

WOMEN AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMON GOOD: A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN SELECTED NIGERIAN NOVELS

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Abstract

*In the African traditional setting, women have been in the vanguards of family, community and national development. Women also play leading roles in the sustenance of peace and harmony and the promotion of the common good. In several situations of difficulty, such as embattled marriage, war, or in social-economic or political upheavals, the women are at their best playing very remarkable unifying roles. They most often volunteer and make sacrifices, even at the cost of their comfort, for the good of their communities. In the literary world, examples of such selfless, kind and good women abound. Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* is an acclaimed good woman; Dora, in AdaOkere Agbasimalo's *The Forest Dames*, represents the figure of a mentor, while the twin sisters: Olanna and Kainene, in Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, are prominent in their roles as volunteers. These texts formed the primary sources of data for this study. The narratives highlight the very active roles women had played at very auspicious times in the past, which roles are sustained to the present times but are not properly appreciated. These texts have received extensive critical attention in various thematic points. This paper veers in a different direction towards highlighting the continuous developmental prowess of women in national development. Using the concept of ethical goodness in the African philosophy of Social Living that promotes the right action, This paper specifically outlines the different selfless deeds, mentorship and volunteering roles of the selected women geared towards improving communal lives. The paper advocates greater recognition of women's laudable role in sustaining family, community and national development.*

Keywords: Common Good, Development, Mentorship, Volunteer, Social Living.

Introduction

The concept of the common good is an ideology predominant in African Social Philosophy. Africans are known for togetherness and communal living. Hence, according to Kwame Gyekye, “the communal or communitarian aspects of African moral and political thought are reflected in the communitarian features of the social structures of African societies” (36). The social structure of African culture is imbued with “Africanness”, which includes the fact of individual social relationships with others in the community, as no one lives in isolation. Rather, “individualism and self-seeking were ruled out..., the spirit of collectivism was so much ingrained in the mind of the people... and whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group...” (Gyekye 36). These ideas of working or thinking for the other are inherent in the African spiritual and social life, and African women have not relented in leading the course of communal responsibilities. For this, different parts of Africa have an acting word for their expression of this socio-political philosophy of ethical values; these include *Ubuntu*, *Ujamaa*, *Igwebuike*, to mention only these. According to Okai, Moses Onyendu and Osah, Goodness, the idea of *Ubuntu* originated from the Zulu or Xhosa language of the Bantu of Lower Congo. It denotes “Humanity towards one another, social living and social responsibility” (26). *Ujamaa*, for the Tanzanian, “advocates mutual respect, common property, and common labour... regarding of all men as his brethren and as members of his ever-extending family” (28). Among the Igbo of Nigeria, the ideology of humanness as propounded by Kanu Ikechukwu Kanu, in his inaugural lecture: *Igwebuike: An Operative Condition of African Philosophy, Religion and Culture, Towards a Thermodynamic Transformation Ontology*, highlights the cosmological foundations of *Igwebuike* as the key idea that shapes the African ethical and social life stating that “*Igwebuike* is symbolic of the African universe of particularities where every creature as an independent entity must negotiate another’s existential highway for mutual survival”(23). Kanu further stresses that “*Igwebuike* understands life as a shared reality. And it is only within the context of complementarity that life makes meaning” (39). The idea that man is the centre of life in the Igbo religious philosophy also gives vent to the shared responsibilities and mutuality of the existence of others in the community.

This thereby depicts the everyday spirit of solidarity and working for the common good. These aspects of the common good are seen “in the custom of common sharing of meals, collective maintenance of public roads and markets, collective assistance to members who are in difficulty or who embark on the construction of houses, collective discharge of burial rites of members, celebration of social occasions of happiness and social festivals” (Okah and Osah 26). These social, religious concepts of *Ubuntu*, *Ujamaa*, *Igwebuike* and others together lay the foundation for the ethics of the African and, particularly, the Igbo social philosophy.

Ethics is highly related to goodness. The concept of goodness is measured by the moral standard of good and bad behaviours. Ethics deals with the morals, values and norms of the African people. It is believed that in Africa, particularly in Igboland, doing good or knowing the good and the bad in relation to other people and the community is not due to religion or tied to religion. It is a function of social living whereby “the institution of community life as part of the African cultural values, the communitarian social arrangement makes for the development and practice of such socio-ethical values as mutual aid, solidarity, interdependence, collective action, and reciprocal obligation. It enjoins upon the individual member of the group the obligation to think and act for the welfare and survival of the group as a whole” (Gyekye 252). The idea of goodness points to the form of behaviour, action and deeds which are acceptable by the standard of a culture and may include: selfless service, good heart, good conscience, kindness, volunteering and mentorship. These features and qualities are proficiently manifest in women who give themselves up for the sake of their families, communities and society. Women have a special role in entrenching and propagating African ethics and morals for the common good and national development.

It is, therefore, of truth that women have been in the vanguard of community and national development in the Nigerian African traditional setting. They play a leading role in the sustenance of peace and harmony in the family and beyond. Even when such seems to be unnoticed, Taiwo Oladele recounts that “the contribution of African woman to literature and society has been largely connected with their roles as wives, mothers and partnering in the home. Their contribution to the economic well-being of society is enormous, much greater than they have been given credit for ... (3). Though perhaps only a few acknowledgements and appreciation are accorded them, African women have taken the place of pride in the hearts of the community for their exceptional contributions to their growth. Hazel Macferson and A Lynn Bolles observe that “throughout Africa, women today are involved in a variety of economic and social activities. The continent has been severely affected by civil war, political oppression and corruption, an adverse economic environment, drought and famine. In the face of these adversities, African women have emerged as the backbone of contemporary society. Their contributions to family and society are essential” (Mario Azevedo 436). This testament speaks eloquently of the contribution of women to national development. African women have, in several situations of difficulty, such as in family or marriage conflicts, war situations, or in a social-economic or political upheaval, made sacrifices that restore hope and harmony in those times of distress. They most often volunteer and make sacrifices even at their peril.

In the literary world, examples abound of good women who have served their communities and helped in the development of society, as will be explored in the selected texts: Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru*, Ngozi Chimamanda Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun*, and Adaokere Agbasimalo’s *The Forest Dame*. The female characters and protagonists: Efuru, Olanna, Kainene and Dora, are sparkling examples of good, kind, and selfless women who have

greatly impacted their communities. These texts are popular Nigerian texts that have stood the test of time in their relevance in re-enacting the cultural values and norms of the traditional Igbo communities in the pre-independence and war times and the modern and post-independent war era. One common premise among them is that women have continued to act positively in the general interest of society. They have greatly shown their capacity towards national development. In effect, this paper examines the Nigerian situation against the backdrop of the foregoing, as captured in the selected texts.

These texts have become characterized by critical and almost extensive works. However, here, mention is made of very recent works done on them to draw the gap and fill the identified vacuum. For example, Ngozi Ogbodo and Mary Linda Vivian Onwuka in “The African Woman and the Burden of Tradition: A Socio-Cultural Analysis of Flora Nwapa’s *Efuru* and Izuchukwu Emeam’s *Wife of the Gods*” portend the fact of an African woman being constantly an object of possession, either by the man, spirit, gods or deity. They argue that “the woman has suffered this ordeal from the inception of the world. And so, man and spirit continue in their struggle to ensure that the African woman remains under their dominance or in their custody” (121). This scenario is seen in the life of Nwapa’s protagonist, Efuru, and Emeam’s Ihuaku, who are both beautiful women possessed by both the man and gods against their wishes. Much as the authors do not condemn in totality the fact of the woman being under the protection of the men and gods, they “bring out the ordeal of the Igbo woman whom the culture and tradition do not allow to have both freedom, wealth and fulfilment like her male counterparts” (132). They, however, advance the need for women to be allowed to lend their voice in matters concerning them and be recognized by society. Moffat Sebola, in the paper: “The Female Body on the Phallocentric Altars: Appropriations of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Feminist Manifesto in Feminism, Corporeality, Materialism, and Beyond” (working title), uses a post-colonial feminist approach to express the multiple oppressive tendencies against the female folk. The paper presents “the black woman as constantly living in patriarchal and repressive spaces characterized by multifaceted discriminations, marginalization, abuse, commodification and censorship, all of which are protracted by the notion that femaleness should live in total subjection to maleness”. The issue of preference of a male child over a female child is demystified, as it confronts the ideology of male supremacy in every sphere of African culture. Beverly Chima Enyeribe, in “Female Bonding: A Panacea to War Trauma Recreated in Some Nigerian Novels”, explores the gruesome effects of the civil war and the traumatic experiences of women in the war and how they were able to navigate through the pains and difficulties through bonding and togetherness. Using Ngozi Chimamanda Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Adaokere Agbasimalo’s *The Forest Dames*, the paper evolves “a womanist consciousness through woman agency to engage in the process of (re) building a more viable nation in Nigeria and also to find out the vision on gender that these two womanist writers expound” (99). These works project a shift from the targeting of women’s oppression and subjugation to the humanist agencies of womanism in recreating the new stance of the affirmation of women’s role in the national building.

This paper veers in a different direction towards clasping the visibility and appreciation of the continuous developmental prowess of women in communal development using the African philosophy of social living. Specifically, using the concept of ethical goodness, which promotes the right action and attitudes, the paper assesses the different selfless gestures and actions of selected female actors presented in both modern Nigerian texts of *Efuru* and those of the contemporary Nigerian texts of Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Agbasimalo's *The Forest Dames* using the characters Olanna and Kainene, and Dora respectively. The study examines the volunteering roles of these women from the earliest time to this current time and then postulates that women have been in the business of communal and nation-building.

The Ethical Good Women in Selected Nigerian Texts

Women in the African worldview have made tremendous efforts towards community and national development. Being aware of the challenges of marriage and family life, the difficulties of war situations and the effects of socio-political maladjustments, women step in to bridge the gaps. They do this because they are aware that such situations often weaken the morale and motivation of the menfolk, leaving them wanting in their responsibilities. Hence, in African studies, women's role in maintaining peace and harmony in the community has been ongoing, as is always projected in most female texts. Supporting this assertion Oladele Taiwo in his thesis: "The Woman as a Novelist in Modern Africa", avers that "she is particularly concerned with the role of women in local, national and international affairs, and writes mostly to highlight these roles. She ensures that women play crucial roles in her novels and are put in situations where they can prove their mettle, show initiative and contribute maximally to the development of enduring social values in the community." (15). True to this assertion, the Nigerian female novelists under study have records of women as key players and epitome of goodness and good character in their social engagements. Therefore, "these concepts of good, bad or evil, right and wrong feature prominently in African moral thoughts, moral system and cultures. Thus, when a person is known to be honest, generous or compassionate, he would be judged as a good person, by which it means they have good character"(Gykeye). In these selected texts, women such as *Efuru*, Olanna, Kainene, and Dora differently sustained the example of kindness and mentorship in their respective communities. They each build up and sustain hope for the people around them, and they are acclaimed as ethically good by the people. For example, in highlighting the personality of *Efuru*, Oladele Taiwo discusses her as the heroine of *Efuru* and writes:

In *Efuru*, the novelist devotes her attention to the exposition of several aspects of Igbo traditional and corporate life. *Efuru*'s experiences are used to demonstrate the harsh realities of Igbo communal life as it moves close to the modern age. The heroine is put in various situations in which she interacts with a larger number of people. Because she is good, it becomes easy to use her as a touchstone by which others are judged. (48).

Efuru is described as a good woman in the community. Despite her marital predicament of barrenness and irresponsible husband, she maintains a high standard of moral decorum and goodness. She is an acclaimed good woman, loved and respected by all, a remarkable woman with very attractive qualities. She is filled with compassion and does good to all manner of people. For example, she provides medical care at her own expense for Nwosu and Nnona. Efuru has helped the people by sending them to hospitals for medical care. She helps Nnona, who has an infected leg and complains bitterly about the hurt and pain she feels from her bad leg. Efuru promises to take her to the doctor for treatment. She tells her sorry and adds, "If you like I can take you to the hospital, the doctor will look at it and he can do something for you" (Efuru 123). Efuru takes over the cost of the treatment of Nwona until she gets healed. Efuru's goodness and kind disposition heavily impact the people, changing a lot of lives positively. Earlier, Nwona is overjoyed by Efuru's promise of sending her to the hospital, and when she comes across Efuru the next day, she asks to reconfirm her hope, and she tells Efuru: "Remember what you send to me last night. I could not sleep last night for joy. When is the doctor coming" (Efuru 124). Efuru continues to offer herself to others. She equally pays hospital bills for the operation of her maid's father and visits Nwona when she has gone for an operation on her leg and buys her things.

Efuru's kindness receives a lot of commendation from the people, even from the men. She is praised and prayed for, and described as a good woman. One of Gilbert's friends urged him to marry her if he wanted to marry her, and so "Gilbert was happy to hear this. He had known these qualities already in Efuru, but he was happy because others knew that Efuru was a good woman also" (125). This testament coming from men at the time of cultural subjugation of the female folk says much about the uniqueness of Efuru's personality in the community and the social interaction with the people. Added to this testament on Efuru is the prayer by Nwona and her children after she comes back from the hospital, saying: "We have come to see you, Efuru, to thank you for what you have done for our mother. What you have done surprised everybody that we have no mouth to thank you. Indeed, a person who has people is better off than a person who has money. Our hearts are glad, and we have come to show you appreciation. Thank you very much. Thank you" (131). This robust show of appreciation to Efuru is in recognition of her outstanding social responsibility to the well-being of the community.

In appreciating the role of women in the community as a matter of individual attributes, Kanu Ikechukwu Kanu explains the place of the African community and ethics, noting that "as a consequence of the central place the community occupies in African ontology, personhood is strongly linked to the community. African philosophy accepts that personhood is something attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through performing the various duties imposed on him or her by living in the community" (170). Following this, the twin sisters, Olanna and Kainene, in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, make a great impact on the communities at the point they join in the rebuilding

services as the Nigerian civil war rages on. Their impacts are felt in their activism and volunteerism during the war.

Olanna, in conjunction with other women, engages in win-the-war activities - taking care of the home front, teaching children and rendering other humanitarian services. Olanna mentored Mrs Muokelu and Ugwu to form part of the teaching squad for children during the war. She tells them, "We will teach mathematics and civics everyday.... We have to make sure that when the war is over, they will all fit back easily into regular school. We will teach them to speak perfect English and perfect Igbo, like His Excellency. We will teach them pride in our great nation" (*Half of a Yellow Sun* 291). Olanna equally helps other women with food and medication for their children who suffer kwashiorkor and other illnesses as a result of the war. By doing these for others, aside from her responsibilities to her family, Olanna raises hope for the people. Enyeribe captures these sentiments when she notes that "women also had to cope with their new roles as breadwinners for the families by sacrificing so much, including their lives, as seen in the character of Olanna and Kainene. As a result of Odenigbo's decline, Olanna had to fend for her family, and she quickly assumes the role with strength and courage" (100). Likewise, her sister Kainene devotes her time and energy to working for others.

Allwell Abalogu Onukaogu and Ezechi Onyerionwu describe Kainene as the strongest woman character in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, stating that "Kainene's strength radiates through the story underlining her reputation as a vibrant, emotionally strong, courageous, determined and enterprising young woman" (205). Kainene possesses business and managerial qualities and has government connections that could boost her companies during the war. So she rather worries about the effect of the war on the people. She becomes concerned with helping her community by donating foreign exchange for the win-the-war effort. She engages in social and humanitarian works, runs a refugee camp, and engages in agriculture to grow enough food, especially protein, for the malnourished children in their camp. She equally opens up a training shop for the craftsmen to raise money for the running of the camp and to train young talented youths. Abalagou and Onyerionwu put it succinctly:

Kainene's managerial competence, fearlessness, decisiveness, determination and compassion keep the refugee camp going despite the severe circumstances of blockade of supplies and incessant air raids by the federal forces. She fights hunger, disease and death gallantly, even putting her life on the line by deciding to join the risky trade across enemy lines to acquire scarce food items for sick and dying children and mothers... Kainene sacrifices all for the survival of other people. (Abalogu and Onyerionwu 207-8).

Kainene devotes her energies, wealth and goodness to alleviate the sufferings of the people. This is despite the fact, according to Enyeribe, that "she was single and had no family. She became a social worker and fended for her community. She becomes a food supplier for a

couple of refugee camps and begins to supervise the daily functioning of the camps. Most times, she crosses the enemy lines, and in fact, she got lost in the effort at humanitarian services” (Enyeribe 101). Kainene, in the process, sacrificed her life searching for food aid for the people. When she left for the market across enemy borders and did not return as expected, her people were agitated and went on a search for her, “ they asked questions, and everyone said the same thing: Kainene had left with Inatimi early in the morning. She told them she was going on *afia attack* to trade across enemy lines and that she would be back by late afternoon. A day passed, then a second day. Everything remained the same, the dryness in the air, the dusty winds, the refugees tilling dried soil. But Kainene was not back” (*Half of a Yellow Sun* 407). And she never returned. Kainene was swallowed up in the frenzy of the war. She paid the ultimate price for the people. Thus, in Adichie, the twin sisters, Olanna and Kainene, give their unalloyed energy and commitment to fending for others during the war. The two, despite coming from a very rich family, jettisoned the opportunity to get out of the country to avoid the ugly experience of the war. They remained with the people and helped to protect and develop them and add hope to the despaired and devastated of the war.

The war situations inevitably change the roles of women towards their families and communities. A similar scenario plays out in the narrative of Agbasimalo’s *The Forest Dames*, where women like Dora are in the vanguard of the struggle for rebuilding the traumatized people and war-devastated community. The victims of war in the text suffered more hunger and displacement as they were forced to always move from one location to safer places. In the process, it becomes so difficult to get food. The women are left more to search for food. In these situations, Dora, Deze’s mother, one of the forest dames, provides leadership and mentorship for other women in discovering new markets for food for the survival of their families as reputed: “food scarcity heightened. The enemies had blocked the channels through which assistance came in. The woman picked up their baskets and combed the hinterland, the distant markets in search of food, walking along superlative pathways through bushes and villages... many in groups, they left home in the afternoon and reached the markets town at dusk... on their way home, they looked out for smaller markets where they resold the items from the distant markets, targeting some profit and consciously reserving some of the food for the family need.” (*Forest Dames* 70). The efforts of the women do not provide enough food, so they are constantly on their toes searching for new sources of food. It was on one such trip that Liliana, Gonma’s mother, was killed in a bomb blast. Women encountered a lot of unnamed calamities in search of food for their families.

During the war periods, she also presented children with different degrees of illnesses, which left parents handicapped in seeking cures. But Dora has been a ready help to other women using her goodwill and strength. She makes herself available to help others. For example, she provides a cure for Lazzie, Oyoyo and Reuben’s child when they almost abandoned him to die as they considered him semi-dead and a burden when they had to

abandon their home to move to a safe location. But because the couple could not bear the mental picture of their child abandoned, “they managed to pack Lazzie onto his mother’s back, and she strapped him with her wrappa, making sure that his head and feet were exposed” (*The Forest Dames* 91). The distraught mother Oyoyo seeks Dora’s help later, and “Dora gave her some of the herbal juice she used to treat her son and invited her to join the market group. When she confided in her that she had no money, Dora loaned her some, and she began the mini-trade” (102). Lazzie eventually recovered, and the joy of his parents knew no bounds. With this development, the community of refugees which Dora helped to settle comfortably described her as “a true example of what a real woman should be – strong and caring, prudent and reliable, hardworking and fast-thinking” (98). Oyoyo and Reuben profusely appreciated Dora for saving their son from dying and for helping them have a new lease on life. Dora, as a character in *The Forest Dames*, has done so much for her immediate family and the community using her wisdom, strength and good nature. She is appreciated openly by the people and seen as a mentor and a good woman. Other women looked up to her in most trying situations.

Conclusion

The idea of development is a consequence of community social living. The African philosophy of goodness and ethical living upholds good morals and norms, selflessness and commitment to the promotion of the common good. This involves thinking and working for the good of others. African societies, and particularly Nigeria, are constantly faced with civil war situations, which inevitably disrupt the family social system by changing family roles and communal co-existence. Also, in non-civil war situations, other family conflicts and difficulties like periods of socio-economic meltdowns push women to swap roles to sustain family peace and continued existence. Women have been, and are being, vanguards in their onerous task of sacrificing and committing to the building and rebuilding of the immediate and extended environments. This study succinctly reveals that women are doing great for society silently and unsung. They are acclaimed as ethically good but not openly appreciated for their moral values and positive impacts on their wider communities even while they co-exist and socialize with the people. These traits of diligence and commitment have continued as traced from the modern text of Nwapa’s *Efuru* through to the contemporary texts of Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* and Agbasimalo’s *The Forest Dames*. These are testaments of the doggedness of African women in nation-building, which have been underplayed and relegated underground. It is the stance of this paper to project the good works of women in family, community and national development and to advocate greater recognition and appropriate appreciation.

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