



Research Paper

Feminist Standpoint Theory and Positionality of Experience in the African Novel

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Abstract

This paper examines the Feminist Standpoint Theory and the importance of positionality of experience in novels by select representative male/female writers in Africa. The paper takes the position that while the citizens of a society or a community could have general experiences that link all together, internal constructs like class, ethnicity, religion, and gender do always separate people further into sub-groups. The Feminist Standpoint Theory posits that women's experiences are different from those of men. Because society has ascribed a subordinate status to the female gender, the perspectives of women will always be different. Analysing selections from the works of Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah, Mariama Ba and Lola Shoneyin, the study discovers that specific constructs that are important to the opposite gender are glossed over in the works of the authors. In the fiction of male authors, the experiences of female characters are not only put at the periphery of family or societal history, the women are most often presented as naturally dependent, weak, sometimes wayward, and generally uninterested in the socio-political dynamics happening outside the family set up in the larger society. Conversely, constructs that seem important to masculinity - like power, and material / social status, are relegated to the background in novels by women while feminine constructs are given prominence. The study concludes that positionality of gender experience directly impacts an author's choice of subject.

Keywords: Feminist Standpoint Theory; Gender positionality; African novel; African women

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I. INTRODUCTION

According to Griffin (2009:447)

A standpoint is a place from which to view the world around us. Whatever our vantage point, its location tends to focus our attention on some features of the natural and social landscape while obscuring others. Synonyms for standpoint include viewpoint, perspective, outlook, and position...each of these words suggests a specific location in time and space where observation takes place, while referring to values or attitudes.

Feminist standpoint theory was propounded by Nancy Hartsock in 1983. It was advanced as an epistemological scholarship that would focus on significating and empowering women's experiences. According to Cabrera *et al.* (2020:309), "Feminist Standpoint Theory is based on the assumption that the world is traditionally represented from the perspective of a determined social condition which prevents the knowledge from being generated free from constraints and prejudice". It entails a personal, subjectivist perspective that prioritises personal experience as source of knowledge and truth. Feminist Standpoint theory signifies "situated knowledges" (Haraway, 1991:188) and "subjugated knowledges" (Collins, 1990:233). While it acknowledges that there are some experiences that characterise the life of an individual not shared by all the members of a group to which an individual belongs, an individual belongs to a group because of shared experiences in terms of gender, race, ethnicity and religion, and "the social groups within which we are located powerfully shape what we experience and know as well as how we understand and communicate with ourselves,

others, and the world" (Wood, 1997:250). Apparently, "our standpoint affects our worldview" (Griffin, 2009:447).

Consequently, Feminist Standpoint theorists base the fulcrum of the theory on three constructs:

- Knowledge is socially situated.
- Marginalised groups are socially situated in ways that make it more possible for them to be aware of things and ask questions than it is for the non-marginalised.
- Research, particularly that focused on power relations, should begin with the lives of the marginalised. (Bowell, 2021)

The theorists put emphasis on empirical knowledge born out of women's objective experiences and interests. According to Hartsock (1983), "women's lives make available a particular and privileged vantage point on male supremacy, a vantage point which can ground a powerful critique of the phallocratic institutions and ideology which constitute capitalist patriarchy" (284). Hence, Standpoint theorists posit that some socio-political POSITIONS women occupy give them privileges (epistemically) which could be used as positions for investigating the nature of social and political privileges, in terms of men benefitting from them while women suffer from not benefitting at all. This aligns with Harding, who states that "starting off research from women's lives will generate less partial and distorted accounts not only of women's lives but also of men's lives and of the whole social order" (Harding 1993, cited in Gurung, 2020:109).

Working within the frames of the fulcrum above, the theory, according to Gurung (2020), is built on four principal theses: strong objectivity, situated knowledge, epistemic advantage and power relations.

Though Feminist Standpoint Theory originated in the work of Nancy Hartsock, its core was developed by Sandra Harding. Her major contribution to the theory is in the feminist theory of strong objectivity. According to Harding, research into social phenomena has always been overwhelmed by sexism and androcentrism, though the male researcher might claim objectivity. But, since positionality is unavoidable in its impact on research, when this is taken into consideration in analysing the product of such research, what ensues is stronger than merely having the researcher claim objectivity. To Harding, when research is started from the experiences of women, this bolsters the standards of neutrality. Whereas scientific research is supposed to be value-free, Harding avows that bias or prejudice cannot be denied. Standpoint theory argues against the idea that all social situations provide equally useful resources for learning about the world ... (It) provides arguments for the claim that some social situations are scientifically better than others as places from which to start off knowledge projects ... (Harding, 1993:61).

This is because a researcher's personal experience (in gender, race, ethnicity, etc.) will always colour the perspective through which the researcher views the world, including the research.

However, since men occupy the position of power and authority, their research is always supportive of androcentric postures. These postures are taken as the mainstream as room is not given to alternative postures or perspectives. But, since women are oppressed and marginalised, their research not only introduces a different posture, it allows for different postures and perspectives. This invariably leads to stronger objectivity. Explaining Harding's thesis on strong objectivity, Gurung avers that:

The strongest objectivity is found through the marginalised feminist perspective. According to her, these perspectives can guarantee the most accurate and least distorted view of the world. Usually, males hold powerful positions and thus try to preserve the status quo and are not interested in considering other's perspectives. It is the notion that perspectives of marginalised and oppressed individuals can help to create more objective accounts of the world it emphasises the importance of starting from the experiences of those who have been traditionally left out of the production of knowledge This epistemology can bring drastic changes in bringing women's voices in social science research ... (and) ... acknowledges that the social location of knowledge producers and the social context of the knowledge production contribute to more transparent and ethical research claims (2020:109).

What one knows is basically a question of one's social location. This position or standpoint impacts the knowledge one acquires and produces. Hence, because of the overwhelming differences in the social positions of men and women (oppressor/oppressed), there are bound to be differences in their approaches to knowledge and knowledge available to them. Whereas dominant groups seem not always (to be) cognizant of their oppressive temper, and consequently are not wont to question the basic constructs of their social position, it is typical (for members) to overlook their biases and prejudices and legitimise any and all knowledge produced from their advantaged social position. Thus, according to Gurung (2020), "the situated-knowledge questions the conventional ways of valuing the knowledge and disrupts such legitimisation of dominant groups" (109). Situated knowledge questions the validity of comprehending and developing historical or cultural discourse of a society or group from the outside. Since knowledge "is embedded in / and thus affected by the concrete historical, cultural, linguistic, and value context of the knowing person" (*APA Dictionary of Psychology*), it means that the process of epistemological construction is constrained by the indices above – history, culture, language and value.

The term epistemic advantage is used in feminist theory to show how disadvantaged groups (in terms of - mainly - gender, race, religion, ethnicity, etc.) are in a better position to generate knowledge of/about the construction of power in the society. Since they are not members of the dominant group but its victims, they are aware of the "knowledge of the practices of both their own contexts and those of their oppressors" (Narayan, 2003:315). For this reason, "the knowledge and theories of marginalised populations hold more epistemic authority than the knowledge and theories developed by dominant groups" (Gurung, 2020:109). Even when it comes to power relations, the best way to learn about how power operates is to examine it from the standpoint of the oppressed, the ones whose choices are constrained by those in power. Then, the real nature of power will be revealed to be different from how it is defined or perceived by the oppressor/dominant group (Harding, 2004).

If individual experience is impacted by one's position in terms of gender, the perspective of such an individual will be limited as it will be quite impossible to empathise with members of the opposite gender. What is obtainable in such a situation can only be sympathy, since true empathy will be empirical, not sourced from the imagination but from felt-experience, which has a deeper influence on human psychological makeup.

The African novel has long served as a platform for the exploration of societal dynamics, cultural nuances, and the human condition. Within this literary terrain, the portrayal of gender roles and relationships has been a subject of profound scrutiny and debate. In particular, the representation of female agency through the lens of male "objectivity" has sparked significant discourse regarding power dynamics, identity construction, and the perpetuation of stereotypes. This paper delves into the intricate interplay between male objectivity and the objectification of femininity in the works of male authors, and female subjectivity and misandrist misrepresentations of male agency in the African novel, examining the ways in which these narratives shape and reflect broader societal perceptions.

Throughout history, African literature has grappled with the complexities of gender, often challenging traditional notions of masculinity and femininity. While male authors have consistently been accused of misrepresentation of the African female agency, female authors, in particular, have used their narratives to interrogate and subvert patriarchal structures, offering alternative perspectives on male and female characters and their actions. However, in this pursuit of empowerment and reclamation of agency, there exists a perilous tendency towards misogyny - objectification and devaluation of females, and misandry – the vilification and demonization of men – which can distort the portrayal of male and female characters and perpetuate harmful stereotypes.

In this paper, the writer seeks to navigate this delicate patriarchal -cum-gynocritical terrain by analysing a selection of African novels written by male and female authors, exploring the tensions between male objectivity and female subjectivity, and the representation of male/female agencies. By examining key character dynamics in the selected novels, this writer aims to shed light on the complexities inherent in the depiction of gender in African literature and the implications for broader sociocultural discourse.

II. POSITIONALITY OF EXPERIENCE AND THE PRESENTATION OF GENDER CONSTRUCTS IN THE AFRICAN NOVEL: MALE OBJECTIVITY AND MISOGYNISTIC MISREPRESENTATION OF FEMALE AGENCY

We begin our analysis with a deconstruction of the gender discourse in the most popular work of fiction in African literature, *Things Fall Apart*. Okonkwo, the protagonist, has become almost a mythical presence not just because of the traditional patriarchal burden that he represents, but also because of the centring of specific masculine tropes in his personality which verge on the extreme and surprisingly conspicuously peripheralized his type. Why would the author have chosen such a figure to examine the bastardisation of the Igbo cultural world? It is because Okonkwo is more of a cultural avatar, a man who simultaneously personifies the strengths and the weaknesses of his society. He is a first-rate farmer. He is also a warrior, having been a champion wrestler in his youth. It is in recognition of his personal achievements that the society has bestowed on him three chieftaincy titles and he is chosen to lead a delegation to Abame to seek compensation for Umuofia on an inter-communal issue. Despite the fact that he represents the best his society could have, in the form of his rationality, self-discipline, and orderliness, it is also generally accepted that Okonkwo is also unrestrained, spontaneous and chaotic, a combination that reflects Nietzsche's conception of tragic heroism in *The Birth of Tragedy*. However, Okonkwo's confusion and underlying phobia are metaphoric renditions of unacknowledged epistemic and cultural crises which had commenced even prior to the coming of the colonialists. But why use Okonkwo's experience to examine the deterioration of his society's cultural integrity? Why focus on the life of an elitist macho-masculinist instead of a multitude of "liberal" men and women which would have liberalised the novel's perspective?

Chinua Achebe affirmed in several interviews and writings that he was motivated to write because of the jaundiced presentation of Africa and Africans in serious European literature. He particularly singled out Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* where Africans are presented as simpletons (*Mister Johnson*) and as people without cultural ontology (*Heart of Darkness*). Well aware that the

tragic genre is given prominence in Western literature and that the core of Western tragedy is the downfall of a highly placed heroic character, Achebe had to create a character in the mould of Oedipus, Hamlet, Julius Caesar, Michael Henchard, a run of classical figures who derive their characterological strength from a deep-rooted androcentric machismo. Of course, Achebe knew that despite the cultural differences between the occidental and African traditional customs, the patriarchal paradigm is given prominence across most human societies. Achebe acknowledged this androcentrism in the cultural values of his upbringing, saying “Those two – my father and his uncle – formulated the dialectic which I inherited” (Achebe, 2009:37).

The dialectic which Achebe inherited was not just a high sense of morality and socio-communal responsibility to others, but also a masculine valorisation of power and competitiveness. If Achebe’s purpose was to fictionalise a society comparable to that found in Western literature, he must of necessity create characters of the heroic kind, and Okonkwo and the other central males of his novels fulfil this purpose. It is not surprising then that Achebe was unable to centralise the female agency and her concerns in his novels. In *Things Fall Apart*, the female agent is silenced and accepting of her inferior status. In *Arrow of God*, even the priestess that is present in the former novel is absent here. The latter is all about priests, colonial administrators and power play. In his last novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, the female agency, though given some prominence, nevertheless Achebe was unable to successfully centralise the concerns of the opposite gender. In the words of Ogunyemi (1988), what Achebe has done in his novels is that he has

pronounced an eternal sentence on his innocent female character, imprisoned on the pages of his books, destined to carry and serve foo-foo and soup to men dealing with 'important' matters. Achebe's machospirit with its disdain for women robs him of the symbolic insight into the nurturant possibilities of women's vital role. Things fall apart also because of the misogyny or contempt for the female (66).

The contention is that Achebe was constrained by his gender and could not ascribe an equal dialectical significance to the females in his novels. While his male characters are categorically elevated by material forces championed by their societies, and some of them witness a transfiguration of their social statuses from the ordinary run of society to become inhabitants ‘of a cultural and spiritual space that is semi-divine in nature and attribute.’ (Udenta, 2015:245), the female figures are overwhelmed by their exclusion from the ideological, historical as well as the aesthetic sites of socio-political significance in their societies. Hence, it is telling that despite the claim that the traditional patriarchal epistemology by virtue of its central position provides answers and solutions to all the questions and complications of the Umuofia society, Okonkwo and his maternal uncle could not provide any answer to the question: when a man fails in the land of his father, why does he return to the land of his mother?

It is a measure of the limitations of the patriarchal standpoint that while Achebe could not situate women in his novels in socio-political power sites during pre-colonial Igbo history (or postcolonial period) in Africa, Akachi-Adimora Ezeigbo (like Flora Nwapa before her) acknowledges the importance of the female agent in the historical and socio-political centring of the Igbo traditional world. In *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996), the women not only have control over their personal lives but their collective experiences cannot be tagged as marginal or oppressed. Resourceful, charismatic, and logical, the central female figures in Ezeigbo’s novel completely upend the popular myth of “natural” female weakness, a myth that had been deployed to consign women to ancillary positions, peripheralized to the fringes of socio-political loci.

While male writers in the continent do not claim to be sexist, their attitudinal postures towards femininity or the female agency are often foregrounded in their works, either in the dynamics created around female characters, in the freedom given female characters to express their femininity, the rhetorical means through which they navigate their communicative endeavours with the members of the opposite gender, and the participation of the female characters in the societal drive towards general and individual development.

Ayi Kwei Armah's status as one of Africa's foremost novelists is unquestionable, and his attitude towards femininity is clearly depicted in his works. While Armah is particularly interested in larger societal constructs beyond gender, his portrayal of female characters is unambiguous. His novels feature a variety of female characters who play diverse roles in the sociocultural and political contexts of his stories. Armah's attitude towards women is evident in the contexts he places them in and the orientations and convictions he gives them.

For example, in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Armah illustrates that the greatest threat to the protagonist's pursuit of personal honesty and integrity comes from his wife, Oyo, and her mother. During a time of widespread corruption, the protagonist's efforts to remain upright are constantly ridiculed and scorned by Oyo and her mother. These women show a complete lack of interest in his struggles, instead displaying a keen desire to join the ranks of corrupt citizens who prioritise personal enrichment over the well-being of the country and their fellow citizens. Armah uses these characters to highlight the pervasive corruption in society and to emphasise the moral challenges faced by individuals striving to maintain integrity in such an environment.

The man's situation is further strained by the constant barrage of direct and indirect insults, innuendos, and accusations of failure, along with psychological pressures he faces at home—where he should find solace

and escape from external pressures. Although by the end of the novel, Oyo comes to appreciate her husband's integrity, this change in attitude occurs only after the Koomsons fall from power and wealth, rendering her appreciation somewhat insincere. The Koomsons, despite their dubious sources of wealth, had always been her model of power and success.

If Oyo and her mother's characterological template had not reappeared in other novels of Armah, one would have easily concluded that their construction in the above novel was a one-time (one-off) thing, only deployed to highlight a point in the context of one novel, and not the author's categorisation of the female agency into a phylum that suits his gender philosophy. It is striking, then, that a similar characterological template obtains in *Fragments*. In *Fragments*, the attitudinal self-centeredness of Oyo and her mother is mirrored in the materialistic acquisitiveness of the relatives of Baako (the novel's protagonist), particularly Efua and Araba - his mother and sister, respectively. According to Inyama (2013):

These women in *The Beautiful Ones* and *Fragments* are located within the contexts of the novels' larger themes as Armah configures them; the themes of greed and material hunger, which he sees as the sources of all kinds of corruption within the Ghanaian society. By this presentation, these female characters are lacking in moral scruples and have no patience with any man who lets such scruples blind him to his "duty" to sacrifice principle and personal convictions on the altar of fulfilment for his family members (38).

Just like Oyo and her mother are vexed and disappointed in the man for not exploiting his position in the civil service to enrich himself and his family, Efua and Araba could not hide their frustrations and disappointment in Baako for returning home from abroad empty handed. His failure to meet their material expectations could only contribute to his emotional breakdown. Baako's attempts at intellectual reformation of his society fails miserably because of the overwhelming materialism of his community. Sneered at by his sister and mother, his efforts at contributing to the growth and development of his society are met with cynicism. Like everybody in the society, those closest to him believe in the maxim of "MONEY SWEET PASS ALL" (106).

Like Achebe, why would Armah banish the female agency to such a negative representation? Without doubt, like Achebe, Armah's novels articulate a masculine positionality of experience that is discriminatory towards the female gender. He puts the female gender in auxiliary positions and shows that her impact on her male family members are never altruistic.

From the analysis above, it is apparent that male authors often marginalise female experiences, portraying women as secondary to male-driven narratives of power, status, and socio-political engagement. In the examined works of Chinua Achebe and Ayi Kwei Armah, female characters frequently occupy peripheral roles within both familial and societal contexts, while the men take the central roles in sites of power and societal importance. The men are presented as active members of the larger society, whereas the women are depicted as dependent, weak, and less engaged with the broader socio-political dynamics that shape their communities. This marginalisation reflects the broader societal construct that places women in subordinate positions, reinforcing stereotypes that diminish their agency and significance.

III. POSITIONALITY OF EXPERIENCE AND PRESENTATION OF GENDER CONSTRUCTS IN THE AFRICAN NOVEL: FEMALE SUBJECTIVITY AND MISANDRIST MISREPRESENTATION OF MALE AGENCY

Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* is not the first novel written and published by a female African author (that right belongs to *Efuru*, written by Flora Nwapa), but its importance in the history of feminist literature in Africa is undeniable. Whereas previous novels by female authors had highlighted issues that were of female concern at the time, the core of these novels only highlighted these concerns and never quite deconstructed their nitty gritty. *So Long a Letter* is a tour de force in the manner in which the central figure, Ramatoulaye, subjectively critiques patriarchal hegemony and its ramifications on female experience in Senegal. From the opening pages of the novel to the last, she vents her frustration, irritation, and exasperation against the marginalisation of women from sites of societal power and authority, by using a culturally and legally empowered site like marriage as exemplification.

Ramatoulaye's marriage to Moudou is not the problem, however. The trouble is that he decides to marry a second wife. Now, one would have expected her to be accustomed to the idea of polygyny, since the Senegalese society is ninety-two percent Muslim (U. S. Department of State). Though Blair (cited in Lang 1991) opined that Senegal is indeed a highly homogeneous society where the Muslim majority show strong tolerance of others' beliefs, at ninety-two percent Senegal can be termed a Muslim country, if not an Islamic one. Granted that polygyny is not imposed by Islam and neither is it universally practised (Al-Faruiqi 1998), yet it is mostly practised by Muslims and it has become one of the major cultural constructs of Islamic societies. Ramatoulaye's aversion to polygyny could not be adduced to hybridisation (See Homi Bhabha, 2004) because, according to Latha (2004:57), "despite a certain amount of acculturation to French norms and values, ... (Ramatoulaye) has a strong awareness of her Senegalese identity." If this is true, and if polygyny is a cultural construct supported by both the Islamic and African traditional cultures, then how come that Ramatoulaye exhibits such a visceral

disdain for it as if it is an alien construct? Ramatoulaye's description of the burial ceremony of her husband, Modou, details the insight of a woman well acquainted with the culture:

I hope to carry out my duties fully. My heart concurs with the demands of religion. Reared since childhood on their strict precepts, I expect not to fail. The walls that limit my horizon for four months and ten days do not bother me. I have enough memories in me to ruminate upon. And these are what I am afraid of, for they smack of bitterness (8).

And she goes on and on with the narration of her husband's obsequies. Intermingling her narration with points of irritation, it becomes clear that Ramatoulaye is a well educated woman (a teacher) who is highly perceptive and whose experience seems to be mainstreamed by the author, despite the fact that marriage to Modou has brought her "into the city's bourgeoisie," (6) like her co-wife. Unsurprisingly, she does not dwell on this aspect of her own background, but goes on to highlight the parasitic nature of the members of the family of Modou's new wife.

Ramatoulaye could not escape being a woman, first, and any other thing, second. Her prejudices overwhelm her thoughts, and these are foregrounded in every line of her epistolary jeremiad. Any value or precept that aligns with her feminist valuation is extolled but any that does not is disparaged. The way she presents her mother-in-law as demanding, her sister-in-laws as undiscerning, and their children as uncouth, smacks of being culturally rebellious. In Africa, marriage is not just a union of two individuals, but a-coming together of families, and sometimes communities and tribes. As the richest one in his family, Ramatoulaye could not claim ignorance of the fact that Modou could not escape being financially responsible for most members of his family and her family, too. It is this tendency to "denigrate" what she disapproves and extol what she approves that makes some critics accuse her of imbibing western individualism in her protest (Ojo-Ade, 1982). Granted that she already admits that her memories "smack of bitterness" (9), the depth and profundity of her bitterness is highlighted by the emotions behind her protestations. She could not get over her husband's betrayal, and the consequences, for her, are damning. This is captured in the most famous expression in the novel, as it is repeated twice in close proximity: "Was it madness, weakness, irresistible love? What inner confusion led Modou Fall to marry Binetou? (12 & 13)

One can only imagine Modou Fall's attitude to his wife's consternation when he decided to marry a second wife. If both Islam and the traditional culture allow the practice, he would have been mystified at the magnitude of Ramatoulaye's antagonism, not just to Binetou (the new wife) but to his decision and the general idea of polygyny. Her lamentations run deep:

And to think that I loved this man passionately, to think that I gave him thirty years of my life, to think that twelve times over I carried his child. The addition of a rival to my life was not enough for him. In loving someone else, he burned his past, both morally and materially. He dared to commit such an act of disavowal (13).

Modou must have forgotten she was raised in a French missionary school where the romantic ideas of monogamy and individual freedom were implanted in her, "to lift (her) ... out of the bog of tradition, superstition and custom" (16) make her "free from frustrating taboos" (16), the purpose should be "to make (her) ... appreciate a multitude of civilisations without renouncing (her) ... own" (16). To Ramatoulaye, polygyny is obviously one of the aspects of tradition, superstition, custom and taboo that needed to be discarded in the face of modern realities. To her, and most women, it is an act that belittles women and commodifies them. Yet, Ramatoulaye is not content with just accusing her husband of betrayal, she also accuses him of committing moral and material crimes. To her, her late husband's moral irresponsibility is a metaphor for not just a man's betrayal of his wife, but a sign of society's general failings, which she sees as the continuation of opprobrious traditional customs and values in a society that has access to better options which could be sourced from colonial constructs.

Caught between tradition and modernity, Ramatoulaye chooses modernity which she believes is liberating:

We all agreed that much dismantling was needed to introduce modernity within our traditions. Torn between the past and the present, we deployed the 'hatd sweat' that would be inevitable. We counted the possible losses. But we knew that nothing would be as before. We were full of nostalgia but were resolutely progressive (19).

The most surprising twist in *So Long a Letter* is how Ramatoulaye integrates her disdain for polygyny into the broader feminist protest against oppression and marginalisation. Initially, she starts from the position of an abandoned woman using the epistolary form to vent her frustrations. However, she soon broadens her focus, merging her personal grievances with wider feminist issues, thereby becoming a champion of women's rights. Despite this, it is easy to overlook how she treats other women, particularly her in-laws and Modou's second wife. Ramatoulaye's progressive views do not extend to her co-wife, whom she describes as a "silent, haggard child" (7). Nevertheless, she consistently presents herself as a defender of feminist rights.

While polygynous grievances might not get the required attention, the issue of female rights (as an individual and as a member of a gender) is a popular construct that has helped to give the novel its sempiternal

appeal. Moving the narrative from the personal to the political was Ba's masterstroke, since rather than appearing self-centred and self-involved, by wrapping up Ramatoulaye's personal dissatisfaction and gripes in the garments of feminist protest, by making her cry akin to every woman's cry "everywhere in the world" (King, 1994:177) against oppression and discrimination, Ramatoulaye is able to challenge the patriarchal structures in the Senegalese society by this synecdochization. She does not only present herself as a victim of one man's betrayal and undisciplined desires, she makes herself out as a symbol of man's devaluation of the female agency and

Another significant aspect of the narrative in *So Long a Letter* is the portrayal of Modou Fall and the patriarchal culture he embodies. His abandonment of his first wife and their children is inexcusable, condemned by both traditional and modern norms. This act highlights the deep flaws in the patriarchal system that allows such behaviour. Described as "popular" (5) by Ramatoulaye herself, at death, his childhood playmates and classmates have nothing but praises for him:

"Modou, friend of the young as of the old...."

"Modou, the lion hearted, champion of the oppressed ..."

"Modou, good brother, good husband, good Muslim ..." (5)

According to Ramatoulaye, "his companions in the trade union struggles" (5) also came to honour him in death. This means that he participated in union activities. Modou was apparently very much involved in the socio-political activities in his society, to the extent that he was popular. Being a friend of the young as well as the old showed his empathetic side, and this aligns with his being described as a "champion of the oppressed" (5). To Ramatoulaye, Modou Fall failed in his most crucial roles by abandoning his family, recklessly borrowing huge sums from the bank to support the lavish lifestyles of his new wife and her parents, and succumbing to unrestrained desires and pleasures. She portrays him as a man who failed as both a husband and a father. Although she champions women's rights to education and their ability to compete with men for public and political positions to contribute to the country's development, she disregards Modou's achievements as a public figure. For her, the private life of a person must align with their public persona. It is then, and only then, that the worth and dignity of an individual could be admired and venerated.

In Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, a similar authorial feminist standpoint is obvious throughout. That the novel is narrated through the perspectives of the major characters is vital, since this not only allows us to see deep into their minds, but it also gives us a vista into the author's intentions. While the women's personal histories and recollections reveal a lot about their personal experiences which are catenated by patriarchal tyranny, masculine oppression and exploitation, Baba Segi's narrative is replete with egotism, narcissism, conceit, vanity, arrogance, self-admiration and hubris. The women's experiences foreground their victimhood which is typicalised by traumatic experiences orchestrated by masculine oppression crystallised as social conventions, societal pressures and personal struggles. On whose side is the author? This is obvious, from the first chapter, where Baba Segi's megalomaniacal exuberance is made obvious:

Later that night, Baba Segi staggered down the wide corridor that the wives' bedrooms were cut from. Like he always did, he caressed Iya Segi's door on the right, touched the knob on Iya Tope's door on the left. He listened for voices at Iya Femi's door and finally paused at the threshold of Bolanle's room. He didn't knock; he just pushed the door open with his toe and brightened the room with the corridor light (2010:13).

Lola Shoneyin clearly sides with the women, portraying them as victims of a patriarchal system that stifles their personal growth. Baba Segi, unable to meet societal expectations of masculinity on his own, exploits this subordination to elevate his status. He relies on societal constructs like marriage, enjoying the protection and advantages these provide. This allows him to transform from a lowly regarded man to one envied by others. Shoneyin dramatically highlights his flaws through exaggerated characteristics and idiosyncrasies, underscoring his lack of true substance. Despite his personal inadequacies, Baba Segi manipulates societal norms to gain power, while the women, trapped by these same norms, reveal the deep-seated inequities of their world. Shoneyin's portrayal emphasises the systemic oppression of women and critiques how societal structures allow men like Baba Segi to thrive at the expense of women's freedom and growth. His attributes are amplified to the level of being ridiculous, and though he is wealthy, he is presented as poor in intellect and socially awkward:

Sitting on a bench next to my father, Baba Segi looked like a hungry demon. His skin was oily and supple ... Then, quite unexpectedly, he looked around and seized a boy by the arm. 'Take me to the toilet,' he begged. Every eye watched Baba Segi as he barged through the door of the unroofed pit latrine. We heard every rumble, every gurgle, every fart and every splutter. When Baba Segi emerged, he reoccupied the space on the bench and told the dumbstruck villagers that everything happened for a reason and that he was thinking of a new business anyway (80).

The major irony of the novel is that the women are all aware of his inadequacies as a man, while he galivants around town boasting of his prowess in bed and his finances: "Baba Segi's big testicles were empty and without seed" (242). It is revealing that Baba Segi never personally sought out his wives for marriage. They

either came to him through family transactions or as oppressed women seeking escape from patriarchal oppression. Despite his flaws, they somehow find life with Baba Segi preferable to their previous circumstances.

The intricate dynamics among the female characters (Bolanle, Iya Femi, Iya Segi, and Iya Tope) foreground instances of women victimising other women. Despite facing oppression within a patriarchal society, some of the wives perpetuate this cycle of victimisation onto their fellow wives. For instance, Bolanle, the newest and educated wife, becomes a target of jealousy and resentment from the other wives. Their insecurities manifest in subtle acts of exclusion, mockery, and attempts to undermine Bolanle's position in the household. They believe that she is one of the “educated types (who) have thin skins ... If we poke her with a stick, she will fly away...” (53). Their plan, according to Iya Femi, is to “continue to humiliate Bolanle until she runs away” (66). Rather than offering support and solidarity, they align themselves with Baba Segi, the patriarch, reinforcing the power dynamics that oppress them all. Additionally, the wives participate in maintaining the facade of the exemplary family for societal approval, contributing to the suppression of their own voices and agency. Shoneyin intricately explores how women, influenced by societal norms and their own insecurities, can perpetuate harm onto each other within the confines of a patriarchal structure, highlighting the complexities of female relationships and the internalised oppression that can result.

In *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, Shoneyin offers a darkly comedic exploration of polygamy, patriarchy, and female agency. Through the lens of Baba Segi, a polygynous husband whose carefully constructed façade of respectability unravels in spectacular fashion, Shoneyin exposes the contradictions and hypocrisies that underpin traditional gender roles and family dynamics. By infusing her narrative with biting wit and irony, Shoneyin challenges dominant narratives of gender and power, offering a subversive critique of patriarchal norms and expectations. Despite the fact that men have always been presented as the logical and smarter ones, and “They think they sit in the centre and the world turns around them” (73), Shoneyin upends the stereotypical gender characterisation by making Baba Segi look dense and his wives smarter. At the end of the novel, it becomes evident that the women are smarter. Despite Baba Segi's discovery that none of the children in his house are biologically his, he must keep the women and their children with him to avoid shame. This turn of events is a harsh anticlimax for a man who has been so proud and pompous throughout the story.

The evaluation of the novels of Mariama Ba and Lola Shoneyin present a contrasting narrative landscape to that of Chinua Achebe and Ayi Kwei Armah. These authors foreground female experiences, exploring themes and constructs central to the lives of women. Issues such as gender oppression, domestic struggles, and the quest for identity and autonomy take centre stage, highlighting the intrinsic value of the feminine perspective. This shift in narrative focus underscores the importance of gender as a determinant of subject matter in literature. Female authors, informed by their own positional experiences, prioritise constructs that resonate with their understanding of the world, challenging the male-centric narratives that dominate the literary canon. Although Osundare (2007:6) avers that “the writer not only chooses his subject, he also chooses his vision,” women producing literature about women ensures authentic representation, empowerment, visibility, inspiration, cultural enrichment, and correction of imbalances in history, literature, and entertainment.

IV. CONCLUSION

The exploration of Feminist Standpoint Theory within African literature underscores the critical role of gendered experiences in shaping narrative perspectives and thematic concerns. This study's analysis of works by Chinua Achebe, Ayi Kwei Armah, Mariama Ba, and Lola Shoneyin reveals significant divergences in how male and female authors portray societal constructs and individual experiences. These differences critically align with the central tenets of Feminist Standpoint Theory, which argues that women's lived experiences, shaped by their subordinate status in society, offer unique and valuable perspectives often overlooked or marginalised in male-dominated discourses. Achebe and Armah portray women differently: Achebe depicts them as docile, while Armah suggests they are sources of amoral influence on men. Conversely, Ba and Shoneyin in their narratives view men as oppressive, exploitative, and undisciplined.

The novels of Chinua Achebe and Ayi Kwei Armah depict female characters in peripheral roles within the terrain of family and society. These female characters are typically characterised as dependent, weak, or morally questionable, and their engagement with socio-political issues is minimal, if not entirely absent. This marginalisation reflects a broader societal tendency to undervalue women's contributions outside the domestic sphere, reinforcing gender stereotypes and limiting the scope of female agency in literary narratives. By relegating women's experiences to the background, these male authors inadvertently perpetuate a patriarchal worldview that diminishes the complexity and significance of female lives.

In contrast, the works of Mariama Ba and Lola Shoneyin foreground the experiences and struggles of women, emphasising constructs such as power dynamics within the family, emotional resilience, and the pursuit of autonomy. These female authors bring to the forefront issues of gender inequality, societal expectations, and the internal and external conflicts women face. Their narratives challenge traditional gender roles and highlight the often-overlooked socio-political dynamics that profoundly impact women's lives. By doing so, Ba and

Shoneyin not only provide a counter-narrative to male-dominated literary traditions but also enrich the literary landscape with diverse and multifaceted portrayals of women and men.

The differences in thematic focus and character portrayal between male and female authors critically underscore the significance of positionality in literary creation. Gender shapes not only the experiences of authors, but also their interpretive lenses, guiding their narrative choices and thematic emphases. This positionality influences how stories are told, which experiences are highlighted, and which voices are amplified or silenced. By examining the works of both male and female authors, the study illuminates the disparities in representation and the underlying societal constructs that perpetuate these differences.

The study concludes that acknowledging the positionality of gender experience is crucial for a holistic comprehension of African literature. The distinct perspectives of male and female authors can only enrich the African literary landscape, providing a more comprehensive view of societal dynamics and individual experiences, as one gender can not successfully present the “real” specificity of the inner world and impressions of the opposite gender. Recognizing these differences enables readers and scholars to appreciate the diversity of narratives and the complex interplay of gender, power, and identity in literature. There is a need for a more inclusive and nuanced approach to literary analysis, one that values and interrogates the positionality of experience. By doing so, it challenges the dominance of male-centric narratives and advocates for the recognition and validation of female-centric perspectives. In celebrating the contributions of both male and female authors, the study underscores the importance of diverse voices in capturing the multifaceted reality of human experience. Through the lens of Feminist Standpoint Theory, it becomes evident that literature serves as a powerful medium for expressing and understanding the varied and intersectional experiences that shape the world.

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