

## Religio-cultural and poetic constructions of the subaltern African woman

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**Abstract:** The colonial experience and particularly the introduction of Christianity and Islam in Africa altered the African socio-cultural fabric and ways of life. European and Arab missionaries diligently spread their religious beliefs which fused with some African cultural practices and ever since, determined the status of particularly African women. Suffice it to say that colonialism, Christianity and Islam masculinized any territory upon which they inflicted themselves and dismantled the matriarchal system that coexisted with patriarchy in some pre-colonial African societies. They also provided an ideological framework for the social roles of women. Besides, Negritude poetic constructions of African women largely contributed in cementing the subalternized image/roles of African women created by colonialism and religious prescriptions in their textual representations. These poets' portrayal of African women as mothers, in terms of their nurturing capabilities, maintained them in an essentially problematic position.

**Key-words:** African woman. Religion. Subalternization. Poetry.

African literature is male-created, male-oriented, chauvinistic art. Male is the master; male constitutes majority. The fact is well documented in our colonial history. The white civilizer, as cunning as ever, carefully chose his black counterparts to run the affairs of the "Dark Continent." Woman is considered to be a flower, not a worker. Woman is supposed to be relegated to the gilded cage; she is not the contributor to, the creator of, a civilization.

Femi Ojo-Ade (1983, p. 158)

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## INTRODUCTION

The colonization of Africa has created a number of binary oppositions namely colonizer/colonized, white/black, civilized/primitive, good/evil, centre/margin, advanced/retarded and adult/child among others, to the extent that we can hardly engage a literary text without using expressions such as subaltern, subject, minority, identity, race, class, gender, empire, colony, nation in our discourse. Things are construed as existing in pairs and standing in polar opposition. Those binary oppositions determine who we are today as people, as Africans and how we manifest our subjectivity. In John Stuart Mill's essay entitled "On Liberty," the critic shows how the rise of a particular group, class, ideology or culture has resulted in subalternizing / dominating another group or class. The arrival of the Europeans and Arabs in Africa has without no doubt subalternized Africans and particularly the African woman. According to Fredric Jameson, subalternity is "the feelings of mental inferiority and habits of subservience and obedience which necessarily and structurally develop in situations of domination-most dramatically in the experience of colonized peoples." (p. 76) Colonialism, Christianity and Islam among others, rendered African woman not only irrelevant in public sphere but also reduced her to a *second class citizen*, a subaltern that lives to serve the man, her superior, her master, her decider and the owner of her soul. Patriarchal ethos, cultural and religious prescriptions constructed the woman such that she should only listen, obey and not query the man. Suffice it to say that under the current postcolonial re-evaluation of binaries, is feminism's concern with the age-long man/woman binary and its gendered male/female derivative.

## RELIGIO-CULTURAL CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE SUBALTERN AFRICAN WOMEN

The colonial experience, and particularly the introduction of Christianity and Islam, did not only affect what Biodun Jeyifo calls the "nature of things" but it disorganized African societies by disregarding certain important African cultural values. It also introduced new practices to the colonized people and determined our being as Africans. Christian missionaries forced Africans to embrace Christianity and made them to turn their backs on their customs and

former ways of life. European and Arab missionaries diligently spread their religious beliefs and particularly the negative image of women. In a nut shell, imported religions and African cultural practices have fused to determine the status of African woman in African societies since the European and Arabs' infiltration in the continent. Colonialism masculinized any territory upon which it inflicted itself and dismantled the matriarchal system that coexisted with patriarchy in some pre-colonial African societies. In his article entitled "African Feminism/Western Feminism: Contradictory or Complementary," Ramonu Sanusi avers that:

Prior to the arrival of Christianity and Islam in sub-Saharan Africa – that is in pre-colonial Africa, women played significant roles and were worshipped and respected by men in those societies. Hence, the more historically minded African feminists relied mostly on Africa's past to formulate their feminist theories for their struggle [...] Similarly, there were many important goddesses among the Yoruba and Igbo of Nigeria and the Akans of Ghana. (p. 187)

Religion also played a central role in sustaining certain kinds of social structures for it provided an ideological framework for the social roles of women. It is generally believed by a number of feminists that men interpreted both the Bible and the Koran to suit their agenda so that they could have control over women. Some point to the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden as critical because it was written that Eve seduced Adam into eating the forbidden fruit. Feminists believe that this alleged action, interpreted by generations of Bible readers as "sinful," led women to be viewed variously as "sinners" or "evil." Other feminists from the Muslim world trace the subordination of women to traditionalist / conservative interpretations of the Koran. Fatima Mernissi, for instance, focuses on the controversy between traditional and modern Muslims over the roles of women. In *Beyond the Veil*, she discusses how some Muslims use the Koran to support their belief in the relegation of women to the domestic sphere:

The desegregation of sexes violates Islam's ideology on the woman's position in the social order: the woman should be under the authority of fathers, brothers or husbands. Since she is considered by Allah to be a destructive element, she is to be spatially confined and excluded from matters other than those of the family. The woman's access to non-domestic space is put under the control of males. (p. xv)

Mernissi also holds that European Christian societies came to the same conclusion as Muslim ones in their belief that women are destructive to the social order. The effect of the interpretation of the Bible and the Koran to serve a specific male agenda relegated women to the background tending to deprive them of certain roles in the society, such as holding positions in mosques, churches, public or government spheres. Both Christian and Islamic religious theories, as interpreted by men and social institutions, seem had been designed to curb women's power. Indeed, as Mernissi points out, Islamic doctrines do not explicitly claim the inferiority of women: "On the contrary, the whole system is based on the assumption that woman is a powerful and dangerous being. All sexual institutions: polygamy, repudiation [and] sexual segregation can be perceived as a strategy for containing her power" (p. xvi). Since it was believed that woman was responsible for man's expulsion from the garden, she is not only regarded as having destroyed the peace of the paradise but is feared for being powerful, hence the need to portray her as destructive and contain her overwhelming power by various means.

Woman is further assumed to be inferior to man because it was written in the Bible that she was constructed from man's ribs. As Mineke Schipper notes, "the story of Genesis tells us in great detail how first man was created and then woman, how she was taken from him and is thus part of him" (p. 23). Schipper asserts as well that a similar patriarchal culture is to be found in the Koran: "Men are the managers of the affairs of women for that Allah has preferred in bounty one of them over the other" (*The Holy Koran*, Sura 4: 34). It can be argued that it is through Biblical and Koranic constructions of woman that her image in various societies has come to be negatively viewed. Many interpretations of the Bible and the Koran also stipulate that woman has to be submissive to her husband. The implications of these religious interpretations, which persist in many societies today, are that woman is reduced to a subordinate subject controlled by patriarchal powers. Such Biblical and Koranic representations of women have rendered African women inferior and subservient as evidenced in the writings of a majority of African authors. Molara Ogun-dipe-Leslie notes: "African woman is discriminated against, excluded from real power, exploited at all levels and derided most of the time in the society. She is usually seen as the cause of whatever happens negatively in the country. The national scapegoat. The cause of the nation's decline" (p. 67). It is sad

to note, as Ogundipe-Leslie observes, that in sub-Saharan African societies women are often considered demonic and are blamed for whatever goes wrong. This attitude toward women leads to their oppression, which in turn, serves to render them irrelevant in the society. “Mother Goddess,” as Adrienne Rich puts it, is gradually devalued and rejected; the human woman finds her scope and dignity increasingly reduced” (p. 120).

Any study on the subjugation of African women that ignores religious theories as propagated by preachers of these sacred books and their effects with regard to domination of women by men religiously, socially, economically and politically, is incomplete. In Adeola Jame’s *In Their Own Voices*, Buchi Emecheta asserts that African women suffered because they embraced Christianity and Islam, two religions that jeopardized their positions and helped to subordinate them. Pierrette Herzberger-Fofana concurs, noting the negative effects of Islam on the status of African women:

Introduite à partir du 10<sup>e</sup> siècle en Afrique, l’Islam a modifié le statut de la femme et donné la prééminence au système patriarcal. [...] Religion d’origine arabe, l’Islam se fondant avec les rites traditionnels, a donné naissance à un culte spécifique: “l’Islam noir” qui s’est adapté aux réalités africaines, incorporant les pratiques animistes et les interférant au dogme religieux. (p. 145-146)

“Introduced in Africa in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century, Islam modified the status of woman and gave preeminence to patriarchal system. [...] A religion of Arab origin, it mixed up with traditional rites and gave birth to a specific cult: “Black Islam” which adapted itself to African realities, incorporating animist practices and interfering them with religious dogma.” (My translation)

Islam, as Herzberger remarks, was mixed with traditional African practices. This mixture gave birth to a new form of Islam that men firmly established in their traditional societies to relegate women. Furthermore, in certain societies in Africa today, some customs, traditions and beliefs persist that keep women under subjugation and make them feel inferior to their male counterparts. Some of these institutions include customs associated with marriage such as polygamy, bride price, arranged marriage, widowhood and female circumcision.

## THE POETIC CONSTRUCTIONS OF AFRICAN WOMEN

In the poetic works that have entered into the canon of African literature, the topic of colonialism is conspicuous because the colonial experience played a critical role in shaping the identity of most African societies and ways of life. Soon after African men tasted Western education, a number of them who became writers quickly realized how much their customs were swept under the carpet by the colonizers and decided to uplift African cultural values. Cyril Mokwenye in his “Senghor as Pre-Independence Negritude Poet,” notes:

Africa, during the colonial era, was portrayed in very bad light especially from the cultural point of view. For the Negritude writers in general and for Senghor in particular therefore, literature was to serve as a weapon for the enlightenment of the white race concerning the blackman's culture and civilization. More than through any other genre, it was through the poetic genre that Negritude was to seek to accomplish this task. (p. 7)

During this entire process of rehabilitating African customs however, Negritude writers particularly depicted African women in their poems as docile and passive and considered those attributes as good qualities. The textual representation of women by men in the early phase of written African literatures played an important role in the subordination of women. The construction of the subaltern female in African poems traces its roots to the attitudes and beliefs that European and Arab missionaries passed down to African men. The colonial administrators and Arab missionaries in most colonized lands of Africa carefully selected men to assist them in their duties and influenced them to work for and support their male-dominated agendas. African men thus came to play a central role in all aspects of the society while women were systematically excluded. Pierrette Herzberger-Fofana affirms that:

Seuls, les hommes qui constituaient la main d'œuvre utile aux besoins du colonisateur percevaient un salaire – les femmes étant exclues de la vie économique – selon l'idéologie occidentale. Cette transposition d'idéologie a été fatale pour la gent féminine (p. 286).

“Only men, who constituted the colonizers’ workforce, were receiving salary – women were excluded from economic life – according to Western ideology. That transposition of ideology was fatal to women folk”. (My translation).

Similarly on the educational scene, African men were given the unique privilege of benefiting from Western education as colonial schools were opened to men first in the name of the civilizing mission but eventually to suit a specific male-oriented colonial agenda. The privilege accorded to the African man through colonial education has considerable implications for African literature because most of the early texts were by African men. African literature became a male enterprise. As Carole Boyce Davies in *Ngambika*, observes, European colonialism, as well as traditional attitudes to women, combined very successfully to exclude African women from the educational processes that prepared one for the craft of writing.

Some of the African men educated by European and Arab institutions and who became authors assimilated the attitudes of foreign patriarchal cultures to depict the uneducated African women in very limited and traditional roles. They tended to glorify women in subaltern, domestic and maternal tasks. African male poets and writers such as Léopold Sédar Senghor, David Diop, Camara Laye and Abdoulaye Sadjí glorified women and at the same time went at portraying them often as mothers in terms of their nurturing capabilities. By doing so, they maintained women in an essentially powerless position. Senghor’s “Femme Noire,” (Black Woman) for instance, portrays the idealized African woman thus:

### **Femme noire**

Femme nue, femme noire  
Vêtue de ta couleur qui est vie, de ta forme qui est beauté!  
J’ai grandi à ton ombre; la douceur de tes mains bandait mes yeux.  
[...]  
Femme nue, femme noire  
Je chante ta beauté qui passe, forme que je fixe dans l’Éternel  
Avant que le Destin jaloux ne te réduise en cendres pour  
Nourrir les racines de ta vie. (p. 16-17)

**Black woman**

Naked woman, black woman  
Clothed with your color which is life, with your form which is beauty!  
In your shadow I have grown up; the gentleness of your hands was laid  
over my eyes  
[...]  
Naked woman, black woman,  
I sing your beauty that passes, the form that I fix in the Eternal  
Before jealous Fate turns you to ashes to feed the roots of life (My translation)

Senghor in this poem depicts the African woman as a mother whose sole role is to rear and nurture children. He glorifies her beauty and her maternal role; however, his portrayal objectifies her and thus keeps her in a subaltern position. The idealized representation of African woman by Senghor is also echoed in David Diop's poem "Afrique," (Africa) dedicated to his mother:

**Afrique**

Afrique mon Afrique  
Je ne t'ai jamais connue  
Mais mon regard est plein de ton sang  
Ton beau sang noir à travers les champs répandu  
Le sang de ta sueur  
La sueur de ton travail  
Le travail de l'esclavage  
L'esclavage de tes enfants. (p. 23)

**Africa**

Africa my Africa  
[...]  
I have never seen you  
But my gaze is full of your blood  
Your black blood spilt over the fields  
The blood of your sweat  
The sweat of your toil  
The toil as slavery  
The slavery of your children (My translation)

Africa is regarded as his mother destroyed by colonialism. The image of woman here is that of an Africa humiliated and subjected to colonial domination. The poet who considers his mother as Africa therefore chants its suffering and victimization. Similarly, the introductory poem “A ma mère” (To my Mother) in Camara Laye’s *L’enfant noir* (*The African Child*) has been described by Adebayo as a “maternal epic” (p. 179). This nostalgic remembrance of his childhood beside his sweet mother focuses on the woman’s patience and resignation:

### **A ma mère**

Femme noire, femme africaine, ô toi ma mère  
je pense à toi...

O Dâman, ô ma mère, toi qui me portas sur le dos, toi qui  
m’allaitas, toi qui gouvernas mes premiers pas, toi qui la  
première m’ouvris les yeux aux prodiges de la terre,  
je pense à toi...

Femme des champs, femme des rivières, femme du  
grand fleuve, ô toi, ma mère, je pense à toi...

O toi Dâman, ô ma mère, toi qui essayais mes larmes, toi  
qui me rejouissais le coeur, toi qui, patiemment supportais  
mes caprices, comme j’aimerais encore être près de  
toi, être enfant près de toi!

Femme simple, femme de la résignation, ô toi, ma mère,  
Je pense à toi... (p. 7-8)

### **To my mother**

Black woman, woman of Africa, O my mother,  
I am thinking of you...

O Daman, O my mother, you who bore me upon your back,  
you who gave me suck, you who watched over my first faltering steps,  
you who were the first to open my eyes to the wonders of the earth,  
I am thinking of you...

Woman of the fields, woman of the rivers, woman of the great river-banks,  
O you, my mother, I am thinking of you...

O you, Daman, O my mother, you who dried my tears,  
you who filled my heart with laughter, you who patiently bore  
with all my many moods, how I should love to be beside you once again,  
to be a little child beside you!

Woman of great simplicity, woman of great resignation,  
O my mother I am thinking of you... (My translation)

Not only did these African male poets and writers subalternize female subjects in their writings, they also defined women exclusively on the basis of their relationships to men and in terms of their maternal roles. Henri Lopes observes this in their works, with a critical tone: “*La femme africaine n’est qu’un objet poétique. Elle est muse.*” (p. 9) (African woman is a mere poetic object. She is a Muse).

Certainly, the African women depicted by the poets are valued, idealized and glorified as sweet mothers and as nurturers of children. Their depictions show the patience, resignation and suffering of African women, all evidently considered positive values by the male authors. However, these textual representations reflect social realities and are rooted and implicated in power inequalities in the societies that produced them. These patient women were also those who suffered domination from oppressive husbands. Buchi Emecheta states that: “the good woman in Achebe’s portrayal is the one who kneels down and drinks the dregs after her husband. [...] In his view that kind of subordinate woman is the good woman” (p. 42). What Emecheta describes here is a situation where a woman accepts to eat the most worthless part of the food that remains after her husband has eaten the juicy part of it. This kind of submissive wife is considered as the perfect African woman.

The cause of African women has not been well served by the majority of African men in their writings. They treat issues that deeply concern women such as childbearing, motherhood, the subordination of women to men inadequately and with bias. In Negritude literature, as Adebayo observes, “the mother is an object of reverence and symbol of patience, long suffering and fecundity, while Africa is conceived and eulogized sometimes in terms of a woman, a mother who is ravaged by years of colonial spoliation” (p. 178-193). Adebayo’s

remarks shed some light on the construction of the subaltern female personae. By chanting women's beauty in their poems the Negritude poets particularly Senghor, maintains that women are not in bondage and thus need not be liberated. In *La parole aux négresses* Awa Thiam takes these writers to task, by saying that rare are those among them who talk with objectivity. Thiam states that they do not preoccupy themselves much with women and when they do, they only sing and glorify women's femininity and their sufferings. Pierrette Herzberger-Fofana agrees with Thiam, asserting that:

Parmi les différentes images que le poète [Senghor] et ceux du même mouvement littéraire exaltent, l'image de la mère occupe une place prépondérante. Personnage mythique ou imaginaire, la mère devient symbole du royaume de l'enfance et du paradis perdu. Aux heures de détresse, d'amertume elle est celle qui efface la souffrance et redonne l'espoir à l'exilé. Cette idéalisation et mystification de la femme africaine caractérisent les poètes mais également les romanciers de la même période. Ainsi Abdoulaye Sadjí et Camara Laye offrent dans leurs romans un portrait semblable de la mère sublimée. (p. 326)

"Among the different images that the poet [Senghor] and those of the same literary movement exalt, the image of the mother occupies an important place. A mythical or imaginary character, the mother becomes the symbol of the childhood kingdom and that of the lost paradise. In times of distress, bitterness she is the one that erases suffering and gives hope to the exiled. That idealization and mystification of the African woman characterize those poets and novelists of the same period. Thus, Abdoulaye Sadjí and Camara Laye in their novels, make a portrayal similar to that of the sublime mother." (My translation)

Both Thiam and Herzberger argue that this glorification of African women as idealized mothers, veils their submission and exploitation. They insist further that to African male writers, this image of the mother symbolizes tradition and an often idealized native land. Irène d'Almeida in *Francophone African Women Writers* lends her voice, noting that "when women were not flat, secondary characters, they were placed on a pedestal and idealized to such an extreme as to neutralize their existence as real people" (p. 8).

## CONCLUSION

African novelists of the second generation inherited a subalternized and domesticated image of African women from both the colonial system and the Négritude poets. A majority of African male texts depict women as inferior and subordinated to men so as to reveal the full authority that men have over women's lives. The power exercised over the subordinated African women was imposed on them and no room is left for them to partake in any decision that affects them and thus they are perpetually silenced. It should be equally borne in mind that even after independence, the condition of African women did not change much because independence failed to absorb, transform and accept women as individuals who might contribute to nation building. In politics, they are still not fully represented especially in societies where women are largely subjugated to Islamic dictates and Sharia laws. Religious rites confine them to housekeeping and prevent them in most cases from playing active roles in societies. In most cases, they are educationally handicapped and unlike their male counterparts, they are not equipped with a Western education that can prepare them to participate in administrative jobs.

**Resumo:** A experiência colonial e particularmente a introdução do cristianismo e do islamismo na África alteraram o tecido e as formas de vida sócio-cultural Africano. Missionários europeus e árabes diligentemente espalharam suas crenças religiosas que, fundidas com algumas práticas culturais africanas, desde então, determinaram o status das mulheres. O colonialismo, o cristianismo e o islamismo masculinizaram qualquer território em que entraram, desmantelando sistemas matriarcais que coexistiam com o patriarcado em algumas sociedades africanas pré-coloniais. Forneceram também um quadro ideológico para o papel social das mulheres. As construções poéticas também contribuíram largamente para consolidar a subalternizada imagem/papel das mulheres africanas criadas pelo colonialismo e pelas prescrições religiosas em suas representações textuais. A retratação poética das mulheres africanas como mães, em termos de suas capacidades de carinho, manteve-as em uma posição essencialmente problemática.

**Palavras-chave:** Mulher africana. Religião. Subalternidade. Poesia.

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