

**PATRIARCHY, SETTING AND OPPRESSION: A STUDY OF MARIAMA BA'S
UNCHANT ECALATE AND IFEOMA OKOYE'S *BEHIND THE CLOUDS***

By

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Abstract

In many African societies, women face discrimination, power disparities and significant barriers because of patriarchal systems. These circumstances restrict their agency, hinder their progress and perpetuate gender inequalities. Thus, this study explores the role of men as a patriarchal figure in Mariama Ba and Ifeoma Okoye's novel and examines the impact of his actions on the protagonist. The study aims to deepen understanding of gender inequality and the oppressive nature of patriarchal systems by analyzing men's behavior and attitudes. Findings highlight of men as a symbol of patriarchal power, limiting autonomy and perpetuating gender inequalities through dismissive behavior, double standards and reinforcement of gender stereotypes. The study identifies implications of men's aspirations, self-identity, emotional well-being and opportunities, emphasizing the far-reaching effects of men's patriarchal influence. The study further highlights the implications of these findings. Overall, this analysis sheds light on the pervasive influence of patriarchy offering insights into the discrimination and power imbalance faced by African women in traditional and immigrant societies.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Gender Stereotypes, Oppression, Religion, Gender Inequality

Introduction

The African World is replete with diverse gender problems which plague African Women and which may be traced to African culture and religion. These African Women writers focus on feminist issues as well as gender issues since they act as the porte-parole of other African women. Francophone and Anglophone women writers strive to present striking pictures of their environment and use setting to manifest feminist ideologies in their works. This paper, which is comparative oriented focus on two African women writers-Francophone and Anglophone, who are

very much inclined to gender issues. These are Mariama Bâ and Ifeoma Okoye who are Senegalese and Nigerian women writers respectively.

Through the characters they present, these women prove themselves to be feminist conscious as well as gender conscious. In their feminist approach to the solution of women problem, both tilt towards womanism which is the theory of black-defined women's struggles. They fight for the recognition of the undesirable and repressive social norms and values that vitiate female autonomy in Africa.

Patriarchy, a system of male authority which oppresses women through its social and economic institutions influences women through its social, political and economic institutions influences setting. Then setting in its own nature negatively influences the freedom of women.

Mariama Bâ and Ifeoma Okoye, therefore, use setting in its various aspects to highlight the oppressive character of patriarchy in society. We shall briefly examine the biography of the women. Mariama Ba, a Senegalese, was a feminist activist whose membership of many women's organizations enabled her to make meaningful contributions to the cause of the struggle for women and children's rights. Even as a Muslim, Bá started early to criticize what she perceived as the inequalities between sexes resulting from African and Islamic

traditions. She wrote only two books before her death. These are *Une si longue lettre* (1980) and *Un chant écarlate* (1981). Ifeoma Okoye, her Nigerian counterpart has, for nearly three decades used her fiction to fight for the rights of women and children, She has published twelve books including adult and children's books. *Behind the Clouds* (1982) her very first novel exposes the intimidation of that a woman suffers in the hands of her in-laws because she is childless, and patriarchal culture places premium on fruitful marriage.

As we have said before this work borders on Patriarchy, Setting and oppression in Bâ's *Un chant écarlate* and Okoye's *Behind the Clouds*. (Okoye, J. N. considers patriarchy as a "system of male authority which oppresses women through its social, political and economic institutions." (2) This patriarchy influences setting which negatively influences the freedom of women. We shall therefore explore the relationship between patriarchy and setting in these two works. Patriarchy derives its power from men's greater access to resources and rewards of authority in the home and the society. Oppression belongs to the male world and patriarchy describes a political system ruled by men in which women have inferior social and political status including human rights. As we have previously indicated, these women use setting in its various aspects to highlight the oppressive character of patriarchy in a society.

Setting may be urban, rural, spatial or even religious. Patriarchy uses the spatial setting which includes physical, psychological, and religious setting to oppress women. The home and the society are aspects of setting where women are marginalized, restricted and subjugated as they carry out their gender roles. The two women writers consider the urban setting as a place where oppressive and repressive social norms and values are strictly put in practice. Urban setting therefore highlights the oppressive character of patriarchy through exploitation, brutal murders, political assassination and abandonment as seen in these women's works. Charles Nnolim in his book, *Pessimism as Dialectic: The Form of Conrad's Heart of Darkness* describes the city as "The seat of conspiracies brutal murders, political assassination, bombing by agent provocateurs and so forth." (17) The urban setting, therefore is a citadel of violence, a concentration of malevolent powers and revolutionary unrest. The situation of these women's novels, we must remark, depends on their geographical zones.

African women in Muslim dominated arrears are restricted and Florence Stratton remarks that "their potentials remain buried in shallow definitions of sex..."(197) As they present striking pictures of their environment and use setting to manifest gender consciousness and feminist ideologies in their works. African women set their novels in the city or village. To show how patriarchy is reflected in the definition of setting in the works of Mariama Bâ and Ifeoma Okoye, we shall approach it through four perspectives: urban and rural setting, western education as setting, journey, motif and religion.

Urban Setting

Francophone women writers use setting in urban environments to confine women either through religious spaces or traditional norms. Mariama Bâ, for instance sets her novel *Un chant écarlate* in Dakar and France. The novel exposes the injustice and the suppressive and oppressive role of patriarchy in the marriage institution as it obtains in the city. Bâ focuses the hypocrisy, callousness, outrageous exploitation and violence in polygamy in the city. Modern men go contrary to Muslim law on polygamy and take their second wives without the knowledge of the first. Examples of such abound in the works of Francophone and Anglophone women writers. In *Un chant écarlate* Ousmane Gueye is seen as a propagator of this anomaly. He has imbibed the callousness, injustice and infidelity in the city. He abandons his wife, Mireille who gives all her love and life to him.

Mireille is oppressed not only by her husband but also his relatives and friends who are representatives of patriarchy. She suffers mental and psychological violence and, confronted with cultural conflict she becomes an 'angel of the house'. Ousmane exercises puissance that is drastic on his wife, Mireille. His friends hold meetings in their matrimonial home at the end of which they disorganize the parlour.

Drastically affected by this nefarious role played by patriarchy in her life and home, Mirelle becomes schizophrenic and drugs her only son to death. She finds herself engulfed in religious and traditional norms quite different from her own because she is French and married to a Senegalese. Mireille has abandoned

her own 'hill' and becomes devastated.

Patriarchal culture places a premium on the fruitful marriage. Thus, unlike Francophone women writers, Anglophone women writers use more of rural and religious setting to expose the oppression of women. Ifeoma Okoye sets her novel *Behind the Clouds* in the city and the rural area. Like Mireille in Mariama Bâ's *Un chant écarlate*, Ije Apla suffers injustice, discrimination and abandonment in the hands of representatives of patriarchy in the city. Ije is indicted because she is childless and she loses her husband to Virginia, an impostor and a prostitute.

Mama, Ije's mother-in-law urges her son to kick Ije out of their matrimonial home. She oppresses Ije and uses verbal violence on her. In the city, Ije finds herself doubly oppressed being accused on the one side, by her mother-in-law for using concoctions on her son, and on the other, by Virginia the impostor, for poisoning their food. Frustrated and oppressed, Ije quits her matrimonial home. Dozie, her husband, like Ousmane Guèye in *Un chant écarlate*, has allowed himself to be drowned in the inconsiderateness of the patriarchal society and has turned his back on a woman who laboured to be his main stay. He abandons Ije to Violence and ridicule thus providing a limiting factor to Ije's, freedom and self-individuality.

Rural Setting

The tumultuous nature of the city, its egoism and outrageous imperviousness is here juxtaposed with the calm, peaceful and altruistic nature of the rural setting. Mariama Bâ, typical of most francophone women writers, plays down on rural setting in her work, *Un chant écarlate*, but Ifeoma Okoye unlike Bâ vividly describes the village square where the town holds her launching ceremony of half a million for town development project. Here, puissance is well dramatized by Dozie Apia, Ije's husband. He is the capitalist, who epitomizes patriarchy and donates highest in the arena. He is extolled by his people. On the other hand, to assert their personality and impress on the crowd, indigent women illogically extort themselves by spending lavishly on articles of clothing. Most rural women do not subscribe to this, yet Ifeoma Okoye uses that medium to describe the unity and community development inherent in villages.

Western Education

The acquisition of western education proffers solution to problems of inequality and gender discrimination in a patriarchal society. Because education changes the lives of women and their mentality too, African women writers such as Mariama Bâ and Ifeoma Okoye advocate the education of women. Western education empowers women and affords them individuality. Educated women are endowed with economic independence, which sets them off to self-assertiveness. Thus Mireille, in *Un chant écarlate*, as a student, participated in a revolution against racism and patriarchal domination. Through education. Mireille comes to understand her mother's problems as the most victimized, and the most oppressed woman in the novel. She completely sacrifices her individuality.

Mireille then vows to transcend this patriarchal subjugation. She subverts racism and marries a Black. Mireille further writes a suffocating letter to her racist father, a diplomat thus, If Mireille, through western education rises above patriarchy, racism and male subjugation of women, Ije Apia in Ifeoma Okoye's *Behind the Clouds* gains economic puissance through education. Ije is as intelligent as she is magnanimous. She sees her husband, Dozie Apia through his education in London. Back home, Dozie gets a lucrative job, and experiences power and pays Ije back by abandoning her for an impostor. When Virginia and Dozie accuse Ije of diabolism, she pulls anger over patience as she is thus falsely accused. She adroitly addresses Dozie, and retorts, has it come to the stage where you doubt my integrity? Do you now see me as a diabolical woman? You are no Longer the man I married." (106)

Looking at Dozie steadily and in spite of her apparent unassertive weak and passive nature, Ije takes a firm decision. Ije Apia takes a firm, reassuring and irretrievable. step to freedom. Two days after this unsavoury incident, Ije, empowered by education, moves out of her matrimonial home into an apartment she has secured for herself. She gets a good job and lives on until Dozie, her husband repents and finally begs her to come back to him having sent the impostor away.

Thus like Mireille, Ije Apia, empowered by education retrieves her personality and self-assertiveness. Yet unlike Mireille, Ije does not abandon her own hills only to crash on another's. She remains steadfast and keeps steady against the tides of patriarchy. The western education empowers her to set herself free from patriarchal grips. She takes a revolutionary stance and sets out in search of a more prosperous and peaceful world View. Both women, through western education, reject the mockery of patriarchal system. Both women do stride into the world to live an independent life. While Ije strives to transcend the stigma of childlessness, Mireille struggles

to surmount racism, discrimination and abandonment. Through education je becomes empowered economically and ultimately wins back her husband. Mireille is empowered economically and politically, yet racism and inter racial marriage destroyed her marriage. Mireille loses out at the end, becomes less powerful and develops schizophrenia. Ije reunites with her husband in spite of all patriarchal injustices shown to her.

Religion

Religion is depicted in the works of Mariama Bâ and Ifeoma Okoye's a psychological force operating as a form of setting through which patriarchy influences and subjugates women. Aduke Adebayo argues that

In the Islam dominated areas of Africa, religion imposed strict codes of conduct on women, which prevented them from going to school. Cultural myths well Christian and Islamic religions emphasized the main role of women as domesticity and maternity (277).

In the light of the above argument, Islam has, on its part modified the position of women in the society for the worse. Mariama Bâ, a Muslim, uses Islamic religion to expose the nefarious dictates of Islam and the hypocritical use of religion as an instrument of male domination of women. In *Un chant écarlate*. Mireille is forced to change her religion from Christian to Muslim and later made to face the awesome experience of shaving her husband. Her home becomes a rallying point for her husband's age group and her parlour becomes the meeting hall. No one considers her feeling as she struggles with the noise and the disorganization of her parlour by these people.

The Anglophone women writers, also use religion to project the oppression of women. But Christian religion allows more freedom, voice and a measure of independence for women. Even

though Zaynab Alkali, an Anglophone woman writer considers a good woman as that who do her husband good not evil all the days of her life ..." (86),, Ifeoma Okoye presents Ije Apia as such virtuous woman. Yet Ije abandons her matrimonial home when she could no longer cope with the oppression, the suppression and the total silencing meted out to her by representatives of the patriarchy.

In her own system of belief, Ifeoma Okoye like Mariama Bâ satirizes the role played by pastors in Christian churches. These false prophets bastardize the Christian belief and practice and exploit the faithful in the guise that they are conducting healing prayers for them. Okoye condemns such pastors as dupes and considers heathenism such another source of extortion of innocent victims.

In conclusion, this paper has attempted to highlight how setting negatively influences the freedom of women in all spheres. Francophone women writers use setting in urban environments to confine women and diminish their power either through religious spaces or traditional norms and spaces. In both Christian and Muslim settings, roles ascribed to women by their patriarchal societies often lie at the root of their oppression. Gender roles in every setting are proved to suppress the assertive moves of women. Mariama Bâ and Ifeoma Okoye are of the opinion that patriarchy influences the setting in their geographical areas. They advocate the existence of women who are as powerful as they are gender conscious and feminist conscious too. Okoye J.N. asserts that setting is depicted as an oppressive and limiting agent against the emancipation of women. Patriarchy is seen to play a dominating role in the setting and influences the urban and rural categories ".(163) Urban and rural setting is seen to dehumanize and subject women to disillusionment. Bâ focuses on the subjugation of women. Ifeoma Okoye on her part gives equal weight to urban and rural setting in

attacking patriarchy in her work. In their works, religion functions as a debilitating form of setting which dehumanizes the female characters through the hegemony of the patriarchal institution

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