CHAPTER III

THE IMAGE OF WOMAN IN AFRICAN NOVEL

The ‘image’ is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex at an instant of time.

Each individual is identified with a proper name in the society. E.Cassierer calls it the myth making consciousness.

The African novel presents different images of women in the contemporary patriarchal society. The famous African writers like Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ulasi, Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Cyprian Ekwensi, Amos Tutuola and Ben Okri use African imagery in portraying and dramatizing the characters and situation, for effect and authenticity.

African societies are primarily viewed as masculine. Feminine perspective of Africa and African society especially about the role of women in African novels is richly illuminating. In African native religion and African life it is the image of the chief deity, the goddess of Earth that dominates. The chief deities of the Ewe community of Ghana are Mawu and Lisa. Mawu representing the moon is a female while Lisa symbolizing
sun is masculine. The image of Mawu greatly influences the life and living of the people. Though men do not duly regard woman, she is universally acknowledged as the mother of mankind.

Dr. Wilfred Cartey's *Whispers from a Continent* places African women geographically in the village. Woman is used as a metaphor of stability. He quotes from Camarlaye’s *The Dark Child:*

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\text{The nourishing milk comes not only from the natural mother but also from the earth of Africa, mother and earth cross-fertilize and link together to from a single symbol.}^1
\]

Mother Africa is presented in the image of purity, fertility and sustainer of the clan. Africa also assumes negative image in the metaphor originating from the Greco-Roman word standing for chaos, darkness and lack of order. Gender discrimination, family constraints and social restrictions on women are the greatest banes of African society. Some female voices scream that the real place of woman is in her home. However, the women are sometimes glorified in their personal life as family caretakers and teachers. Woman constitutes a force
to nourish and shapes the young minds in her family. In the tradition-bound society she is confined to her home discharging her primary duties. The creation of myth and literary image of Africa meaning one’s physical attachment, formulates the woman’s place in the home.

Women in the superstitious society are the incarnation of supernatural powers. Woman, in most African societies represents some aspect of the Earth goddess. The Akan of Ghana and the Igbo of Nigeria call the goddess of Earth, Earth Mother. Oya, the goddess of Niger River, one of the wives of Shango, the god of thunder, identifies herself with the wind that blows across the country when no rain falls. In Ghana special convents are established to train women to become the priestesses of Akonedi shrine.

Marion Kilson opines that wherever goddesses occur, the principal attendants and participants are women. Moreover the rituals are symbolic of essential cultural aspects of womanhood. Dipo of the Krobo and the Bragoro of the Asante in Ghana are worshipped for fertility.

Women, with their intimate knowledge and experience of the spiritual world, as priestess perform the rituals
at the shrine of the goddess of Earth and help in maintaining social morality. Flora Nwapa, the most sought after feminist, has the Lake Goddess as her guiding principle and tries to bring people closer to the deity even in the changed society. Goddess by virtue of her service becomes part of the society. Nwapa’s feminine perspective through the actions of her female characters catalyzes the events in her novels. Lake Goddess Ogbuide, who becomes the kind and powerful mother of Ugwuta community, asserts the feminine principle.

Umuofia, the village in *Things Fall Apart*, respects only one woman called Chielo, the priestess of the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves. Chielo has a dual role to play as an ordinary woman and as the one to reprimand the offenders of the community. She as the spokesperson of the deity screams at Okonkwo when he accompanies his wife and daughter to the shrine of the Oracle of the Hills and the Caves.

*Beware of exchanging words with Aghala.*

*Does a man speak when a God speaks? Beware!*²

Okonkwo, the great warrior and matchless wrestler and who rants at Nwoye’s mother, his wife,
Do what you are told woman. When did you become one of the nidche?\textsuperscript{3} becomes meek and dumb before Chielo.

Nwapa carved a niche for the feminine in her novels. She calls Uhamiri, the female deity of water, the woman of the lake or Mammy Wata. She contrasts Uhamiri with Urashi the male river God only to highlight Uhamiri’s innate potentialities. But Nwapa has portrayed female spirits only to show that they are not subordinates to male spirits as reflected in the dialogue between Urashi and Mammy Wata.

"You have come at last, Great Spirit of the Lake. It does not to pay to be stubborn, Great Spirit of the lake."

"We have a guest here, Great Spirit of the river. Today is not for quarrel, Great Spirit of the river", 

replies Mammy Water.

"You always want to quarrel, you proud spirit of the lake", \textsuperscript{4}

Urashi Continues.
Mammy Wata is regarded as one of the wildest spiritual forces, cruel to human beings. However, she is an afflicter and healer, she brings both fortune and misfortune. She is also responsible for infertility, venereal disease, and other bodily ailments. People worship her for children. The two colours mostly associated with her devotees in West Africa symbolize the deity. Her worshippers wear red and white clothes as a mark of her destruction and creativity. For the Igbo the red connotes death, danger, power, evil and maleness. Redness is also thought in terms of heat, sacrifice and defilement whereas white colour denotes creativity, peace and birth.

The absence and disgrace of Mammy Wata is believed to create problems not only for women but also for the entire society. Uhamiri who is childless stands as a hope to bless other women with motherhood. Nwapa reminds us that Uhamiri claims a domain to relieve herself from the geopolitical dislocations.

Nwapa describes Uhamiri,

*as elegant woman very beautiful combing her long black hair with a golden comb.*
She focuses on the fairness of her skin, fine texture of her hair, serenity of her expressions and by the wealth displayed on her person she is akin to Greek gods. She looks odd as she represents the wild spiritual forces and inconsiderate to human. But she is more concerned with the health and prosperity of her followers. Though intellectuals blame Mammy Wata for women's barrenness, venereal diseases, headache and bodily distress, others have implicit faith in the goddess who would bestow on them beauty and wealth. She has also cautioned people about misfortunes caused by fortunes showered on them.

Nwapa speaks of the divine machinery at work in the lives of Ugwuta community. Uhamiri, the goddess of the lake is the most revered in her village whereas in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* Chielo, the Priestess of Agbala is not regarded always in her village. Ani is worshipped only during the period of New Yam Festival. The people are afraid of Chielo's curse that befall on the entire community if they go wrong, while Uhamiri is worshipped also for motherhood. Uhamiri is believed to make barren women conceive with her blessings.

Although certain women representing deities are endowed with mystical powers enjoy special status in their community, ordinary woman fails to command respect in the
patriarchal society. She is the most neglected, exploited and degenerated person. Women generally do not actively participate in the meetings of their community. They have no say in the decision-making. African Woman thus symbolizes passivity and victimization of societal prohibitions as well as certain self-imposed inhibitions.

Ellke Boehmer analyzing the status of women as mothers, whores, girl friends, wives, free women, courtesans, Political women and workers symbolizing national pride and also as spiritual advisers supporting their community, has observed that they have not been presented as individuals actively and respectfully involved in the political activity.

The relationship with a girlfriend is based on mutual love affair and pleasure derived in each other’s company whereas the good time girls’ relationship is primarily materialistic. Gloria in Aluko’s Chief the Honorable Minister represents girlfriends symbolizing power and complexity. Gloria is a benevolent and lovable character nursing her lover Moses. She enjoys her status not depending on others.

In No Longer At Ease Clara also is a nurse but does not have other responsibilities. Even her relation with Obi
Okonkwo would complicate the affairs of Obi’s family since Obi’s parents do not consent for their marriage. Clara never magnifies the problems. In *A Grain of Wheat* Wambuku signifies the idea of African independence. She is first the girlfriend and then becomes the wife of Kihiga. She loves him more as a lover than as a husband.

In *The White Veil* Ogot stands as immoral woman disregarding man’s natural impulses. Achola’s reluctance stands for easygoing attitude of a Victorian. The relation between Ogot and Achola implies Victorian notion that for real sexual pleasure one needs to look beyond the matrimonial bed.

Miria in *No Bride Price* is a symbol of causality. With the exception of Miria all the girl friends are well educated. Although she is an illiterate comprehends Lombe’s personal problems. Her sympathy and comprehension excel his social status and perception. Agnes Akilo in *Man of the people* is professional and intellectual though culturally inferior. Chief Nanga attracted many women by his wealth and status as Minister but Agnes could attract him.

Girlfriends stand in contrast with the most complex goodtime girls. Remy in contrast with Gloria is psychic and not
a very serious without any emotional stress. Mercy has dual personality, one as a taxi driver and the other as an influential politician. Unlike the goodtime girls she is not promiscuous. Selina in *Ripples in the Pool* is regarded as a goodtime girl for two reasons. Firstly, her sexual relationship materially rewarded her. Secondly, she was also giving bodily pleasure to her patients while nursing them. Hers is a split and disturbed personality. She dies not as a wife nor as a good time girl but as a courtesan.

Adaku in Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* symbolizes the struggle of woman to free herself from the destructive traditional social dogmas that render her merely to a wife primarily to suffer. She seeks to continue casual relationship with men for material gains and physical gratification.

Some African women are portrayed as literate and legally married wives, some assertive and some submissive. Fatima, wife of Dr. Amilo Kanu in Ike’s *Sunset at Dawn* is a university graduate with enough knowledge of medicines to deal effectively with the villagers’ problems caused by malnutrition. She is educated like her husband, and enjoys herself in the company of westernized and sophisticated people.
Yaniya in Ekwensi's *Beautiful Feathers* is portrayed as smart, good-looking, glamour girl. Edzi in Selor Mey’s *The Narrow Path* besides being self-centered is a happy married woman taking care of her children, and unconcerned about her husband’s lapses. In Achebe’s *A Man of the People*, Chief Nanga’s wife is generous and assertive in her own way.

Chinua Achebe in his story, *Marriage is a Private Affair*, which he wrote in his youth, dramatizes the problems faced by a young couple who get married ignoring their traditional custom and belief. He talks of the practice of finding a suitable girl by the parent in traditional society. Nnaemeka’s father from his native village writes a letter to his son that he had gone and found a girl for him.

*I have found a girl who will suit you admirably....She has a proper Christian upbringing. When she stopped schooling some years ago, her father (a man of sound judgment) sent her to live in the house of a pastor where she has received all the raining a wife could need. Her Sunday school teacher has told me that she reads her Bible very fluently.*

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But Nnaemeka says that he cannot marry his father’s choice, as he has already loved Nene Atang, who is a teacher in a Girl’s School in Lagos. His father wonders,

*Teacher, did you say? If you consider that a qualification for a good wife I should like to point out to you, Nnaemeka that no Christian woman should teach. St. Paul in his letter to the Corinthians says that woman should keep silence.*

Flora Nwapa’s Idu in *Idu* is lovable and submissive, a believer of male inheritance. She even forces her husband to go for a second marriage when she fails to conceive. But her husband Adiewer does not evince interest in the second marriage. When he falls sick Idu nurses him with least protest and dies after twenty-eight days after his death. In Emecheta’s *The Second Class Citizen* Adah is an intellectual, a superior being. But to Londoners she appears to be just a black immigrant with no proper education.

Adah is the property of her husband though she is denied western education. She is the victim of gender discrimination. She supports not only her children but also helps Francis in prosecuting his studies further. She faces
many challenges in life and tries to protect and preserve her womanhood. In the novel *The Journey Within* Ejiaka is the symbol of compassion, joy and Christian faith and she realizes that man is a must in the life of woman.

In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* Okonkwo's three wives stand for endurance, beauty and anger. His first wife, Nwoye's mother has all the patience to compromise with life and is most obliging to her husband. When Ikemefuna was to be sacrificed though she inwardly wanted to save him she could not spell it out to her husband. She patiently suffered the loss of Ikemefuna. Okonkwo's second wife Ekwefi whom he won by participating in a wrestling match stands for beauty. Ojiugo, the third wife of Okonkwo quite often loses her temper.

In Okpewho's, *The Victims* Nwabunor is a dominant character craving for power and assaulting her drunkard husband. In Ngugi Thiong'o's *The Mubenzi Tribesman*, Ruth is socially superior with enough self-confidence and much sophistication. Nwapa's Amaka in *One is Enough* is a rebel fighting back and beating her husband black and blue until he faints. Unlike other women who wish to be submissive, she turns violent and hits him in the chest when she comes to know about his 'secret family'. She becomes conscious of her
victimization and as an empirical right she strives to liberate herself from the clutches of cultural bondage.

*When Amaka learns about her husband’s secret family, she expresses shock, outrage and disappointment. Her anger is not directed at the second wife because Amaka herself considered another wife for Obiora in order to obtain the requisite children. Obiora does not apologize for his deceit, and their conservation turns into a shouting match. Amaka, a woman has only two choices of behaviour in this situation. She either becomes hysterical or passively accepts his blows...Amaka beats Obiora in the chest. Obiora literally falls on his back.*

A free woman is one who flouts the conventional norms and for whom woman is not just to marry and produce children. The most sought after heroine who symbolizes women’s protest is Flora Nwapa’s Efuru. Efuru determines to lead a lonely life without husband when she fails to conceive. Efuru as a rebel, decision-maker and a social reformer, desires to change social conventions that affect her own future. She negotiates
with all possibilities and remains firm in her decision though other women are angry with her and criticize her for her indifference.

She declares emphatically,

*I want to be nurtured and sustained by the strengths of my culture but I am also prepared to make changes if any when the need arises.*

Efuru wants to be a free woman in the real sense of the term. She defines life as she wills and decides.

*Life for her meant living it fully. She did not want merely to exist. She wanted to live and use the world to her advantage.*

Akunna in Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* flouts the norms of the society that a girl must accept as husband the groom chosen for her by her people and that the bride price must be paid before marriage. She marries Chike, her own choice against the will of her father. She wants to lead an independent life and keep her individuality. On the other hand Dipoko's heroine Ewudu in *Because of Women* not only flouts the traditional norms but also social custom of marriage because
of the restrictions imposed on women. The readers view Ewudu, as a woman of 'new' ideas in a positive sense. In *From A Crooked Rib*, Farah's heroine Ebla becomes a prostitute not intentionally but in forced circumstances. Yet she is considered to be a free woman.

Cyprian Ekwensi's heroine Beatrice in *In People of the City* is a contrast to Ebla. She is a product of circumstances. She is rich and fond of high life. She plays the roles of good time girl and courtesan. Beatrice is compelled to become a free woman due to lack of economic resources. Ekwensi's Enu in *Iska* is also a free woman, though idealistic, refuses to comply with the traditional standards. June in Kahiga's *The Girl From Abroad* emerges as the passionate deeply stirred young woman reluctant to marry. She is the incarnation of independence.

In Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, for Nnu Ego village stands for infertility and city a place for conceiving but ironically she becomes a victim of politics. On her way back to her room Nnu Ego felt that she was a prisoner, imprisoned by her love for children, and caged as the senior wife. She cannot even ask for money for the maintenance of household as it was considered below the standard of a woman.
in her position. She felt the attitude of men unfair as men cleverly used woman's sense of responsibility only to enslave her.

Mother is but the incarnation of love. African women though detached from their husbands, yet try to retain motherly instinct. Women also advise their husbands to get a second wife to become mothers to their children. Nnu Ego in Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* is a pain-stricken mother who struggles hard to rear her children, and she even sacrifices her life for their welfare. She defines the validity of her womanhood solely by the success of her children. Buchi Emecheta not satisfied with the image of mother offers positive image of women by encouraging their education.

According to her,

> Women are capable of living for so many other reasons than men.\(^{11}\)

Nnu Ego sacrifices her life for the sake of children and becomes oblivious of the outer world. She creates a world for herself with the children.

> She never really made friends, so busy had she been building up her joys as a mother.\(^{12}\)
Adaku in *The Joys of Motherhood* too does not believe in the sanctity of marriage. When Nnu Ego asks her about her indifference towards her own daughters, she replies that they are meant to sell themselves in order to look after their family. Her own experience of life induces Adaku to finance for promising education for her daughters, which would make them live on their own without dependent on man for finance.

Flora Nwapa's *Idu* projects the image of a woman who rejects cultural tradition, male dominance and primacy of the child even though portrayed as passive, powerless, passionless, unimaginative and irresponsible woman. *Idu* is portrayed both as a loyal wife and devout mother. Later *Idu* becomes insane when her son dies, for she could not stand the bereavement.

In Nwapa's novel *Efuru* the two characters, Ossai the mother of Adizua and the protagonist, *Efuru* stand for maternal love. Ossai as mother, shares the grief of Adizua who could not afford to pay the bride price. Similarly when Adizua starts neglecting *Efuru* and maintains illicit relationship with another woman, she, as dutiful mother tries to check his behaviour. More than Adizua she grieves over the loss of *Efuru* when *Efuru* divorces him. *Efuru* even disowning her father marries Adizua.
But when Adizua fails to attend the funeral of her child, her motherhood compels her to go for divorce.

*Efuru watched the men as they lowered her only child into the coffin. She stood there like a statue with tears running down her cheeks.*

Courtesans are professional love-makers. For them lovemaking is a trade, a trade in flesh. They demand respect and exhibit ability to captivate, seduce people and provide sexual enjoyment, whereas ordinary prostitutes are poverty-stricken, for whom prostitution is their livelihood. But both are paid women, leading immoral life.

Cyprian Ekwensi highlights the worse and more disturbing elements of post-colonial African society with a focus on the stereotyped female images. To create interest in the Western reader he has made subtle racism and sexism themes of many of his works. In *Jagua Nana*, Jagua is a courtesan of high order. She is professional in her dealings with men. She cherishes her bitter experiences to mean something. Besides being a courtesan, she is also a successful woman. She has assumed four roles of woman-as wife, mother, prostitute and extra breadwinner for the household.
Ekwensi has made Jagua, very fascinating a character with her own life style and thoughts. She is a liberated woman enjoying sexuality. She looks like a jaguar, holds her victims in her so-called “clutches of Jagua”. She exhibits her glamour to earn money. Jagua Nana is a seductive prostitute imaged in the corrupt and money-hungry society. She resembles Emile in Zolo’s Novel Nana and Defoe’s Moll Flanders in her carefree and wretched life. Like Tom Tulliver in George Elliot’s Mill on the Floss, Freddie, Jagua Nana’s patriarchal brother, upbraids her for the kind of life she leads.

*My dear sister is time you stop your loose life. Is a shameful thin’ to me, your brother, I got a beautiful sister like you. God made you with dignity an’ when I think of your kind of life .... my sister come home and stay in the family. You don’ wan’ to marry. Awright. Nobody forcin’ you. Den keep yourself with respect.*

Ghanaian writer, Ama Ata Aidoo has also dealt with the theme of prostitution in her work *Something to Talk about on the Way to the Funeral.* She narrates the story of Auntie Araba, an independent thinker who goes in search of a job in
order to feed her family. She conceives by the barrister she works for. In anger and out of contempt, unable to bear the bitter truth she turns into a prostitute.

Moral corruption as a theme dominates the literary scene in African fiction. In post-colonial Nigeria, Ghana and Kenya the westernized woman is looked upon as 'cheap' and 'available' and her presence in the job market is seen as a threat that can only be contended with accusations of sexual permissiveness. In African society prostitution is not a matter of concern though its primary occupation is agriculture and it encouraged early marriage and early child bearing. It is the rich that indulge in concubinage and polygamy. In many places women are subjected to sexual harassment, prostitution and consequent endemic venereal diseases. Women are treated as common wealth to be shared by many. Even for the police prostitution has become a source of income. Even the white do not spare black women. They have illicit relationship with black women.

Wole Soyinka too presents the stereotyped images of women that fall into one of the three categories: the foolish virgin in rural settings, the female fatala in urban settings and the masculanised matron. According to Davies, Soyinka's works
present the kerner of positive portrayal of female image which is never fully realized.

In Soyinka's *The Interpreters* Simi unlike Jagua is an intelligent and pleasure seeking woman. As a courtesan she is satisfied. Ekwensi's character Konni in *Loko Town* is a progressing woman, experienced practitioner, and an independent thinker. In Ekwensi's words: She lived alone, she paid her rent, and did just as she pleased. Her main purpose of prostitution is to regain respectability.

In Mwangi's *Going Down Riverside* Wini is an illegitimate woman, solely engaged in prostitution in order to sustain her child. She never goes to bed with every casual contact she makes. She behaves for sometime truly as their legitimate wife, professionally she is a semi-skilled worker. In Ngugi's *Minutes of Glory* Beatrice, a down trodden is the protagonist. When subjected to humiliation time and again she realizes that good looks alone can attract people and make woman successful. An ordinary virtuous woman becomes a professional prostitute.

Women that flouted traditional norms turned into politicians. Penda, a prominent character in Ousmane's *God's
**Bits of Wood** markedly signifies a woman who is politically active and independent. Right from her childhood, she disguised herself more as a boy. When a man slapped her she retaliated slapping on his face. And she actively participated in strikes.

People believe that Penda has 'heart and stomach' of a man, masculine in temperament. African novel with rural setting depicts traditional culture and woman in her traditional role. The characters in the modern urban setting look different by their extreme individualism. They are considered as single, isolated, unified, culturally freethinking individuals reflecting urban individualism in the society in transition. The characters are self-confidant and rely on the inner voice. They are exposed to several crises in their society and try to solve their problems independently. Ama Ata Aidoo's Esi in *Changes* is an independent workingwoman symbolizing female protest. Esi is also a dutiful and obliging daughter and granddaughter. African woman besides playing the roles of mother, wife, whore, courtesan, prostitute, daughter and neighbour, has also become a political leader and a professional worker.

Soyinka's and Achebe's characters exhibiting integrity and moral austerity boldly face the brutalities of degenerating male dominated society. The degree of resistance in
extremity sometimes involves serious physical loss and even death. Their self-assertion vindicates their individuality. Achebe has presented the image of an idealized woman thereby opening the space for women to become active and involve themselves along with men in the nation-building activities. They are the images of progressive women though they are not fully evolved characters.

In most of the literary texts, women slander, backstab and hurt one another. But in Achebe's works women do not indulge in violence against other women. Further, these multiple images of women shift constantly unlike the stereotyped women in traditional society. And it becomes difficult for the black woman to define her identity and her specific role in the given changed circumstances.
REFERENCES:


3. Ibid. p.18

4. Ibid.


7. Ibid.


10. Ibid. p.94.


12. Ibid. p.224.


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