

Women Writers and Peace Building in Africa: Possibilities for a More Socially Engaged Writing

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Abstract

Literature in contemporary times is dominated by feminist themes. They often play around Gender-Based issues such as, Violence against Women, Harmful Traditional Practices, Patriarchy and its offensive impact on women, Gender Discrimination and of course, Romance. Much as these issues are germane and strictly women topical, they do not reflect sufficiently the emerging trends in women experiences all over the world. There is a global experience of violence which is currently subjecting women and children to vulnerabilities such as destruction of property, perpetual fear and loss of loved ones, abject poverty and loss of access to education. Peace scholars have often reiterated the idea that the cost of conflict is as enormous as that of its transformation and that conflict is better prevented than managed or resolved. It has also been established that women often get to know about an impending conflict before most men in the society. Likewise, more peace scholars believe that women as natural peacebuilders can effectively prevent, mitigate and resolve conflicts thereby forestalling the attendant unpleasant consequences of conflict. This paper seeks to foreground the nature of peacebuilding and the power of the female writer to harness her natural instincts to build structures of peace thereby preventing violent conflict in Africa through her writings.

Keywords: *Women writers, Peacebuilding, Writing, Creative writing.*

Introduction

Creative writing is one area that has been commonly traversed by men and women and, if we subject our discourse to a broad gender parlance, we would be talking about a cross gender activity explored and exploited by all known genders as gingered by their natural inclinations and inspiration attributable to each writer's muse. In other words, creative writing has not witnessed the limitations experienced by other disciplines where to a large extent certain disciplines have hitherto been seen and accepted as either exclusive male or female preserves.

Although civilisation, technology and general world-view consciousness is breaking professional ceilings in contemporary times, there still exist spheres of engagements essentially dominated by either of the prominent genders: male or female.

Creative writing, although not so restricted, has also exhibited some gender-bents that may not escape the eye. Throughout the seventies till about mid-eighties writers like Dennis Robins, Agatha Christie, James Hadley Chase and other prominent British and American writers held prominence and arrested youths' attention with their prolificacy in Romance, Crime and Crime Detection. The early eighties through the nineties witnessed a more elevated and sophisticated works of Sidney Sheldon, Arthur Hailey, Robert Ludlum, took the world on a ride into Espionage, Development, High Definition Crime and Crime Detection, Empire Building and Destructions. The observable trend in this fabulous escapade of these writers was that women wrote essentially on women concerns particularly Romance while men dwelt essentially on macho-based themes sometimes spices with a bit of romance. This bent has pitched women writers inadvertently in the sentimental niche of creative writing and has over the years been so stereotyped.

In recent times however, the world is befuddled with so many challenges. These challenges, ranging from violent conflicts to environmental degradation, economic depression and poverty have impacted negatively on the lives of the people particularly the vulnerable groups- children, women and the aged. Women being a focal point of vulnerability bear a heavy burden of providing for, protecting and assuring the general welfare of the other members of this critical group. To this end, they work their fingers thin. Therefore, this paper believes that the plight of the woman in violent conflict zones should not go unrecognised, unacknowledged and undocumented by women writers.

Women and Peacebuilding

The potency of the feminine influence on peace processes cannot be ignored. At whatever level peace building is required, women have always been found at the forefront of activities. This is particularly borne out of their innate ability to mould and build characters (Olaifa, 2014:60-66). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has identified four levels of gender equality analysis which are: Welfare, Access, Conscientisation, Participation and Control

(Idyorough: 2005:9). The fourth level which is participation is considered paramount in peace building. (Chowdhury 2005:7) believes that when women are marginalised, there is little chance for an open and participatory peace process.

Women's participation in peace processes begins at the conflict formation level where emotions begin to switch. The woman is so strategically placed that she notices the early warning signs of an impending conflict. She is the one that notices the mood swings of her husband, she notices unusual visits paid on him by strange acquaintances, she notices his nocturnal movements and his skipped meals. Her sensitivity is kindled and her curiosity ignited. This is where she brings her natural acumen into force which could either douse the rising passion or fuel it. The way the pendulum of her participation swings depends on the level of recognition and opportunity afforded her by the society to demonstrate her peace building capabilities (Olaifa, 2014: 60-66). Nevertheless, women have often defied socio-cultural barriers to engage in meaningful and landmark interventions in conflicts. In Africa history is replete with women's involvements in peacebuilding even at full-blown conflict level.

On the 8th of March, 2000, at the occasion of the International Women's Day, the President of the UNSC issued a statement that recognised the under-utilised and undervalued contribution women can make to preventing war and to building peace and to bringing individuals and societies back in harmony. It played a crucial role in the adoption of the UNSC Resolution 1325 which was later adopted that year.

The preoccupation of the woman's mind during and after any war is how her family would be safe. She realises that she stands to lose all when war breaks out. Her husband is at risk, so are her children that could be drafted as child soldiers and she, who could also be drafted into war and if not, become target of rape and sundry assault (Chowdhury 2005). Women keep the future of their societies and communities at heart when they participate in peace negotiations. They think ahead and seek to provide a conducive, living environment for their future generations. Their interest in the society is larger and broader compared to their male counterparts whose negotiations predicated on immediate gains in terms of authority and power.

The Mano River Women's Peace Network (MWPN) facilitated the coming together of the heads of government of Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone to accede

to their call for disarmament. This initiative earned these women the UN recognition and the network won the UN Human Rights Prize for 2003. In their declaration, MAWOPNET stressed the need for more room for women participation in peace processes in Africa. It reads thus:

The only way to ensure that African women become equal partners is to support their struggles for full participation in national, political, economic and social life. In the face of entrenched discrimination, controversial ensures to increase opportunities for women, including quotas for women in parliament and the civil service, should be supported as a step on the path to gender equality.

To achieve enduring peace, gender perspectives should be mainstreamed into peace processes. Grassroots women groups can facilitate peace processes in inter-group, inter-ethnic and inter-class lines.

The Peace process in Rwanda has its roots in the full participation of women and this is broadly acknowledged as a cultural attribute of the Rwandan women (Mutanba and Izabilla 2008:15) and to Archbishop Emmanuel Kolini of the Anglican Church in Rwanda, “A woman is the epitome of peace. It is from her that peace flows and radiates to the other members of the family”. “A woman does not belong to any particular family or tribe. She has no boundaries (Nyampinga) and therefore she is there to unite families because she is neutral”. A woman does not do things halfway. If she believes in a cause, she goes headlong to defend it. The women who participated in the Rwandan genocide were ruthless and those who had the courage to defend their neighbours did so with all vehemence.

Women are naturally equipped with conciliatory tactics with which they reconcile warring parties. This is why they can be referred to as bridge builders. They mend broken bridges between friends, relations, communities, ethnic groups etc. They mould the bricks to fill existing gaps in relationships. The Somalis believe that mother is a school. The values, with which children are brought up, precede their actual birth. “Indeed before becoming adults we attend a basic school, and that school is mother” (Mohammed 2003:75-115)

Apart from these, women have been observed to be capable of the following peacebuilding processes: Spearheading socio-economic processes; Participating actively in resettlement initiatives; Decision-making; Opposing Gender-based Violence; and Initiating income-generating activities. Women are accustomed to settling disputes in a way that all the parties in conflict benefit mutually. The female peacebuilding savvy is therefore expected to extend towards writing, an engagement that is bound to unearth and document information relating to women's lives and experiencing spanning all facets of life.

Women Writers

Women writers can be simply defined as the female kind of humans who engage in any form of writing. However, for the purpose of this paper, focus will be on females who engage in creative writing as a means of communication to a mass audience. Indeed, women's writing has assumed the status of a kind of academic writing in recent times due to the recognition of the idea that women basically write on issues of intense pertinence to their experiences. It therefore is a distinct genre of creative writing which explores the uniqueness in works of female writers and seeks to strategise on addressing peculiar female issues. Blain, Grundy and Clements (1990:8-9) opine that "Their texts emerge from and intervene in conditions usually very different from those which produced most writing by men."

Although Women's Writing is a recent development in the scholarly realm, "there are examples in the 18th century of catalogues of women writers, including George Ballard's *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain Who Have Been Celebrated for their Writing or Skill in the Learned Languages, Arts, and Sciences* (1752); John Duncombe's *Feminiad, a catalogue of women writers*; and the *Biographium faemineum: the female worthies, or, Memoirs of the most illustrious ladies, of all ages and nations, who have been eminently distinguished for their magnanimity, learning, genius, virtue, piety, and other excellent endowments* (Todd, 1989: 13). Their works were recognised, acknowledged and publicised by male writers of their time. According to Gilbert (1986), studies like Dale Spender's *Mothers of the Novel* (1986) and Jane Spencer's *The Rise of the Woman Novelist* (1986) were ground-breaking in their insistence that women have always been writing.

The content and perhaps focus of these writings are not the main fulcrum of women's writing but the gender of the writer. It therefore matters less whether the woman explores issues on Crime, Politics, Romance etc. than that she, as a

female, is the writer. To Blain et al (1990), “It is not a question of the subject matter or political stance of a particular author, but of her gender, *i.e.* her position as a woman within the literary world”.

The position expressed above is an issue of grave concern to this paper. If in the past women’s writing was regarded as an enterprise in general concerns, it’s contemporary status as an academic discipline makes it incumbent on female writers to explore nitty-gritty of female experiences and their peculiarities in a more profound and distinct way. While not ignoring the efforts at exploring general themes by female writers, contemporary experiences of women particularly in the areas of violent conflict makes it imperative for women writers to beam more light on peacebuilding writings with the aim of preventing, mitigating, managing, resolving and transforming conflicts.

Some Emerging Trends in Women’s Experiences Radicalisation of the feminine Gender

The patriarchal nature of global societies has over times veiled the under-running engagements of women in conflict situations. Hence academics, commentators, the press and creative writers have ignored both the overt and covert activities of women in issues of violence. As succinctly expressed by Krulisova (2016), “the phenomenon of female violence in global politics has long been neglected by both academics and policy-makers”. These assertions go to support the earlier submissions in this discourse to the extent that women are more involved in conflicts than people know. Women have always been available as decoys, spies, errand carriers, weapon couriers. These had been the covert contribution of females during violent conflicts except in few cases in Africa, when women actually led battalions to war. Such examples as of Queen Amina of Zazzau, Madam Tinubu of Abeokuta abound throughout African history. In the mid- 20th Century, African women engaged more in diplomatic conflicts where conflicts were raised and quelled at board rooms and summits. Princess Toro of Uganda comes to mind readily and many other contemporary actresses abound serving as ambassadors of their countries at different nations of the world. The erstwhile President of the United Nations Security Council, Professor Joy Ogwu of Nigeria has demonstrated a keen sense of diplomatic standards in conflict prevention and management during her tenure. Her Excellency, Fatima Zahra Mansouri of Morocco, Her Excellency, Amina Salum Ali of the African Union, Her Excellency, Emolemo Morake of Botswana, Her Excellency, Mathilde Mukantabana of Rwanda and a host of other African women have demonstrated

high acumen for preventive diplomacy at this level of international relationship between their countries and other nations of the world. More women have led protests against leaders of thoughts and establishments (Olaifa, 2019).

In recent times, global politics has ‘witnessed a shift in the gender ratio in perpetrators of both “legitimate” and “illegitimate” political violence’. The paradigm has shifted from covert to overt participation of women in violent conflicts of varying degrees and momentum. In ISIS ravaged terrains, there is growing concern for the strong pull of their women into violence particularly of the terrorism magnitude. Rahman (2016) posits that women have been as active as men in the terrorist engagements currently engulfing the world. According to Bloom, between 1985 and 2010, female bombers were involved in more than 257 suicide attacks, i.e. about a quarter of all terrorist operations worldwide. Rahman (2016) posits that women have been as active as men in the terrorist activities currently engulfing the world. The rate of women drift into contemporary violence trend is alarming more so when the trend is often voluntary. According to Ondieki, Achuka, Okwany and Otsialo (2016) ‘The major concern is what the future holds for Kenyans, now that there are all indications that women terrorists are “graduating” from simply helping male militants behind the scenes to taking an active role in attacks’.

It is not Kenya alone that is concerned about the plight of its women’s embrace of terrorism, the world in its entirety is jittery about the radicalisation of its female folk. Britain has been worse hit by the terror drift pounding hard on its teenage and productive age women. A recent statistic by the security service puts the number of British Muslims who have fled their country to join ISIS in Syria at 60. Webb (2016) posits, ‘According to security services, about 600 British Muslims have joined IS in Syria – and about 60 of them are young women. Girls are being sold a new life fighting for freedom and for Allah’. In Nigeria, the trend has been the abduction of teenage girls, the brainwashing and subsequent forced marriages and then conscription into the Boko Haram forces. The radicalised among them offer to perform suicide bombing while their counterparts engage themselves in domestic chores including servicing sexual urges of the men and childbearing. According to the Nigeria Security Tracker, Female suicide bombers have been responsible for over 200 deaths since May 2015, nearly half of all casualties from Boko Haram-attributed suicide bombings during this period. Webb maintains ‘Counter-terror cops said they were “deeply concerned” by the figures as many

women were unaware that they will probably never be able to return home. These are just some of the jihadi brides who abandoned Britain for the Caliphate’.

Spousal Violence against Men

The trend and trajectory of spousal violence are equally changing and gruesomely challenging. In the past, domestic violence was regarded as men’s prerogative. Men are generally regarded as physically stronger than women, therefore issues of spousal aggression are often assumed as men’s prerogative. The patriarchal nature of the African and world societies has also made this assumption more profound to the extent that male victims are not able to confess to the oppression publicly for fear of stigmatisation. The image that pops up at the mention of spousal aggression is that of a male aggressor and a female victim. Available statistics have also proven that the number of female victims of Domestic Violence is far higher than that of male victims. According to Renningson (2003), ‘Domestic violence is perpetrated by, and on, both men and women. However, most commonly, the victims are women, especially in Africa. Even in the United States, it has been reported that 85% of all violent crime experienced by women are cases of intimate partner violence, compared to 3% of violent crimes experienced by men’.

However, women’s involvement in spousal violence in contemporary times is assuming a dastardly and morbid status. Here are some of the common headlines in newspapers: Lagos police hunt for man over banker’s wife’s death (Baiyewu, I. & Samson F. (2016); Russian woman stabs her husband to death and feeds his remains to her dog; Lawyer brutally stabs her husband to death (George 2016); Nigerian Woman kills her husband in Delaware (WPVI-TV, 2015).

As far back as 2010, Dennis Campbell of The Guardian London had come up with the following statistics on spousal violence against men. ‘More than one in four women 28% and around one in six men 16% had experienced domestic abuse since the age of 16. These figures are equivalent to an estimated 4.5 million female victims of domestic abuse and 2.6 million male victims. More than 40% of domestic violence victims are male. The National Coalition against Domestic Violence (2019) presents the following: On average, nearly 20% people per minute are physically abused by an intimate partner in the United States during one year. This equates to more than 10 million women and men; 1 in 3 women and 1 in 4 men have been victims of (some form of) physical violence by an intimate partner within their lifetime. 1 in 5 women and 1 in 7 men have been victims of

severe physical violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime. According to Jeltsen & Scheller (2014), 'at least a third of all women murdered in the U.S. are killed by male partners.'

News, reports and statistics, like those presented above, assault sensibilities and trigger apprehensions on the fall-outs and unintended outcomes of gender transformation. Although women are not expected to be docile, they are not expected to be violent, wild or deadly either. All codes and conventions on the rights of women are geared towards preserving women's rights and integrity and opportunity for equal participation in development activities in their communities and beyond but definitely not to attempt outdoing men in violence.

Drug Trafficking and Abuse

Drug trafficking and abuse are twin menaces gaining prominence among women in recent times. There is hardly any country in Africa where women do not engage in some forms of drug abuse or others. The media is replete with news of women engaging in drug use, abuse and trafficking. Mavodza (2011) reported that almost all the Zimbabweans arrested for drug trafficking were women. According to him, 'It has been observed that almost all of those convicted of drug related offences are female single parents aged between 27 and 37 years. Six of the convicts were sentenced to death while one lady sentenced to life imprisonment succumbed to illness and died on April 14, 2010'. Two of the women were arrested for traffic seven kilogrammes of cocaine worth \$900 000.

Morocco has a more comprehensive report on drug related activities though with particularly prevalence among men. Toufiq, J., El Omari, F. and Sabir, M. (2015) in their 2014 report tagged, '2014 annual report of the National Observatory on Drugs and Addiction: Morocco', P-PG/Med (2015)' rated men as more involved in the drug offences but they did not exonerate women. Submitting on this, they wrote:

In 2003 a national population survey on the prevalence of mental disorders and drug addiction was carried out among sample of 6,000 people aged 15 and older. The study was conducted by the Moroccan Ministry of Health with support from the World Health Organization. It indicates that about 4.8% of the population have used psychoactive substances at least once in their life. Cannabis was the most frequently used illicit substance in the last 12 months. The use of psychoactive substances was more prevalent among

males and in rural areas. The sample of the latest study was 5 801. The study indicates that cannabis use is more prevalent among males than females. Thus 9.5 % of surveyed males reported having used cannabis at least once in their life, while only 2.1 % of females reported lifetime use of cannabis.

Meanwhile there are three major international drug control treaties, the Single Convention on narcotic Drugs of 1961 (as amended in 1972), the Convention on Psychotropic Substances of 1971, and the United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances of 1988, which are mutually supportive and complementary (UNODC) Many of the African countries are signatories to these convention yet the scourge is endemic.

Yangian (2014) observed the fight against drugs in Liberia was taking a more serious trend with the indictment of a Ugandan woman for drug trafficking. According to him, the Ugandan woman was found guilty of unlawful possession, trafficking and distribution of narcotic drug a crime of first-degree felony in Liberia.

It is no longer news that a lot of Nigerian women particularly in the northern part of the country engage in substance abuse. It is fast gaining a norm status among young and middle-aged women. Going by the ThisDay report (2017) some of them are introduced to it by their peers. One of the ladies interviewed confessed to having been introduced to substance abuse by her boyfriend in her National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) days. She returned to her Kaduna home a drug addict. According to her, in the last five years, she had met more than 200 girls and women who take codeine in Kaduna and there are ‘countless’ women, including married and ordinarily responsible women in Kaduna who are codeine addicts.

Prominent among the abused drugs are hard drugs like cocaine, heroin or wee-wee, CSP, Tramadol, Rohypnol and D5, Stopcof, C&C, Cofflin, Totalin, Ezolyn and the prices range from N250 to N1000 per bottle. It gets to the extent that they sniff septic tanks and get high on the stench. This is an appalling state of human degeneration.

Umoru (2017) reported the alarm raised by the Nigerian Senate that 19 states in the northern parts of Nigeria were in danger of being engulfed in narcotics addiction. To him, it disclosed that across the 19 states, women, young girls in

tertiary institutions, working class ladies, married, unemployed women displaced by Boko Haram insurgency, among others, were involved in drug abuse, and that in 2015 alone, over 2,205 people were arrested in North-West geo-political zone by the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency, NDLEA, over drug-related abuses.

Women involvement in narcotics abuse and trafficking is an upward moving trend in Africa. It is apparent that governments in Africa are applying both international and municipal frameworks to battle the scourge but to little avail. For the menace to have grown to this alarming proportion, it means the home has failed in discharging effectively its social responsibility.

Women writers can take it up from there. These stray young women and ladies often visit the social media. That could be one avenue for women writers to engage the women addicts by creating stories and scenarios that spell dire consequences for people who engaged in such dangerous habits. This could be an effective way of deconstructing their propensity towards crime and criminality.

Conclusion

The issues discussed above are by no means exhaustive of the myriads of emergent trends in feminine lifestyles yet they have been able to pinpoint salient and topical ones. Going by the submissions made above, women writers need to focus their lenses on peacebuilding. They need to begin to write on activities that would correct negative notions which might have been imbibed through wrong interpretations of the feminist struggles and women's rights. Apart from the above, more works are needed in the area of deconstructing female assumptions on the gains of active participation in terrorism. Extremism in sexual orientations also needs to be addressed to restore the integrity of womanhood and humanity. Essentially women's writings should aim at orientating children and youths on values which edify and can uplift their future, enhance social development and global peace.

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