

Mother Africa on a Pedestal: The Male Heritage in African Literature and Criticism

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'Women have no mouth' (Beti proverb, Cameroon)

The physical differences between the sexes that children are born with have enormous effects on their entire lives. In any given cultural context, male and female behaviour patterns are fixed by norms, and anyone who tries to break the rules can expect to meet with serious problems in a community in which the ruling group produces images and conceptions of the others to legitimise the status quo.¹

A recent UN study of women's position in the world showed that women do two-thirds of all the work both within and outside the home. But they only receive 10 per cent of all the money earned on earth. And they possess less than a hundredth of all the wealth of the world.

In Africa, illiteracy is four times more prevalent among women than among men and in the schools the proportion of girls falls as the level of education rises. In this context, it is not surprising to see that most African literature has been written by men, and that most critics of African literature are men as well.

I do not believe that we should re-open here the discussion whether the 'other' is at all capable of studying or writing about 'us'. This discussion took place in the context of the obvious *Eurocentrism* which for a long time determined the perspective of so many Western (and even a number of African) scholars - the 'other' being the European, 'us' being the Africans.²

Nowadays, the same question is obviously of current interest among feminist critics: the radicals reject the male perspective once and for all, as belonging to the 'other' and therefore inadequate to study 'us' or 'our texts' for that matter, particularly because of the unsurmountable viricentrism in literary texts as well as in literary criticism. However, openness and awareness are a better research guide than narrow-minded protectionist prescriptions.

I believe the starting point should be that every subject can be dealt with by any writer or critic, and that only the result is to be examined carefully. Therefore, the first question is logically: what do the texts say?

In the oral tradition, we often do not even know whether the storyteller who thought up a particular story was a man or a woman. Of course when one examines the recorded texts, one might wonder whether a myth or story doesn't serve particular interests in a given society.

As far as written literature is concerned, we know that the main bulk of texts has been written since colonial times. This has certainly affected the depiction of women in colonial as well as in African literature. The fact that most African literature and criticism up till now has been produced by male authors quite naturally leads to the question as to whether this very fact has made any difference. Has the 'male heritage' influenced African literature? If so, how and to what extent?

In the following pages, I shall examine three factors that have contributed in different ways to the development of woman's image in African literature. These are (1) the mythological 'pre-phase'; (2) the colonial heritage; and (3) developments since the 1960s.

We shall try to relate these points by comparing the images produced in their respective (con)texts. As always in literary history, the African woman today is creating her own literary texts on the basis of inherited literary and social conditions, on the one hand continuing existing traditions and on the other hand opposing them. We shall conclude with some reflections on the critic's attitude toward the woman writer.

The Mythological 'Pre-phase'

In the story of Genesis in the Bible, we are told in detail about the creation of man. He is the first human being; woman comes later, she originates from man and is therefore part of him, relegated to a secondary position. Many passages in the Bible confirm the supremacy of man over woman - or at least that is how they have been interpreted. Patriarchal patterns of culture are also to be found in Islam. The Qur'an says: 'Men are the managers of the affairs of women for that Allah has preferred in bounty one of them over the other'. (Sura 4: 34) Studies on women's position in Africa make it clear that the replacement of traditional ideas by Western ones has not proved to be a guarantee for the amelioration of women's position. On the contrary, they may have only served to strengthen ideas which many African creation and origin myths already contained.³

Myths are supposed to contain the truth, and the dogmas and utterances in them are not to be doubted in the community. Of course they have, in fact, very often been manipulated and adapted according to the interests of the people in power. Myths explain and justify how man created order from chaos and how, by way of culture, he imposed his will on nature. In myth, woman has been associated (by man?) with nature in two main senses, one positive and the other negative: as the life-giving mother figure and as the frightening, dangerous witch who has to be dominated or at least restricted by codes and norms. A number of myths explain how the existing hierarchical order was created and how it has been ever since - from the beginning. Looking at African creation myths woman, in comparison with man, has often had to put up with a secondary position.

There is much more to say about woman in African creation myths than can be said in the limited context of an article. Here, we must confine ourselves to a few observations. In a Luba myth from Zaire, the Supreme Being, Kabezya Mpungu, created two people, a man and a woman who had no soul or *mutima* yet. It was only after God left the earth that he sent *mutima* 'in a little vase the size of a hand'. *Mutima* entered the first man but nothing is said about the soul of the first woman. It reminds one of the European discussions among medieval philosophers about whether woman had a soul at all.

Very often, woman is mythologically discriminated against. When man and woman did not originate at the same time, the

woman was almost never created first. More than once, she came into being accidentally, as in the following Saramo myth (Tanzania):

Long ago there were no women. There were only two men who lived on honey. One of the men climbed into a tree. There was honey inside the tree and he wanted to get it out with his axe. The sharp blade of the axe fell down and hit the other man, who was lying on his back asleep. The axe fell onto his penis and cut it off. What was left was a bleeding wound, like women have.

His companion climbed down and asked:

'What is that?'

'The axe cut it off,' he replied.

Then they slept together and a girl was born. They slept together again and a boy was born. A world of people descended from those two men. Ever since that day, women lose blood, just like that first woman did. (p. 103).

Here woman is a mutilated man. A Fang myth (Gabon) has man created by God, whereas woman is made by man from a piece of wood. In another Fang myth, woman originated from one of man's toes.⁴

The Asante (Ghana) explain how man and woman came together against the will of the creator. It is clearly emphasized that man not woman committed the first transgression; he made his way into the woman's camp. Nevertheless, woman is punished much more severely than man:

Here is the punishment for the men: when a man sees a woman whom his heart desires he will have to give her gold, clothes and many other fine things before he can possess her. And here is the punishment for the women: since you also disobeyed, when you see a man whom your heart desires you will have to keep it to yourself in your head! In addition, you will have to pound the fufu and do all the work, before eating it yourself . . . You will be with child nine to ten months and you shall give birth in great pain. (pp. 101f)

When it comes to original sin or the Fall which destroys the paradise situation, it is woman's doing in most cases. Among the Tutsi (Rwanda), for instance, woman let her tongue run away with her and betrayed the secret of Imana, the Supreme Being; whereupon her children were driven out of heaven. In the Hungwe myth (Zimbabwe), it was Morongo who seduced her husband so that he made love to her against the will of the God Moari. Bambara mythology blames the first woman Muso Kuroi for destroying the

original harmony. The Kulwe(Tanzania) creation myth blames the fact that people have to work and that they know hunger and perdition on the woman who did not respect God's command to grind only one grain of wheat (which would then multiply), and thus ruined the earth (pp. 88f). The same happened in the Bini myth (Nigeria) where men did not have to till the ground because they could cut off a piece of the sky and eat it whenever they felt hungry. The sky warned them not to cut off too much because he did not want to be thrown on the rubbish heap. And then it was again 'a greedy woman' who cut off an exorbitant piece of the sky which neither she nor anybody could finish. The remainder was thrown on the rubbish heap and 'the sky became very angry indeed, and rose up high above the earth, far beyond the reach of men. And from then on men have had to work for their living.'⁵ There are many more examples, but the ones cited above, from different parts of Africa, illustrate the degree to which woman was blamed for what went wrong.

Fortunately, there are a few rare exceptions to the anti-female rule found in so many myths. A myth of the Ekoi in Nigeria says that at the beginning of time, only women populated the earth. By mistake Obassi (God) himself killed one of these sisters. To make up for his mistake, he offered to give them anything they wanted of all his possessions. One by one, the women refused all the things Obassi mentioned. At the end, only one thing remained on the list: man.

They took man, therefore, as compensation for the fellow woman who they had lost. Thus men became the servants of women, and have to work for them to this day. For, though a woman comes under the influence of her husband upon marriage, yet she is his proprietor, and has a right to ask any service, and to expect him to do whatever she chooses. (p. 104)

However, Obassi Nsi, the God here, must have originally been a goddess (the earth goddess?), as the informant explained to P.A. Talbot who noted this myth in 1912: 'Obassi Nsi must be a woman and our mother, because everybody knows that mothers have the tenderest heart'.⁶ Nonetheless, Obassi Nsi has since become a male God, although the myth is still told in this pro-female form.

Why have women so often - and not only in African mythology - been blamed for all the wrong in the world? In fact we do not know where anti-female mythical literature comes from, but myths survived at the roots of what society gradually became. Not only in myths, but also in fairy tales and all sorts of other stories, woman

may be depicted as a dangerous force, as threatening nature, a witch, a negative power, as the one who swallows or castrates man, as Denise Paulme showed in her *La mère dévorante*.⁷

In the same or in other stories, besides the image of woman as a negative force, we find the opposite view, woman as the tender virgin or the virtuous maternal character. The positive view of woman is usually associated with her reproductive function, the dearly loved and loving mother who takes care of her children and sacrifices herself for them. Both views are widely prevalent in African oral literature.

The Colonial Heritage

In her well-known book *Le deuxième sexe*, Simone de Beauvoir – and with her many others in the Western world who stand up for the rights of the (Western?) woman – sees obvious parallels between the situation of women and blacks. According to her, both groups are struggling to get rid of the same paternalistic grip of the white man that wants to keep them in their proper place, i.e. the place he has destined for them. The white man, she says, speaks highly of the qualities of the good black, who is child-like, unaware of his situation, easily amused and resigned to his lot. In much the same way, he appreciates the woman who is really a woman, puerile, irresponsible, vain, the woman who recognizes man's superiority and who is pleased to submit to him.⁸

In an interview with the Senegalese poet and former head of state, Léopold Sédar Senghor in 1974, I asked for his comment on these ideas of Simone de Beauvoir in *Le deuxième sexe*. Senghor agreed completely; according to him, women and blacks are so much more emotional than the 'hard-hearted man who tyrannizes them'. The question, then, is what does the African woman become in this field of force; twice oppressed, by the white man and by the black brother?

This kind of comparison between the situations of (white) women and blacks in the world has been made in Western feminist circles and sometimes still is, but it is not current at all in Africa (the case of Senghor is quite exceptional and his negritude theories about 'raison hellène' and 'émotion nègre' are well-known). Who has ever seen a black man expressing his sincere compassion for the tragic fate of the poor oppressed white woman? It is certainly not evident in African novels written by men. One would search in

vain for black characters who are aware of being victims together with the Western woman of white man's stranglehold of discrimination. On the contrary! In the eyes of the colonized African, the white woman is a privileged being par excellence, as she has no reason to complain about her position, as many novels show. For instance, Margery Thompson in Ngugi's *A Grain of Wheat* led a life of luxury with nothing to do but give orders to her servants.⁹ In the colonial situation, a woman who would have been an insignificant person in Europe, doing her own housekeeping and taking care of her own children, is granted unprecedented opportunities to exercise power over one or more subordinates. Power which is too easily misused, as the African novels about the colonial period show. From the African point of view, the white woman is indeed a serious racist factor in colonial society as the South African situation still clearly illustrates.¹⁰

In the novels – especially in the francophone ones – on the other hand, a lot of attention is devoted to the looks of the white woman, her white skin, the colour of her eyes and her hair, her hairstyle, her clothes, her make-up. Often it is said that she is beautiful and well dressed; blue eyes and fair hair are obviously preferred. The more out of reach she seems, the more she is idealized. In Ferdinand Oyono's *Une vie de boy*, for instance, Toundi praises the beauty of his Madame, the wife of the French Commandant. She has just arrived from Europe and is not yet aware of the colonial mentality which she is soon to adopt. So she shakes hands with him, an unusual gesture in colonial society. Toundi writes about her in his diary:

My happiness has neither day nor night . . . I have held the hand of my queen. I felt that I was really alive. From now on my hand is sacred and must not know the lower regions of my body. My hand belongs to my queen whose hair is the colour of ebony, with eyes that are like the antelope's, whose skin is pink and white as ivory. A shudder ran through my body at the touch of her tiny moist hand. She trembled like a flower dancing in the breeze. My life was mingling with hers at the touch of her hand. Her smile is refreshing as a spring of water. Her look is as warm as a ray from the setting sun. It bathes you in a light that warms the depth of the heart. I am afraid . . . afraid of myself.¹¹

In *Soul on Ice*, Eldridge Cleaver stated that, for oppressed blacks, the white woman is the symbol of freedom – a quite different view of the situation from Simone de Beauvoir's. Blacks, he says, dream of the white woman and put her on a pedestal; she is especially desirable because unlike himself and the black woman

she is not submissive. This perspective explains Toundi's above-mentioned reaction in *Une vie de boy*.

In *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Frantz Fanon emphasizes that oppressed black people often seek to liberate themselves by choosing a woman with lighter skin: her love could make him less black; the whiter the freer. This liberation, he writes, would be best symbolized by the 'whitest woman, the blonde with the blue eyes'. According to Fanon, this kind of reasoning is based on norms of 'white superiority' which, of course, have been imposed by colonialism and by Western propaganda in films and magazines.¹²

In spite of her beauty, the white woman in the African novel is usually depicted as a moody and discontented creature. She rarely has a status of her own, she has no job and is completely dependent on her husband and his profession; she is only somebody's wife. She is usually preoccupied by her appearance, her beauty, her figure, her clothes and her jewellery. The other thing colonial Western women seem to be interested in as far as the novels are concerned is the topic of Africa and Africans, whom they talk about endlessly, usually in a negative way. There are endless complaints about the damned country, the miserable climate, the heat, the downpours that spoil the tennis courts, the fact that there is no decent hairdresser and so on; and then there are the Africans themselves, lazy liars and thieves. All this is brought forward as the way Western women think; these characters are bored, their marriages are a failure, they work off their bad temper on their staff, as Toundi's Madame does in Oyono's novel.¹³

Their lack of interest and imagination makes them capricious and unpredictable. In fact, these female characters in African novels correspond exactly with the description Simone de Beauvoir presents in *Le deuxième sexe* of the 'real feminine woman', the fatuous, frivolous little person we referred to earlier. The negative impression that the Western woman obviously made in Africa can be found in a wide range of novels. It is often even made worse by the racism and prejudice she arouses in herself and in other colonials in a society offering fertile grounds for these feelings. In short, the Western woman is depicted in African novels by male writers - especially those set in colonial times - as the dangerous, frivolous, adulterous type (European marriages are generally unhappy and infidelity is more of a rule than an exception). She is hardly ever presented as the positive, thoughtful caring mother.

African novelists have indeed devoted great effort to projecting

a negative image of the Western woman, but they depict African girls and women who adopt aspects of 'modern' life no less critically. Often, little consideration is given to the fact that there may be positive advantages in turning away from certain traditions.

African women in the novels often see white women as dangerous rivals, so they do their best to imitate them in order to please their African boyfriends, or to find a European lover themselves. Following the examples of Western women, they also start wearing tight clothes, even trousers, which show off their figures. Older people find this shocking. Modern women try to straighten their hair; they use lipstick and often seem to prefer European languages to their own. The older generation (and the male writer) is worried about these developments, since the white women have always been the epitome of impudence and wickedness: morals and traditions are in danger of being lost if 'our' women identify with this example. Western glamour films have also contributed toward imposing the stereotypical image of the Western woman in Africa.¹⁴ Consequently, the African woman who tries to Westernize her looks and who exhibits a certain independence is also stereotyped as not really to be trusted. She is often viewed as the antithesis of the traditional virtuous caring mother: again two camps according to the good-bad scheme. 'Modern' motherhood seems a contradiction in terms. Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* is an example: she wears a low-cut transparent blouse 'through which her pink brassiere could be seen - provocatively - and much more besides'. Jagua - 'sheath dress, painted lips and glossy hair' - goes with her boyfriend Freddy to the Tropicana Club. This is how the women there are presented:

All the women wore dresses which were definitely undersize, so that buttocks and breasts jutted grotesquely above the general contours of the bodies. At the same time the midriffs shrunk to suffocation. A dress succeeded if it made men's eyes ogle hungrily in this modern super sex-market.¹⁵

As we know, *Jagua* ends well: back in the village, she becomes a loving mother so that virtue triumphs over evil at the (happy) end.

One of the most famous examples of this opposition is Okot p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino*. Our sympathy is drawn towards Lawino and her complaints about the behaviour of her rival Clementine, who lightens her skin and tries to lose weight, 'like a white woman'. Thanks to her 'modern' features she impresses Lawino's husband Ocol, who has had a Western education and is now trying

to get rid of his traditional wife. Clementine wants to look like a white woman, since she believes that this will make her beautiful, but from the traditional point of view she is not. On the contrary, 'modern' behaviour is considered 'shameless'. The Clementines dance like white people dance, held tightly; they kiss like white people do and the Lawinos are shocked:

I am completely ignorant
Of the dances of foreigners
And I do not like it.
Holding each other
Tightly, tightly,
In public,
I cannot.
I am ashamed.
Dancing without a song
Dancing silently like wizards,
Without respect, drunk . . .

If someone tries
To force me to dance this dance
I feel like hanging myself
Feet first!¹⁶

In the 1960s, Okot p'Bitek idealized the African tradition just as much as the négritude poets did in the 1930s. The idealization of the past was used to emphasize African dignity in the face of Western colonial domination, which threatened to destroy the traditional culture. At the same time, however, this romantic nostalgia that the African writer seems to cherish with respect to the female traditional role is not very conducive to women's emancipation, especially if she has no choice but the one between being a Lawino or a Clementine. Unfortunately, from the male writer's perspective, there seems to be hardly any other choice for her. Modern African women risk being accused of losing their African identity, a reproach (which one can hardly defend oneself against) much less heard in the case of men.

Since the 1960s: A New Perspective?

In her interesting book *Emancipation féminine et roman africain*, Arlette Chemain-Degrangé carefully analysed the image of the woman in the francophone African novel. Significantly, up till

1975, all of these novels in French had been written by male writers.¹⁷ She arrived at the conclusion that, in general, male writers simply take it for granted that woman submits to man and to tradition. Of course it is true that women played a role of their own in traditional African society, but men did too, and today they do not want to go back to the past. Doesn't an African proverb say that the river never returns to its source? In the novels, however, a woman who shows her independence is often punished for it.

However there are male novelists who advocate African women's liberation and do not adhere to the stereotypes of good (= the traditional loving mother) and bad (= the modern, evil, vicious girl). Sembène Ousmane is a significant example of emancipated thinking: he mercilessly highlights women's inequality and criticizes their resignation to their fate. He also shows the role that women should play in the development of society, for instance in political actions such as the railway strike in *God's Bits of Wood*. There are many other writers who broach the dilemma of liberation versus conservatism, but it is more often in a moderate, if not conservative, rather than a radical way, from the woman's point of view.

Gaining equal rights is obviously a wearisome task, not only because of the power of parental authority but also because of the fact that most men comfortably prefer to preserve discrimination when it suits their purpose. If women point this out, they are accused of having been influenced by Western women's liberation movements and that is the end of that. Francis Imbuga's play, *The Married Bachelor* shows both points of view. Mary lives with her boyfriend Denis. When she tells him that she already has a child by someone else he kicks her out, even though he himself has a son by another woman. Aren't they in the same situation? Denis does not think so:

DENIS: You are a woman. I am a man. You have once been pregnant. I have not. Do you still believe us to be similar?

MARY: But the basic facts are the same.

DENIS: Basic facts? What do you know about basic facts. The trouble with women is that you listen to the preaching of some western intellectual, talking about the equality of men and women and you imagine he is right. What you fail to realize is that woman is dangerously handicapped. This calls for more restriction of her physical desires. Women must exercise greater control over themselves if they are to retain their dignity in society. Right now yours, if you had any, has vanished into thin air.

MARY: Please, Denis, be kind. You are hurting me. Please.

DENIS: I am not hurting you. You hurt yourself the moment you allowed a man to share a blanket with you, give you a child and get away with it.¹⁸

Why should men be more equal than women? It has to do with society's heritage of traditions and norms. Men often want for themselves the same authority in their homes as their fathers had, an authority that was sanctioned by tradition and myths of the past. Young men want to marry virgins, and girls are given in marriage to husbands by fathers who do not have to ask their daughters' opinion. The women are expected to be faithful to their husbands, but have no right to ask the same in return. The men often have quite different norms, those that suit their male convenience.

In Buchi Emecheta's novel *Double Yoke*, a woman's point of view of virginity is presented with a great deal of irony. The female character Nko is rejected by her boy friend, because 'he was not sure that I was a virgin when we first made love'. Her friend Julia immediately wants to know whether Nko had asked him if he was a virgin too.¹⁹

Today, women writers are increasingly aware of their sisters' inequality in society and have started to write about it. Emecheta straightforwardly reveals her views of womanhood and of traditional society, which are much less idyllic than in the works of many a male writer before her; *The Joys of Motherhood* leaves no doubt about that.²⁰ She is one of the best known anglophone women writers in Africa. On the francophone side, the first woman writer who really attracted international attention was the Senegalese Mariama Bâ whose first novel *Une si longue lettre* had an enormous impact in her country as well as elsewhere.²¹ In an interview at the end of the Dutch edition of her book, she says:

In all cultures, the woman who formulates her own claims or who protests against her situation is given the cold shoulder. If the woman who expresses herself orally is already labelled in a special way, the women who dare fix their thoughts for eternity are criticised all the more. Thus women are still hardly represented among African writers. And yet they have so much to say and write about . . . The woman writer in Africa has a special task. She has to present the position of women in Africa in all its aspects. There is still so much injustice. In spite of the fact that for a decade the United Nations have paid special attention to woman's problems, in spite of beautiful speeches and praiseworthy intentions, women continue to be discriminated. In the family, in the institutions, in society, in the street, in political organisations, discrimination reigns supreme. Social pressure shamelessly

suffocates individual attempts at change. The woman is heavily burdened by mores and customs, in combination with mistaken and egoistic interpretations of different religions . . . As women, we must work for our own future, we must overthrow the status quo which harms us and we must no longer submit to it. Like men, we must use literature as a non-violent but effective weapon. We no longer accept the nostalgic praise to the African Mother who, in his anxiety, man confuses with Mother Africa. Within African literature, room must be made for women . . . room we will fight for with all our might.²²

These words sound full of hope and strength. Unfortunately, Mariama Bâ died at the age of fifty-two, a few months after this interview.

In reality, male reactions to women's liberation efforts in African society are often alarming, especially when the future of the society as a whole seems critical or hopeless. Ngandu Nkashama clearly emphasized this in an interesting article on contemporary theatre in Zaire. As recently as 1982, he made the following comments about images of women:

Often she is considered to be the cause of all social misery, because of her perfidy, her subtle playing with evil in all its forms, her use of ambiguous language, her mean and narrow-minded spirit full of scandals, luxury and lewdness . . . Woman's guilt is also attested to in her abandoning of her primordial role which had made her the guardian of tradition, protecting oracle of future societies. Carried along in the dizzily violent circle of the new cities, with their deep loneliness and their terrible fright, woman becomes the place in which the drama of the whole people 'dis-occults itself'. [*se désocculte*]²³

Abortions, killings, suicides, adultery, these images of woman in the theatre constitute, in fact, the trial of an (in)human community adrift. Feminism, according to Ngandu, is associated, for example, with traditional images of women grave-diggers, and societies of witches who eat their own children etc. In this theatre in the 1980s, one finds negative characters such as the 'sterile woman', who is violently tortured; the 'fallen woman' and the 'incestuous girl' in plays by Mambambu, Mususua and Ngenzhi Lonta.

All these plays stress the destruction of cultural identity: the dislocated family, the towns that destroy human relationships, social crises that reject people as such. Ngandu concludes that if the man sets such great store by the image of woman, it is because he has problems recognizing his own image in a society that rejects him, if not debases him. To him, this is not anti-feminism but the transposition of the whole social drama on the image of the woman

charged with the anger of a society unable to put its situation into words.²⁴

This is all very well, but the question remains: why should the woman be the only scapegoat? Why should she once again be blamed for all the wrong in today's society? Is it because she is in a weaker position and therefore more a victim than he is? Or because the male perspective prevents him from blaming man - even partly? Ngandu's examples emphasize this and, moreover, there is no female playwright among the ones mentioned and quoted by him. It is even possible that there are still none at all in Zaire. In African literature as a whole woman hardly has a mouth yet. The image of women in the novel is also very much a male writer's business, and often sadly stereotyped, especially in the urban novel where she is mainly depicted negatively, as a source of perdition and of menace.

In an interview I had with Buchi Emecheta in Amsterdam in May 1983, she complained about the way in which male colleagues often presented their female characters: 'A writer like Cyprian Ekwensi, for example, has got brilliant daughters, so why should he put down the women in his novels the way he does? I really do not understand'.

In a study of the image of woman in the Kenyan novel Eleanor Wachtel concludes that the 'modern' woman was continually associated with the evils of the city, such as drinking, violence, temptation and prostitution. She is depicted as a contemptuous parasite against the cherished background of the ideal traditional mother image. This easily leads to the stereotyped antitheses of mother-whore which, according to Eleanor Wachtel, are frequently found in contemporary Kenyan novels because they have been written by men:

As in nearly all third-world countries, most of the Kenyan novelists are men. Their central characters are preponderantly males. Further, the male viewpoint is underlined not only by the many characterizations of young men, but by the literary device of the first person protagonist . . . This is quite natural to the relatively inexperienced author who would tend to be somewhat autobiographical anyway. At the same time, however, it is also more intimate, personal and hence, more explicitly male in outlook and tone . . . This device creates rapport between author and reader and enlists the latter's sympathy. It does not allow for another point of view . . . Women are necessarily 'the other'. In Kenya this male-focused lens on life is an accurate reflection of society. It is consistent with a society where men are the primary decision-makers.²⁵

The only solution to this is the one to be implemented by women writers themselves: they must pick up their pens and express their own ideas about woman in African society, and thus correct or complement the one-sidedness of certain perspectives. This was indeed one of the conclusions of a number of women writers at a conference on African women and literature organized by the University of Mainz in 1982.²⁶ At this conference, the above-mentioned tendency to confuse Mother Africa with the African mother Mariama Bâ alluded to, was also emphasized by the South African novelist Miriam Tlali. As she put it, 'it is a problem when men want to call you Mother Africa and put you on a pedestal, because then they want you to stay there forever without asking your opinion - and unhappy you if you want to come down as an equal human being!' In the past women often accepted this, but they are less willing to do so in the contemporary urban context.

It is always difficult to start sharing power if one is used to being the master. For people who never had power, the changes can only be for the better. This has proved true in the past in the case of colonial domination, but the question is still who profited from this new power structure. Very few women did. Girls today receive less education and (as in the West) what they receive is more often of a domestic rather than of a technical nature.

At the Second International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books in London in April 1983, it was obvious that a number of black men in Africa had already made an important impact in world-wide literary circles, whereas black women were still struggling for recognition and were just starting to express the feelings and experiences of their sisters 'silenced by tradition'. In the words of Jane Bryce: 'black women have extended the meaning of words like "colonisation" and "barbarism" to include the specific experience of women in both black and white societies'.²⁷

Two critical attitudes

The field of criticism is still just as male-dominated as that of creative writing; this was clearly emphasized at the Mainz Conference. The present writer had to think of this, when looking for literary criticism and comments on the works of African women writers. In the main anthologies, essays on West African or East African women writers are hardly in evidence. It is true that there is now a book by Lloyd Brown on *Women Writers in Black Africa*.²⁸

The question is whether dealing separately with women's literature does not lead to a covert way of keeping them 'out of the official circuit'. However that may be, more attention is being devoted, little by little, to African women writers, as is also evident from this special issue of *African Literature Today*.

As far as critics are concerned, I should like to emphasize here the difference between what I call *exclusive* and *inclusive* criticism. Exclusion has often been used for the purpose of subjugation: this was a well known policy of the colonial masters, who tended to exclude Africa from what they called civilization.

Generally, we can distinguish these two approaches in criticism. In the first one, the critic takes his own culture, history, ideology and so on, as a (consciously or unconsciously) preconceived model and examines every text from that particular point of view. The other approach is that of the open-minded critic who is not bent upon including or excluding texts according to his own current value system, but who reads literary texts within the contexts from which they originated. Of course, inclusive criticism demands more of the critic since nothing is fixed in advance, especially when texts by authors from other cultures or ideologies, or of the other sex are concerned. The critic should be very well aware of what he is talking about; he has to be erudite (and modest!) in a new world-wide sense, and not only be familiar with his own culture, history, value system and context, but also with the other's. The openness of the inclusive approach has the advantage that the critic has not been excessively influenced by standard Western or male (or both) dominated values. Of course this is not easy, especially for people who are not even aware of the existence of different value systems. African critics who have the experience of values being dictated by Eurocentric exclusive criticism may have a head start on Western critics, as they would have seen how objectionable exclusive criticism can be. Unfortunately there is no guarantee that this will be the case.

An attempt will be made to illustrate this point by giving an example of both sorts of criticism involving women writers. Femi Ojo-Ade reveals himself as an example of the exclusive critic, when he tells the African woman writer what to do or rather what not to do in his 'Female Writers, Male Critics':

The [women] writers that we have studied dwell too much upon the malady of male chauvinism, a phenomenon that, in its most famous aspect, is no less a Western way than the notions of feminism espoused by some female writers. Blackness, Africanness . . . is almost foreign to

others who have let the questions of male domination blind them to the necessary solidarity between man and woman.²⁹

At the Mainz Conference, the African women writers and critics rejected precisely this kind of viewpoint because they felt that it was unfair; it was also all too easy and simple to try to combat their striving for equality by saying that it was under Western womens' influence. The other well-known argument is of course that women lose their femininity, when they demand equal rights, as Ojo-Ade suggests indeed in his article on Mariama Bâ. According to this critic, 'as an expression of freedom' the feminism of Ramatoulaye, the heroine of the novel:

constitutes only a partial aspect of the totality of African life. Femininity is the virtue of the traditionalist; feminism, the veneer of the progressive striving to become a man.³⁰

Does femininity still equal submissiveness?

An example of an inclusive critic is Eustace Palmer, who, in an excellent article, looks without prejudice at Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood*. Without balancing feminism against blackness, he appreciates with great care Emecheta's woman's perspective as a contribution to the whole of African literature and does not regard it (as Ojo-Ade does) as a 'deviant perspective':

The picture of the cheerful contented female complacently accepting her lot is replaced by that of a woman who is powerfully aware of the unfairness of the system and who longs to be fulfilled in her self, to be a full human being, not merely somebody else's appendage.³¹

He is aware of the critic's problems that are to be expected in view of this new approach of a 'reality' which is not his own:

What gives this novel its peculiar quality is the unashamed presentation of the woman's point of view. This comes out not merely in the powerful evocation of Nnu Ego's misery but even in the narrator's own omniscient comments . . . There will be many who will find Emecheta's analysis of the female situation controversial; her presentation may not be able to stand up to sociological scrutiny. But *The Joys of Motherhood* is an imaginative and not a scientific work, and the artist is surely within her rights to exaggerate or even to depart from sociological authenticity. The novel must be judged as a work of art and it is difficult to deny the accomplishment of the artistry.³²

This broadness of the male critical mind is often lacking in the discussion of works by women. The main problem, however, is that men are not used to taking the female perspective into account, since it has so often been hidden or kept from men by the women themselves, because of personal interest or fear of reprisals, just as African views were kept from white colonizers by the Africans, in the past. Today, some women have the courage to reflect in the mirror of their writings their own views and experiences of the hierarchical role patterns, as well as the violation of the status quo by daring female characters.

One can like it or not, one can get angry and tell them 'to behave', but that would mean dictating one's perspective at the expense of someone else's, and denying that someone else the right to have and express any personal view on 'reality' at all.

Therefore I should like to remind the reader of an old statement by Chinua Achebe - which I alter slightly with his permission - because in this new context it has lost neither its deep wisdom nor its relevance:

The *male* critic of African literature must cultivate the habit of humility appropriate to his limited experience of the *female* world and purged of the superiority and arrogance which history so insidiously makes him heir to.³³

Achebe used the word *European* in his text instead of 'male' and the word *African* instead of 'female': he was addressing the Eurocentric Western critic. He has also asserted that his statement, which dates from 1962, made him 'quite a few bitter enemies: one of them took my comments so badly - almost as a personal affront - that he launched numerous unprovoked attacks against me.'³⁴ Are African critics any wiser today than European ones were twenty years ago?³⁵

NOTES

1. See for instance Christine Obbo, *African Women: Their Struggle for Economic Independence*, London, Zed Press, 1981.
2. I.e. the methodological discussion of whether African literature

should be so different as to demand different methods to study it. See for instance the papers I edited for the African Studies Centre, *Text and Context in Africa: Methodological Explorations in the Field of Literature*, Leiden, African Studies Centre, 1977.

3. Unless stated otherwise, the creation myths referred to here are to be found in my collection *Het zwarte paradijs, Afrikaanse scheppingsmythen*, Massbree, Corrie Zelen, 1980. Page references to this book are inserted in the text. Unfortunately, this book which contains fifty creation myths (chosen among hundreds) from all over Africa, is not yet available in English.
4. *ibid.*, pp. 19ff.
5. Ulli Beier (ed.), *The Origin of Life and Death*, London, Heinemann, 1974, p. 51.
6. P.A. Talbot, *In the Shadow of the Bush*, London, Heinemann, 1912, p. 17.
7. Denise Paulme, *La mère dévorante*, Paris, Gallimard, 1975.
8. Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe. I. Les faits et les mythes*, Paris, Gallimard, 1949, pp. 24-5.
9. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *A Grain of Wheat*, London, Heinemann, (1967), 1976, p. 34.
10. See, for instance, Jacklyn Cock, *Maids and Madams. A Study in the Politics of Exploitation*, Johannesburg, Ravan Press, 1980. In my book *Le Blanc vu d'Afrique*, Amsterdam/Yaoundé 1973, I have analysed the francophone African novels on the subject of the image of the white man and the Western world up till 1966. One chapter deals with the Western woman, see pp. 135-168.
11. Ferdinand Oyono, *Une vie de boy*, Paris, Julliard, 1960. English translation, *Houseboy*, London, Heinemann, 1966, pp. 55-6.
12. Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1968. Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1952.
13. See Oyono, *Vie de boy*.
14. Cf. *Le Blanc vu d'Afrique*, pp. 145ff. An example from the African novel in English is Margery Thompson's affair with Dr Van Dyke in Ngugi's *Grain of Wheat*. See also Alan Burns, *Le préjugé de race et de couleur*, Paris, Payot, 1949, p. 41: 'There is no doubt that passionate love scenes in films discredit the white woman in the eyes of the Africans' (my translation). G. Jahoda, *White Man*, London, Oxford University Press, 1962, p. 105, confirms this.
15. Cyprian Ekwensi, *Jagua Nana*, London, Heinemann, 1961, 1975, p. 7, p. 13.
16. Okot p'Bitek, *Song of Lawino, a Lament*, Nairobi, East African Publishing House, 1966, p. 41.
17. Arlette Chemain-Degrange, *Emancipation féminine et roman africain*, Dakar, Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1980.
18. Francis P. Imbuga, *The Married Bachelor*, Nairobi, East African Publishing House, 1973, pp. 53-4.

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19. Buchi Emecheta, *Double Yoke*, London/Ibuza, Ogwugwu Afor, 1982, pp. 154-5.
20. Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*, London, Heinemann, 1979.
21. Mariama Bâ, *Une si longue lettre*, Dakar, Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1979,
22. The interview in the Dutch edition of the book was done by Jan Kees van de Werk.
23. P. Ngandu Nkashama, 'Le théâtre: vers une dramaturgie fonctionnelle', in: *La littérature zaïroise*, numéro spécial de Notre Librairie, janvier-mars 1982, pp. 67-8.
24. *ibid.*, pp. 72-4.
25. Eleanor Wachtel, 'The Mother and the Whore: Image and Stereotype of African Women', *Umoja*, 1, no. 2, p. 42.
26. The selected papers presented at this conference were published in 1984. See Ulla Schild (ed.), *Jaw-Bones and Umbilical Cords*, Berlin, Reimer Verlag.
27. Jane Bryce, 'Book Fair Blazes Trail', *The New African*, May 1983, pp. 34-5.
28. Lloyd W. Brown, *Women Writers in Black Africa*, West port, Conn., Greenwood Press, 1981.
29. Femi Ojo-Ade, 'Female Writers, Male Critics', *African Literature Today*, 13, 1983, p. 176. See also his 'Still a Victim? Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*', *African Literature Today*, 12, 1982, pp. 71-87.
30. Ojo-Ade, 'Still a Victim?', p. 84.
31. Eustace Palmer, 'The Feminine Point of View: Buchi Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood*', *African Literature Today*, 13, 1983, p. 39.
32. *ibid.*, pp. 44, 55.
33. Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, London, Heinemann, 1975, p. 6.
34. *ibid.*
35. A more extended version of this paper is to be found in Mineke Schipper (ed.), *Unheard Words. Women and Literature in Africa, the Arab World, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America*; London, Allison & Busby, 1985, pp. 22-59.