and girls is hugely important…we hope, too, that the other African countries which have yet to ban FGM – including Liberia, Sudan and Mali, among others – do so".

[27] Stella Mukasa is the director of gender, violence and rights at the International Centre for Research on Women. A Washington DC-based global research institute focused on women and girls.

A new President is in charge in Nigeria, hopefully his administration recognizes — as did his predecessor — the need and urgency to continue encouraging and promoting a gender sensitive paradigm. It is of paramount importance for the country's global reputation, that she adheres to the contagious campaign of awareness that has been introduced to the country anew, and by so strive provide a maximum level of immediate protection to girls, women, mothers and wives.

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