

Culture In Literature For Reorientation In Africa

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Abstract- For over a decade, attempts have been made by African writers and scholars to situate the import of culture in literature as a medium for reorientation and change in Africa. Objectively, this connection is uneasily recognized. Yet, literature and culture offer a viable instrument for socio-cultural change, unity and sustainability in Africa. Bearing this in mind, the paper adopts the comparative literary approach in its identification and exploration of cultural features in the family lives and marriages of two African rural communities, highlighted in the novels - **The Stillborn** by Zaynab Alkali and **Trois Pretendant...Un Mari**, translated into English as **Three Suitors ... A Husband** by Mbia Oyono. It is evident that patriarchal customs and practices of polygamy, marriage subjugation, male supremacy, domination of women impel positive cultural relationships in families as well as marriages, especially amongst women. Consequently, education, freedom of speech and expression, positive self affirmation are advocated as avenues for achieving social change and reorientation.

Index Terms- culture, Literature, family life, marriage, reorientation

I. INTRODUCTION

The essence of a people's livelihood is generally referred to as culture. It is the totality of their wellbeing, outlook and perception of life, food, clothing, politics, marriage, childbirth and death. Culture is the distinguishing factor as well as the bond that holds a group of people in a community, town, city and country. However, much of life's reflection is expressed in literature, which serves as the mirror of the society. In this stead, the primary value of literature encompasses a human reflection that weaves the many events of life put together. In the same vein, Literature is amazing because of its universal appeal. It does not deal with the particular society of a particular community but rather with society as a whole.

Since literature is a mirror of the society, there is therefore a nexus between literature and a people's way of life. For instance, African writers have been concerned with their socio-cultural environment. The social mores and cultural values have been of concern to them. In the novel, **Things Fall Apart**, Chinua Achebe used the medium of literature to explore the Igbo community before the invasion of the colonial masters. He created a clear picture of the cultural values, laws and mores of the people of Umuofia, and through characterization and thematic engagements, he submitted that it was the introduction of western values that relegated African norms to the background. This submission is very important because the African society was presented as a

barbarian society in European novels, and African writers have been struggling to correct this ugly representation. Similarly, in Sambene Ousmane's novel, **God's Bit of Wood**, the cultural placements of women in Senegal are exposed. We see women struggling to better their lot in the society. The same scenario is created in Elechi Amadi's novel, **The Concubine**, where the Igbo culture of marriage, hunting, widowhood, natural medicine and respect for elders is presented. Little wonder that Achebe stated in his creed that his prerogative is to espouse and recreate the pure and undiluted African community in its true identity. Thus, African writers are confronted with the challenges of misrepresentation of African identity, loss of cultural values and the urgent need to re-educate Africans on the essence of cultural fellowship and preservation of Africa's heritage.

The Concept of Culture

Culture is an embodiment of the customs, values, knowledge, language, material objects that are passed down from one person or generation to the other. It is the collective attitude and behavior of a people, which reflects their daily life activities and rites like marriage, childbirth and death. According to Matsumoto (1996 :16), 'Culture presupposes a set of attitudes, values and behaviors shared by a group of people, and communicated amongst them'. This means that every community is expected to adhere to certain norms, values and knowledge that binds them together in fellowship and communal life. Such attitudes and shared experiences create communal identities and image that is similar across communities, towns and countries. Also, the acquisition of culture by a group of people promotes national unity and communal heritage. Although, the cultural norms and values of a people may differ across communities and countries, culture remains a universal and social phenomenon. It manifests itself clearly and publicly in issues of language, beliefs, customs, norms and values.

These cultural indices are what Spencer-Oatey (2008) refers to as basic values and orientations to life. They influence the behavior and perception of people. For instance, in most ethnic groups in Nigeria, the culture of marriage is arranged between both families rather than an arrangement between two individuals. It is also similar in most African countries like the Cameroon. Therefore, the concept of culture in this paper seeks to establish that it is a social phenomenon that reflects a set of basic assumptions and values to life, procedures and behavioral convention. This is further buttressed by Spencer – Oatey (2008), who outlines some of these features of culture as follows:

- i. It affects behavior and interpretations of behavior

- ii. It manifests clearly and publicly at different layers of observable objects like dress code, manners, feelings and values.
- iii. It is associated with social groups and shared by at least two or more people. Most importantly, culture has both universal and distinctive elements.

In the light of these assertions, the paper aims to examine the nexus in the culture of marriage and family life of two African rural communities in northern Nigeria and the Cameroon. The paper seeks to establish that there are basic features that are cultural and similar in their marriage customs and family practices. This will be elucidated in the course of this paper. Since, culture is a universal concept acquired by a group of people in the course of generations, it stands to reason that the marriage culture in northern Nigeria and Cameroon have some common features that express their human philosophy and convention. It also means humans have overlapping biologies and have similar social structures, and physical environments which create major similarities in the way they form culture. But within this framework of similarities, there may be differences, as a result of gradual changes or cultural dynamics, due to internal and external forces. Some of these mechanisms of change may be new discoveries, evolution or innovation.

II. THE CONCEPT OF LITERATURE

Literature has diverse interpretations alluded to the term. It expresses words that create the imagination for the reader to visualize life. Good literature has the ability to demonstrate craft, mastery and aesthetic effects to stimulate the senses, raise questions, provide fresh points of view and expand the understanding of self and the world, as well as renew the spirit (Emecheta, 2009). For the purpose of this paper, literature will be conceptualized as the embodiment of the imagination of writers, to visualize life (culture), since literature mirrors human behavior, beliefs, and knowledge.

Also, according to the Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism, entitled "*Literature*", it portrays the concept of literature as the idea of writers and readers, within every culture as captured in their literary works. This implies that an idea may be acquired through the experiences of people within social institutional settings such as the family, religion, tradition and beliefs. Similarly, literature reflects and exposes the life of an individual and the society he lives in. In this stead, the primary value of literature becomes the human reflection that encompasses the many events of life put together. It is an expression of human experiences because it allows people to look back on their memories, as well as learn through the experiences of others. Thus, literature has didactic and enlightenment qualities that can create a socio-cultural identity. By reading the literature of various societies, human beings are able to learn lessons because they can see through other people and relive memories. So, literature is not only a reflection of the society but also serves as a corrective mirror, through which members of the society can look at themselves and find the need for a positive attitude and new identity.

III. FRAMEWORK OF STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

The paper is hinged on the "parallel" theory of comparative literature of the American School of Thought which emphasizes the idea of similarities in humanity's socio-cultural and historical evolution. The theory is founded on the American perspective of 'depoliticization' which states that despite the differences in language and culture, all nations have certain things in common. It is a theory in the social evolution of humanity and the influence of the environment on the social, individual and collective lives of the people. The study adopts the 'parallel' theory of comparative literature of the American school of Thought, which grew in the second half of the twentieth century. The founding father of this school, Henry Remak (1961), emphasized a 'depoliticization' of comparative study and created a model hinged on social evolution and influence of the environment on the socio-cultural and individual life of man (50). Interestingly, the 'parallel' theory has been adopted by many comparatists in America and Eastern Europe. One Russian comparatist, Konrad opines that the parallel theory developed from the homogeneity in the social and historical evolution of humanity. The 'parallel' theory affirms that there are similarities between the literatures of different people whose social evolution is similar, regardless of whether or not there is any mutual influence or direct relation between them. The colonial experience and its impact on the collective psyche of Africans is a shared feature of literary phenomena amongst writers of African descent. Similarly, the cultural practices of communal livelihood like family life, and marriage relationship have common features across the African continent. The paper therefore investigates some of these features of family life and marriage like arranged marriages, parental involvement, bride price and dowry issues, polygamy, male supremacy and education, as captured in the nexus of the literary texts under study.

The study deploys a critical textual analysis of the two primary texts, using the qualitative approach. This will allow for in-depth analysis and discussions of the socio-cultural practices outlined in the protagonists' experiences in the texts.

IV. DISCUSSIONS

The analysis will be centered on discussions around features of family life and marriage, which are expressed in the lives of the protagonists, and reflect cultural factors such as patriarchy, arranged marriages, bride price, male superiority, and polygamy in the plot structure and experiences of the characters in the two texts under review.

Family Life as Patriarchal: The essence of literature as a reflection of the society in this paper is succinctly captured in the family relationship and marriage in the two texts under review. From the personal and family experiences of the main characters explored by the two writers, we see the family life structure in clear perspective. It should be noted that family life relationship and marriage play a critical role in African communities. It shapes their daily activities and provides the forum for growth and socialization. Family life also determines the marriage contract and influences the social and political identity of the individual. Another important feature of family life in most African communities is its composition of kinship values, marriage, adoption and other relational aspects. Within this family life

circumspect, lies the nuclear and extended family bond that unites the larger family. Also, family life is hugely anchored on polygamy, especially in pre-colonial African societies. Makinwa-Adesoye (2001) confirms this when she opines that some of the inherent features of African households are rural, patriarchal, polygamous and attach great importance to lineage continuation. No doubt, these elements influenced the decisions, actions and inactions of the protagonists and other characters in the two texts. In the same perspective, the family social organization relegates women and accords them a lower status than men. It also places great emphasis on female fertility and patriarchal supremacy that promotes male domination. However, as rightly noted by Goran Therborn (2006), African communities have also experienced positive changes that have enhanced their individual and collective identity, as a result of education, urbanization and disregard for the importance attached to land and cattle.

Commencing with *The Stillborn*, the family life pattern of the protagonist, Li is founded on strict patriarchal traditions. The narrative opens on the day Li returns to the village after completing her primary education at a boarding school, away from the village. She is thirteen, and yearns to escape from the suffocating atmosphere of her home. She calls it “worse than a prison” (Stillborn, p.3). Her home is presided over by an unloving and domineering father, supported by an equally unpleasant deaf mother. Li felt trapped and unhappy. She missed the kind of life she had lived at the primary boarding school, where she is free and gay. The home becomes a symbol of patriarchal society. Here, traditional norms and customs that inhibit her mental growth and value judgement is expressed. Such cultural norms are personified in her parents, especially her father whose rules she “considers stupid and unnecessarily rigid” (Stillborn, p.3). Li perceives her father as insensitive and inconsiderate, and vocalizes her revolt against domestic confinement when she desires to use the rest room. She hopes to find solace and some quietude in the rest room, away from the over bearing influence of her father. Despite the excitement of coming home from school, Li gets frustrated and feels incapacitated. She finds the atmosphere at home suffocating. She feels caged, sad, and misses the school atmosphere in the boarding school. At the boarding school, Li experiences a semblance of freedom and a general feeling of happiness.

The family relationship between Li and her parents is further challenged with restrictions, impositions, cultural and Islamic religious norms. For instance, Li is contrasted with her sister, Awa. This is because her sister Awa is born and bred in the confines of culture and tradition in the village. For instance, Awa is ‘not allowed to go out at all except to the market, riverside, the prayer house and school.’ (Stillborn, p.4). Li, on the other hand, has achieved awareness and education, away from the village. While Li has experienced the journey of schooling, Awa has never moved out of the village. So, Li confronts the patriarchal hegemony in her home and community through her actions and inactions. Awa on the other hand, represents the traditional woman, who is conditioned to marry and bear children. She is socialized into accepting her limitations in the village as her destiny. Li expresses qualities of resilience, determination and aspiration which makes her different from the traditional woman’s perception. Therefore, the benefit of the education she experienced at the primary boarding school provides the catalyst for her

transformation, empowerment and eventual liberation from patriarchal traditions.

In addition, Li abhors her mother’s perception of traditional norms and values. Her mother is everything that Li does not want to be. Li views her mother’s character as ‘monotonous’ and her steps as “mechanical”. Her mother is socialized into repeating the same boring domestic activities at home. On the other hand, Li’s mother describes her character as “forward and tactless”. This becomes a source of conflict between Li and her mother. Li’s mother becomes a representative of the traditional woman, who accepts her fate and contends with societal patriarchal influences.

Closely related to the family life pattern is the issue of polygamy in the marriage culture of most sub-Saharan African communities. In *The Stillborn*, the author uses the challenges of Li’s childhood friend, Faku, to portray the depravity of polygamous marriage. Here, the fact that the woman is unable to give birth to more children makes her an object of humiliation by her husband and co-wife. Li, the protagonist is also confronted with the issue of traditional practices of engagement and marriage in her young life. At the beginning of her relationship, Li relishes her romance with her new found love, Habu Adams. Even when Awa remarks about his tattered clothes and battered canvas shoes, Li sees beyond these to his good looks and positive qualities. In a series of reminiscences and flashbacks, Li marries Habu Adams. Alkali fills in the events of the past four years through flashbacks, which she aptly introduces with the words “as her finger worked” (Stillborn, p.56), her mind travelled back in time to when she had dreamt of a romantic life in her marriage.

However, after the marriage, tradition demands that she waits for her husband to take her to the city. Li is left in the village for four years by Habu, who is now a salesman in the city, instead of a doctor. In her frustration, Li cries out to Kaka (her grandfather), “I am his (Habu’s) responsibility now” (Stillborn, p.63). Li feels abandoned and frustrated. In line with cultural dictates, her grandfather advises her to continue to wait for Habu. However, Li questions a tradition that demands that she waits indefinitely for a faithless husband:

Was she to spend the rest of her life waiting for a man like a dog waiting for the bone from its master’s place? Who says a husband makes for a guardian or a father? Certainly not the Hausas, who would say, “A woman who takes a husband for a father will die an orphan (Stillborn, p.64).

Therefore, culture and tradition play a big role in the courtship, engagement and marriage of Li, as evident in the Hausa proverb quoted by Li. Finally, Li’s character resonates with other characters in the novel and exposes socio-cultural features of family life patterns in northern Nigeria. The author used the opportunity of changes in most contemporary African communities due to education and urbanization, to address the issue of lower status accorded the woman, polygamy, as well as issues of male supremacy in African homes and communities. Li finally demonstrates the new perception of identity, during her grandfather’s funeral, where Awa categorically affirms that ‘you are now the man of the house’ (Stillborn, p.101).

In *Three Suitors ... A Husband*, we see similar affinities in the family life structure of the protagonist, Juliette. The story revolves around a school girl, Juliette, whose consent for marriage, was not sought but decided by her traditional family. The theme and characterization reflect the Cameroonian culture, prevalent

in rural areas, where, the writer denounces the underside of dowry and the realities of traditional African societies. Again, we see patriarchal affinities in the family life structure, where decision about the marriage of the girl is taken by the men in the family. The woman is expected to respect the collective family decision, as represented by the parents and grandparents of the girl to be married off. In the plot narrative, an overbearing father, Atangana, wants to give his daughter in marriage to any rich man. That singular action demonstrates the social code and tradition that characterizes the culture and tradition of most communities in Africa. The story takes place in Mvoutessi, a village in Southern Cameroon. It is about a father, Atangana, who sends his daughter, Juliette to college. The singular action of the father raises series of questions on the relevance of girls' education.

Next is the attitude of the family towards her relationship and marriage. The family has just received a sum of 100,000 francs from Ndi, a young peasant who wants to marry Juliette, the young school girl. Meanwhile, another suitor has expressed similar interest. He is Mbia, the official, who proclaims himself very important and pays double the sum of 200,000 francs as dowry, in addition to a list of which the family claimed. At the announcement of this new marriage that is contracted without her consent, Juliette devises a plan. She uses the opportunity to announce her engagement to Oko, a young high school student. However, the family does not want "schoolboy" because the latter is unable to solve their problems.

In this present tricky situation, young Oko, the unwanted fiancé and Juliette, decide to "play a good trick" on the villagers. The 300,000 francs of the two suitors, will be stolen by Juliette, and then handed over to Oko, who will introduce himself to the family, at a time when they had lost all hope of repaying the two suitors with whom relations had meanwhile degraded. He presents himself with the desired sum and is accepted by the family, who did not suspect anything. The wedding between Juliette and Oko is celebrated by the whole villagers.

The plot narrative highlights the import of cultural values and norms on marriage and family life in most African communities. The text decries the role of parents in the decision making of their daughters' marriage, as well as the usefulness in educating girls. Here, the relegation of women in issues of family life and marriage is explored. In *Three Suitors ... A husband*, there is a numerical superiority of men over women. The women are confined to the kitchen, while the men are outside, in the open air. This confinement is an exclusion of women from critical decision-making process in family and marriage matters. Women are informed of the progress of the dowry only after the departure of the suitors.

Culturally, in traditional marriage ceremonies in Africa, women are not free to choose their suitors in marriage. It is the family that is the only institution capable of this choice. But with the arrival of schools and education in Africa, the girls who went to school had another conception of marriage and family life, which is exhibited in the character of Li in *The Stillborn* and Juliette in the *Three Suitors...A Husband*. Thus, there are similarities in the cultural practices of these two African communities, with respect to their family relationships and marriage. Their patriarchal societies have a strong influence on women and girls, encourage male supremacy, and the practice of

traditional marriage is usually coordinated by the family, without recourse to the feelings and emotions of the women.

V. CONCLUSION

The paper set out to identify and analyze cultural features of family life and marriage practices of rural communities in sub-Saharan Africa, using two literature texts for critical analysis. In the process, it has been established from the experiences of the protagonists and family relationships in the texts examined that the medium of literature is a reflection of the communal activities that express the true cultural identity of a people. Also discovered is the core between culture and literature as a reflection of a people's identity especially in rural communities in Africa. In *Three Suitors...A Husband*, the protagonist, Juliette, as well as Li, in *The Stillborn* demonstrated that, the way to negotiate culture for identity and social change is through education, which creates awareness and enlightenment. They are able to resolve the marriage conflicts arising from family interference and realize their dreams, hopes and aspirations. The writers of the two texts are able to reflect on the challenges of traditional restrictions imposed on women and girls, as well as the benefits accrued from educating the female child.

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