

Limitations in the Feminine Impulse of West African Fiction: A Study of Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* and Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*

By

Aloy Nnamdi Obika PhD
Department of English
Madonna University Nigeria,
Okija Campus, Anambra State
+2348033820690

Abstract

From the onset of human existence till just recently, only men were going outside to meet challenging situations. Women were staying indoors so as to attend to the sick, be with the children and cook food since they are the weaker sex. This situation gradually led to the marginalization of women who in the 18th and 19th centuries in Europe and America started protesting in order to have equal rights with men. Their movement known as feminism has yielded positive results in those places where it originated but not so in the West African sub-continent. When this feminist philosophy is presented in literary works, the women are portrayed in such a way that they are well educated and trained in different fields of human endeavours. But a deeper study of texts from West Africa shows that the impact of feminism is at a limited level due to the educational standard of the people and their religious and cultural inclinations. In order to arrive at this conclusion, the researcher had to make use of Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* and Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter*. When the content of these texts and the critical works on them are compared with the theoretical works on feminism, one can discover that there is a chasm between the working of the philosophy in Europe and in West Africa.

Keywords: Feminism, Impulse, Impact, Limited, Literature

Introduction

From the dawn of human existence till now, there have existed numerous conflicts which manifest as wars (tribal, inter-town or village, national or even international), struggle for survival, and attacks from wild animals and so on. These are very dangerous, and can go to the extent of threatening human existence. But man has been challenging and battling with all of them. Because of the inherent dangers involved, men have been at the front leaving women at the back because the belief is that they are the weaker sex. Exposing them to these dangerous situations can lead to human annihilation.

Therefore, at the early stage of human existence, man was at the front. This situation has gone on to the extent that most women are both protected and at the same time marginalized. Come to think of it, how many women could take spears, clubs, bows and arrows to fight wild animals? Which woman could go to the battlefield with these crude arms to fight the enemies?

An illustration can be given with Homer's portrayal of the experiences of the Greek soldiers as they were on the plains of windy Troy during that war that lasted for ten years. During that war, even the gods and goddesses appeared in human form so as to fight. During that war, no woman participated for none could have survived as it is presented in Homer's *The Iliad*.

Therefore, under that condition, most women would be at the background preparing food for the warring men, protecting the children and attending to the wounded warriors. It is this role that made the men to take precedence over them most especially in patriarchal societies.

From this early stage, the world kept on developing, passing from one level to the other. From taking voyages of discovery to settling down and having industrial establishments, men were still at the front, the weaker sex being at the back because of the danger at the front. Looking at this level of human development, Damazio Mfune-Mwanjakwa cites Hall as pointing out that:

The doctrine of “the separate spheres” where women were consigned to the private or domestic sphere, and men, the public sphere of politics, business and even writing, began only with the rise of industrialism and in its wake, professional specialization. Before that, each family was a more or less self-contained productive unit such that the division of roles between men and women was not rigid at all (2).

The current researcher disagrees that the separation of women and men into different spheres started with the era of industrialization. This is in view of the fact that this era has not even permeated into every area of the world even at this moment but in most parts, the sexes have been assigned their roles. As shown above, this demarcation started at the genesis of human existence. But unfortunately, he who pays the piper must dictate the tune. In this way, women who were at the back enjoying the proceeds from the dangerous incursions of men are now seen as dependants and minors alongside the children whom they take care of.

Concerning this consideration of the weaker sex as minors, Mfune-Mwanjakwa posits that:

This attitude towards women as minors is the effect of 18th and 19th centuries social and biological Darwinist theories that classed women (including white women and all the colonized people both men and women) at the same level as children on the evolutionary scale or *Great Chain of Being* that stretched from simplest plant and animal life to the white upper class, European male (8).

It was at this time that some women began to agitate for equality with men. This movement known as Women’s Liberation or the Women’s Right Movement has undergone many transformations from its early days in the United States of America when such women like Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth C. Stanton began fighting for women suffrage. When they won that, they started fighting for abolishing job discrimination against women. For women to fill those positions, many of them became lawyers, medical doctors, politicians, office administrators and so on. These were denied them in the past.

This movement generally known as feminism has even reached the West African sub-continent where hitherto women’s place was in the kitchen, and for them to have a say in society, they must do so through their sons and husbands. On this issue, Samuel Yaw Asante while citing Katherine Frank states that:

Feminism by definition is a profoundly individualistic philosophy. It values personal growth and individual fulfillment over any larger communal needs or goals. African society of course, even in its most westernized forms, places the values of the group over those of the individual with the result that the notion of an African feminism almost seems a contradiction (12).

Since this study aims at evaluating the extent of the success of this movement both in the literary outputs of this zone and its effect in the real society, it is right to point out at this stage its hindrances from communal interference as stated above.

Furthermore, M. H. Abrams and Geoffrey Harpham explain this philosophy of feminism as follows:

The basic view is that Western civilization is pervasively patriarchal (ruled by the father) – that is, it is male centered and controlled, and is organized and conducted in such a way as to subordinate women to men in all cultural domains: familial, religious, economic, social, legal and artistic (94).

It is not only Western civilization that is “pervasively patriarchal”. Here in Africa, a similar situation is obtainable. In fact, the situation is worse here. If Western women had no breathing space, they would not have been organized enough to philosophize and come up with the term “feminism”.

In spite of the level reached in the Western world, it is recorded by Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson that, “African feminism examines African societies for institutions which are of value to women

and rejects those which work to their detriment and does not simply import Western women's agendas" (563).

A situation like this can account for how women are presented in African fiction, most especially those written by men. The image of these marginalized people is nothing to write home about. In such works:

The often apparent fashion is to present the women as one of a series of avatars; an affectionate mother, a dutiful wife, an exhilarating mistress, or a whore. At best, the woman suffices as a prop for the ambition of the man; at worst, she is the *femme fatale*, very much destructive when she deploys her feminine wiles (Ogunrotimi 127).

Therefore, Western feminism as presented in fiction showcases female characters who strive for personal growth and fulfillment, who at all costs hold their heads up and are not subservient to men. This has nothing to do with Africans most especially those in the sub-Saharan section of the continent. This can account for Oladele Taiwo's views as cited by Asante. According to this erudite critic after studying Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy*:

It may be the intention of the author to prove that women can do without men in their private relationship Aidoo is quite entitled to put woman at the helm of affairs in her novel. But it is an error to think that they can live a full life without men. If such a situation is tenable in Europe, it has no chance of succeeding in Africa (24).

That Taiwo's stand is tenable both in West African fiction and in the real life of the people is unarguable. What is more, this is the era of realistic fiction. If the writer wants to produce a literary work that entertains, educates and helps in sustaining the culture of the people, feminism as practiced in the Western world cannot be applied in African context because of its one dimensional stance. This is because in Africa, there are certain conditions that limit the power of that philosophy to the extent that those who want to apply it here can be seen as people who are either odd or even insane. To study those conditions that limit the relevance of feminist stance is the aim of this paper. To embark on the study we shall make use of two prominent literary works -- Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* and Bâ's *So Long a Letter*.

Limited Impact of Literature on West African Society

These literary works are expected to make impact on society most especially on the particular societies where they are set. As it was observed by DuVign but cited by Ahumaraeze, Chinwe Innocentia and Ugomma Anaekperechi Nwachukwu: "Literature, being society specific and a product of the society, not only reflects the society but affects it in varying dimensions. Thus, literature is not just a reflection of the society but rather a projection of the people's aspiration for the future" (13).

In the Western world, this may be the case, for literature is known to do so. However, there is much doubt that it can do so in the sub-Saharan zone under consideration. Therefore, applying literature on female situation so as to ameliorate some negative conditions will not be possible. This is because literature is only seen as a school subject that enables somebody to pass his examination. Those outside the field of education hardly read. Those who pass such examinations may or may not be employed in the positions where they can effect changes. In addition, the society in question is that where some secondary school drop-outs either by hook or crook become so rich that they are awarded honorary doctorate degrees. To crown it all, they go into politics, buy the votes of the hungry millions for them to be the ultimate leaders. Can they give what they do not have when they are in leadership position? All that such people can do is to amass wealth and stash away some of it in foreign countries. It is not surprising that one of the countries under consideration in this essay is referred to as the poverty capital of the world. Under this condition, feminine subjugation stays untouched and the clout of literature is seriously hampered.

To further limit the impact of literary works not only in the region under consideration but throughout the third world, it has been stated by Rodriguez but cited by Davis Carole Boyce that: "It is easier to eliminate the colonial bourgeoisie influences that were imposed on us and identify with the enemy than to eliminate generations of tradition from within our society" (562).

Some of these traditions started years ago and the people so much believe in them that they cannot be tampered with. Some have become so sacrosanct and feared that even the church and Western influences have not been able to touch them. These manifest as beliefs or superstitions and the people use them to go about their lives' journey. As an illustration, in Igbo land where Achebe's *Anthills* is actually set, how many women can challenge masquerades and their native doctors? That there is a novel that condemns the attitude of the culture, that no woman can be a member of a masquerades group, will not make it possible for women to be given the masks to put on and go out to demonstrate the magical prowess of ancestral spirits which masquerades are representing. That can account for only very old women being admitted peripherally and are known as the mothers of these ancestral spirits. These women were occupying this marginal position before the Europeans came to our shores. There is no hope that literature, Western civilization and religion can do anything to change the situation.

Under this consideration, the stand that "Literature has the inevitable presence of historical and sociological facts which typify the societies they emanate from [and] in line with this, literature can function as to chart a way or new agenda for society" is just a day dream (Ahumaraeze and Nwachukwu 11). In spite of the fact that it is true that literary texts have the historical and sociological facts of the societies they emanate from, there is not much they can do. In other words, hoping that with literature, feminine marginalization in West African patriarchal society will one day be changed is just a pipe-dream.

But then, can you ask yourself how literary experts and novelists or creative artists participate in social issues using their works? The zone being looked at here is where unemployment and economic stress are raging about madly. These enlightened few cannot form a quorum which can give them enough power to effect changes. Some of them are poor because the publishers of their books cheat and exploit them. Although they are not the poorest in society, they cannot be counted among the rich. Under this condition, the impact of their literary outputs cannot be felt. In other words, using literature to change female marginalization only ends on paper and cannot go beyond there.

Therefore, in this zone, it is not true that "Writers can through their character portrayal effect changes in the scheme of things in the society and chart a new path for the society to follow" (Ahumaraeze and Nwachukwu 11). They can do so in the Western world where writing and reading are taken seriously, where people have the time to read and write, and their time is not swallowed up by the rat race of how to eat just anything that can stifle roaring stomachs.

In view of this, it is right to see the peculiar limitations that can be ascribed to each of the texts selected for this study because the considerations above are general to all literature texts because of the social conditions in this sub-Saharan zone.

Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*

There are many female characters in the novel. Some of them are cast in the expected poise of feminists who are supposed to be on equal terms with the male characters. Such characters are high achievers and are placed in elevated positions and so, they verge into areas hitherto reserved for male characters. In addition, there are others who are cast in the wonted mold of the female in chauvinistic societies. Some of these female characters in the novel are: Elewa, Adamma, Agatha, Agnes, Comfort and Beatrice Okoh. Not all of them will be considered here.

The first character to be considered here as a feminist, is a minor character known as Comfort. She is a very sensible and attractive friend of Beatrice. When she was twenty-six years old, her fiancé took her to meet his people. According to the novel, his people were living in "some backwater village" (Achebe 88). That their town is highlighted in this way is to show how backward the people were. But instead of these people admiring a beautiful lady from the city or being intimidated by her intelligence, beauty and education, his aunt had the temerity to boldly and deliberately utter to her hearing that: "If *ogili* was such a valuable condiment, no one would have it lying around for rats to stumble upon and dig into" (Achebe 88).

Comfort who is cast in the mold of Western feminists noticed that her intended husband has swallowed the insult without any reaction. To her, how could a man who was likened to a rat not react at

all? Or how could a man whose intended wife was referred to as the smelling and putrefying condiment *ogili* not react in any way? If her being seen for the first time was like that, what would it be like when married into the family?

And as a feminist who must impulsively assert her right and not be subdued, she had to throw the man out of her flat when they returned to the city. From the look of things, his people would have been appreciative of her help to him for in the normal patriarchal society, she would be in his flat. But this one had none and he was depending on her. This situation correctly pertains to feminists' standard, that the female should stand on her own and her relationship with males should not be that of the master-servant relationship. In her assertive pose as a feminist, after discharging the man, she traversed tribal boundaries so as to marry a northerner with whom she later bore two children.

But then, her reaction shows the limitation of feminists who only take things as they see them and evaluate them at that moment. It is that either the novelist fails to explain fully or Comfort is somehow myopic. In her hasty separation, she fails to understand why the man was silent in the face of an insult from a village woman. At the same time, she even did not enquire. Since the future is always nebulous, if she meets a character worse than her fiancé's aunt, will she again separate and marry again? Under that condition, what will she do with her two children if the culture of the people assigns them to the husband? Will she be able to forget the children and go away even if her maternal attachment dictates otherwise?

These considerations may not hold in the developed world because of differences in cultures. That can account for the portrayal of another minor character, Louise, who is an American whom Chris married when he was in London. No emotional attachment, no Christian consideration that marriage is for life, and for better or for worse was able to hold the marriage for more than six months. The misunderstanding between the couple propelled the marriage to a hasty crash.

It is at this point that we look at a major character who happens to be a heroine because of her laudable social position and achievements. This character is Miss Beatrice Nwanyibuife Okoh. She was born as the fifth child when her parents were desperately looking for a male child. It was with disappointment that they received her and that accounts for her name Nwanyibuife "a female is also something." She resents this name but her entire life proves this name right.

Her being "something" props up in her making a first class grade in English language in Queen Mary College, University of London. Her being "something" can be seen in her position as a senior secretary in the Ministry of Finance. Her being something can be seen in the accolade from the head of state that has it that "We're very proud of her". Whom the president of a country is proud of is not a failure or an underdog but a high achiever. Her being "something" can be seen in her being referred to as a "priestess with a goddess personality" (Achebe 199). Also her being "something" can be seen in her connections with the three persons who control the fictitious African country, Kangan and these three people are His Excellency Sam, Chris and Ikem. To prove that she is at par with the three prominent national figures, she confesses that: "Of all the absurd things people have found to say about us lately, the most ridiculous was to portray Ikem as one of my trio of lovers" (Achebe 92).

In other words, Achebe presents BB or so he fondly refers to her, as a high flyer, this being one of the hallmarks of feminists. To crown it all, nobody even among the three prominent national figures dictates to her. To show that the character in question is somebody with a very high profile, she says of herself that "I was determined from the very beginning to put my career first and if need be, last. That every woman wants a man to complete her is a piece of male chauvinist bullshit I had completely rejected before I knew there was anything like women's lib" (Achebe 88).

While considering this prominence given to her, Chiemela, Chikezirim and Emmanuel Inedu posit that:

Unlike other women in Achebe's earlier novels, Beatrice is the new woman with her womanhood; women move from the periphery to the very centre in national affairs. Achebe uses her to reveal his vision of womanhood in present day Nigeria -- firm, courageous, independent and a productive lot (35).

What these critics are emphasizing is that Beatrice, because of her elevated position, is a feminist. She is one of the first female characters who have a say in the affairs of her country. This stand is not far

from the observation that: "There seems to be enough evidence to suggest that the radical approach Achebe has adopted in *Anthills* may be the author's own atonement for his own marginalization of women characters in his fiction, hitherto" (Mfune-Mwanjakwa 18).

But then, how right is it that Achebe marginalized women in his former works? This observation is as a result of not taking cognizance of the influence of realism in these works. Indeed, what Achebe portrays in the said novels is realism as obtainable among the Igbo of which ever period is depicted in each novel.

But not everything about the portrayal of this elevated character is out of the ordinary. As an illustration, her relationship with her fiancé, Chris sometimes is shown from the perspective of the traditional female who is always subservient to her lover or husband. It is from this perspective that one can view the first anniversary of their love affair when they stayed together before he flees to the north. She features well in safeguarding Chris' life when the security operatives are hunting for him. If not because of her role, Chris would end like Ikem. But her role postpones Chris' death, no matter how long.

In eulogizing her, it has been observed that: "Her dynamism and courage are revealed during this crisis period. She does not waver and panic as women are wont. Her resolve is that 'the only thing we fit do now is to be strong so that when the fight comes, we fit fight am proper ...' " (Chiemela and Inedu 35). That she does not waver and panic like most women is a mark of her feminism. This is because, women in the traditional society are seen as the weaker sex and for their survival, they must depend on their men. When the men lead, they follow. On being bombarded by crisis, the traditional women resort to shedding tears. But not so does the modern feminist who must always take the bull by the horns.

It is the modern woman's taking of the bull by the horns and by so doing, positioning herself in the role of men that Beatrice has to conduct the naming ceremony of Elewa's baby even when Elewa's mother and uncle are absent. But then, for proper functioning of society, there are roles assigned to the different sexes. When one verges into an unfamiliar terrain, one may commit a blunder. That can account for Elewa's uncle's observation that there is no schnapps in the house. According to the novel, "He merely said, 'Ah? – a compressed but eloquent way of saying: 'A naming ceremony indeed, without schnapps' " (Achebe 225).

But then, white horse brand of hot drinks is later given to him but the blunder has been committed. So also, an inappropriate name has been given to the baby girl, Amaechina which means, "May-the-path-never-close". This name is usually given to baby boys who are to continue and revive lineages which are heading to extinction because of lack of male children. In the case of Elewa's baby, will she not get married and everybody will forget about her root? But then, to which family does she belong in view of the parents not being married?

If BB is aware of her culture and that this culture supersedes every other consideration, she would have considered that among the Igbo people, there are some places where the payment of bride price determines the ownership of offspring. However, there are some parts which *ab initio* assign the offspring to the man whether he has fulfilled all the marriage requirements or not. In Elewa's case, which family does the baby, belong to?

Also, the name was given haphazardly without taking cognizance of cultural stand because in Igbo land, names mean a lot and are believed to control the successes and failures of the bearer. Although Beatrice shows little awareness of this by naming the baby Amaechina, the level of her awareness is shallow. The question now is: in view of the ability of literature embodying and shaping a people's world view, can the scene of BB's naming of Elewa's baby do so among the Igbo? Herein lays the limitation of feminist impulse. This is because when something is totally in opposition to a people's way of life, there is no possibility that it can uproot existing culture in order to install itself.

In studying this naming episode, Ernest N. Emenyonu states that:

By causing Elewa's uncle to be late for the naming ceremony, Achebe seems to say that, with our present state of affairs in the country, men may gradually relinquish the positions to women since Beatrice is clearly the unopposed leader of the small group at the naming ceremony (11).

But then, her dabbling into the terrain which the Igbo people do not assign to women, has brought to the fore the limitation inherent in feminism among the Igbo people. While few women are clamoring to

be lifted higher, they lose out at the end at the most important spheres of life. To show this loss, it is on record that:

There is an air of tragedy about BB. Her childhood and her status, first as Chris's girlfriend and later, a lonely woman not even privileged to be Chris's widow, leaves her with a feeling of little hollowness. The kind thing would have been to leave her carrying Chris's baby from that night in the mosquito infested room of Aina and Braimoh, but she is not so lucky (Emenyonu (11).

Childlessness among the Igbo is a real tragedy. In fact, any society that does not have Old People's Homes or Cheshire Homes, substitutes this lack with raising and training children who will take care of their parents when they grow old and are physically incapacitated. Beatrice should count her teeth with her tongue in spite of her social and educational elevation.

In support of the failure of this heroine is Sharon Verba who in an online article, cited Elleke Boehmer as recognizing "Achebe's literary prowess and commending his willingness to make women positive symbols, but in the end, [the critic] laments the lack of depth in his female characters" (n.p.). This lack of depth must be there because Achebe is grafting two incompatible cultures. This, in other words, is one of the sources of the limitation of feminist impulse in the West African sub-continent.

At this point, there is need to look at the other text, Bâ's novel so as to show further the failure of feminism in the region under consideration.

Bâ's *So Long a Letter*

This epistolary novel dwells more on the disappointment of married women when their husbands take other wives. The writer looks only at just two women to show the influence of feminism in African societies. But among the characters whose lives she explores are: Ramatoulaye, Aissatou, Jacqueline, Binetou and Young Nabou. Their major grouse is in their husbands either marrying second wives or going outside their homes to enjoy the sexual satisfaction from slender and younger women. The portrayal of such scenes is in conformity with what Mineke Schipper has on Bâ as cited by Uzo Esonwanne: "As women [we] must work for our own future; [we] must overthrow the status quo which harms [us] and [we] must no longer submit to it" (93).

In this her desire, one can see the limited desire of the feminist. It is all about the female, not taking cognizance that a world filled only with thriving women is one that gives lopsided life. In *So Long a Letter*, only the men misbehave. As Femi Ojo-Ade puts it, "... two camps are precisely delineated: the victimizer, the slave master, the ruler of this hell on earth is man; the victimized, the slave driven at times to the point of mental exhaustion is women" (73).

The most prominent characters used to portray the influence of feminism are Ramatoulaye and her friend, Aissatou. Their relationship which emanated from their school days never waned even when Aissatou is dwelling in far away Paris. Both of them do not succumb to the subjugation of traditional and Muslim religious views on polygamy. Here, they were influenced by their headmistress. It is not for them that Shehab is cited as giving the following on Islamic marriage:

The main condition mentioned in the Holy Quoran for allowing polygamy is to solve the problems of orphans and widows but it also mentioned three conditions such as justice between wives, sexual capability and equality in meeting expenses. It may be mentioned here that if a person is not in position to meet the expenses of one wife, he according to Islamic law is not allowed to marry (Nnaemeka 173).

But Ramatoulaye can, when pressed into a tight corner, endure the shortcomings in polygamy. Such cannot be said of Aissatou whose feminist impulse is unmanageable. Instead of sharing a husband with another woman, the marriage must collapse whether the above considerations are obtainable or not.

However, like other feminists, both of them at their formative stage were intent on elevating themselves educationally for with such, they could live above religious and traditional subjugation. As the novelist states it, education can function in such a way as: "To lift us out of the bag of tradition, superstition and custom, to make us appreciate a multitude of civilization without renouncing our own, to raise our vision of the world, cultivate our personalities, strengthen our qualities, to make up for our inadequacies" (Bâ 115).

It is then not surprising that with their level of education increasing and highlighting them in society, people who are not that fortunate would say one bad thing or the other about them. As Ramatoulaye writes in her letter, "Because being the first pioneers of the promotion of African woman, there were very few of us. Men would call us scatter brained. Others labeled us devils" (Bâ 14). However, when faced by problems, the two react differently thereby showing the limited impact of Western feminism at work.

In view of this, when Ramatoulaye's husband Modou Fall marries Binetou who is of the same age with their daughter Daba, she does not over react so as to call it quits. She endures, only easing out tension through writing of letters to her friend. One can see the extent of her suffering by her stating that: "I lived in a vacuum. And Modou avoided me. Attempts by friends and family to bring him back to the fold proved futile. He never came back again, his new found happiness gradually swallowed up his memory of us. He forgot us" (Bâ 46).

A situation like this is painful and not many people can bear it. If the husband has had any tangible reason, it could be understood. But then, the man goes to the extent of changing Alfa Romeos for Binetou while avoiding Ramatoulaye and her children. His new mother-in-law breezes around without any apparent problem, while his first wife has to be controlling the children single handedly.

Ramatoulaye's desultory condition has been observed thus: "She is guaranteed neither justice and equity mandated in Islam nor is she the beneficiary of the moral and material support of her husband as well as the superior position which the ranking of wives in the African traditional marriage guarantees" (Nnaemeka 180).

The question now is: to which extent is she a feminist? Despite her being referred to as being "scatter-brained and a devil," she is far from being a feminist. As Olumide Ogunrotimi posits:

As the central character in the novel, Ramatoulaye is a poor excuse for a feminist. Her behaviour and choice of direction endures "the male oriented view of the women's function as being essentially domestic She is more of a mouthpiece for feminist pains than a revolutionary trailblazer, unlike her friend Aissaton who is ready to discard offensive and oppressive tradition (131).

From this observation, Ramatoulaye is far from being a feminist if one looks at her domestic role in being a typical African housewife who must see to the smooth running of the family. No matter what happens, a typical African wife endures. But Ramatoulaye seems to have the influence of both Western feminism which propels social uplift through education, and African tradition which values the home and family no matter the condition. It is then not surprising that:

Her marital pains seem to be more intense because of her fence sitting. She lacks the panache and determination to cater to feminism in its Western form and she would not brook the African version as prescribed by Emecheta ... that polygamy serves the woman better as it allows her to focus on carrying out personal activities since the man will be more interested in the younger wife (Ogunrotimi 131).

Such cannot be said of her friend, Aissaton. Her mother-in-law is able to push her husband Mawdo Bâ to marry somebody from his social level because his wife is from a lower social status and is the daughter of a blacksmith. His complying with his mother's wish becomes an insult to Aissaton as well as a betrayal of love and trust.

As Uzo Esonwanne sees it:

... what makes Mawdo Bâ's decision to marry Nabou odious to Aissaton is not just the fact of his taking a second wife. Rather, it is the fact that the action betrays a prior commitment made to her during courtship. At that time, and against his mother's wishes, he a Toucouleur and son of a princess "from the Sine" had insisted that "marriage is a personal thing and emphasized his total commitment to his choice of a life partner by visiting Aissaton's goldsmith father (94).

After seeing her betrayal by her husband, she bundles herself and her four sons into a plane to land in Paris. There, like the Western feminist, she elevates her educational standard by obtaining a certificate from the School of Interpreters. After this, she gets employed in the Senegalese embassy. All this is hitch free for her to put a gap between her and her betraying husband.

But then, certain questions and considerations must come up. In her moving away with all her four children, does it mean that none asked about the father and in this way insisted that he would stay with him? While they were moving, does it mean that none of their relatives from both sides ever tried to stop them? And as if she was preparing all along for the situation, financial constraints never stopped them.

Everything was hitch free which in real life does not happen like that. Therefore, feminism when applied to the African situation with its overdose of tradition and religion cannot work. The result you get is either a facile one or an unbelievable result. Therefore, feminism is limited both in application and its result.

In view of this limited nature of feminism in the West Africa sub-continent, the novelist is also evaluated to see whether she is a feminist since nobody can give what she does not have. Such an evaluation can tell much about the novel itself. The result of such an evaluation shows this:

Bâ considered herself a feminist, but some Western feminists would contest that claim under the pretext that she depicts a heroine who accepts a plural marriage. However, in an interview with Alioune Joure Dia, Bâ powerfully argued that although every woman has at some moment dreamt of having a husband to herself, social exigencies do sometimes force women to resign themselves to polygamy (Gikandi 63).

The result of all these considerations in *So Long a Letter* is that the reality as dictated by financial constraints, religion and tradition makes it impossible for Western feminism to be transported and planted in the soil of the West African sub-continent. These conditions limit and control the excesses of Western feminism.

Conclusion

From creation, human beings have been facing challenges some of which are life annihilating. Such challenges range from wars to fighting against wild animals. Since women are physically weaker than men, they were relegated to the home front where they took care of the family through keeping the children, preparing meals and even attending to the men when they came back wounded. This position gradually metamorphosed into subjugation of the women folk since he who pays the piper dictates the tune, for in sincerity these men were fighting and fending for their families.

But around the 18th and 19th centuries during and after the industrial revolution, some women especially in Europe and America started speaking against this situation. To them, women should be given equal rights with men. Therefore, they should have the right to vote and be voted for; they should be given prominent positions and employment opportunities, and so on. For them to fit into this new position, they saw the importance of education and their not being submerged under the men most especially in patriarchal societies. This movement which is called Women's Liberation or Feminism, works in the Western and developed world and can be seen in the literary works produced in those places.

However, a different result is obtained in the West African sub-continent due to the rigid cultures, financial constraints and religious affiliations obtainable in the place. Therefore, all attempts to showcase feminist philosophy working smoothly in this place seem to be impossible. When you study literature which enriches society through entertainment, education and building the people's culture, you discover that it makes limited impact because of the literacy level and financial muscle of the citizens. Literature projecting this philosophy has limited impact.

Therefore, this can be seen in the two texts used in this study -- Achebe's *Anthills* and Bâ's *Letter*. Their major characters just like Western feminist characters are well educated. The major one in *Anthills* rises so high that she interacts with the highest in the land. However, she and other female characters in the novel fall short of the standard obtainable in Western novels that feature feminists. The main issue treated in Bâ's *Letter* is polygamy. Polygamy is generally accepted in the region but it is a headache because the husbands of two feminists in the novel marry other wives. While one endures the abandonment, the other has to leave so as to exile herself and children in Paris.

Therefore, feminism makes limited impact in the two novels. Whoever that wants to study the influence of the philosophy of feminism in the novels and its impact in the actual lives of the people should go elsewhere because it has only limited influence in the West African sub-continent.

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