

# Image of Women in African Literature

**Dr. K. Sathyapriya**  
Assistant Professor in English  
Sri G.V.G Visalakshi College for Women  
Udumalpet, Tamil Nadu  
[pertlarks@gmail.com](mailto:pertlarks@gmail.com)

---

## Abstract

The image of women in literature emerges out of the existing world. Literature depicts two images of women - first, the ascetic women in quest of truth, knowledge and spiritual pursuit sacrifice life for the society and second, the domestic women dedicate themselves to the welfare of the family. The image of women in society mostly belongs to the second category. The shadowy female figures projected by many writers mutely fulfill their traditionally ordained roles as devoted wife, obedient daughter and self abnegating mother. They are often depicted as supporting characters rather than protagonists. In addition, the tendency for African women authors has been to portray the women characters as educated yet lacking self-empowerment. Women have faced and continue to face widespread poverty, heavy labour burdens, gender disparities and economic exclusion. But education inculcated a sense of individuality among women and aroused an interest in their human rights. Over years, the age old image of the women seems to be slowly blurring and gradually shading off into a new image. Beyond the obstacles faced by female characters in the literary works, they should, as evident in reality, also be shown to experience wholesome levels of personal achievement. The paper discusses the evolution of African women from ancient to modern period.

**Keywords: Image, Women, Traditional Women, Africa, War**

## Introduction

A galaxy of writers emerged in African literature and everyone is special in portraying the society in their own aspect. One cannot under-estimate the creative spirit of the Africans. They have presented the grandeur of their country which is not subservient to other countries. Their works are comparatively equal to that of the other writers of the colonized countries. Hostile environment, stifling atmosphere, suffocating milieu and anxiety, decadent culture and dehumanization, luxury, abuse of sex, lust for power and some more themes are concentrated on by the African Writers. The detailed study of the African literature would help the readers to understand the lifestyle of the Africans and the African writers. The writers shape their characters based on the characteristics of the common man. The joy in enjoying literature intensifies based on the understanding of the work. Every writer has used his/her own style in

---

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 20:3 March 2020

**Prof. Dr. S. Chelliah, Editor: Select Papers of the International Conference on  
*Human Praxis and Modern Configuration through Literature* -- VOLUME 2**

Dr. K. Sathyapriya, Image of Women in African Literature

165

portraying the women characters and understanding becomes essential to grasp the elegance of the writers. The sociological study of the African woman would reveal the actual circumstances of the woman of Africa down historical periods.

### **Discussion and Interpretation**

The status of women in Africa does not remain the same and changes over a period of time; the image of women depicted in African literature also goes on changing. The image of traditional African women is found in pre-colonial literature. Transitional image in the colonial period and transformation could be found in the post colonial literature. Male-writing always portrays the optimistic side of women. For them, women remain the same in an unchanging pre-colonial period. They portray the traditional women whose role is active. As a young girl they are always obedient and as a strong mother feel happy for what they are. Male writers are reluctant in dealing with the issues of women, particularly polygamy and motherhood. It is because of the dearth of women writers in the African scenario such an image prevailed until recently.

“Long ago women used to rule this land and its men. They were harsh and men began to resent their hard hand. So when all the women were pregnant, we came together and overthrew them. Before this, women owned everything” (The River Between, 18). Chege, the central character Waiyaki’s father, narrates the story of how matriarchal families descended from the nine daughters of Gikuyu and Mumbi and were transformed to the patriarchal order. These lines of Ngugi Wa Thiong’o in the novel *The River Between* is not only a retelling of Gikuyu myth but stands as an evidence to prove that in many ways the African women led an autonomous life in ancient Africa.

Kenneth Little’s *The Sociology of Urban Women’s Image in African Literature* is the work that describes the stereotypical images of women. Wole Soyinka, Sembene Ousmane and Ngugi Wa Thiong’o are some of the writers who characterize women as resourceful and determined. But women appear in their true colour and have a distinct personality only in woman author’s works. In recent times women writing in Africa have taken effort in bringing out the history of women and their experiences through the centuries.

Once, the women in pre-colonial Africa achieved superior status in the society. They were known for their traditional role and status and considered as the evidence of the opulence of the African culture. Thiong’o in *The River Between* does not find his women cultivating at the fields but he feels that they speak to the crops and the soil in a secret language. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* has produced the character Auntie Ifeka, in whom one can find the traditional woman enjoying economic independence. The traditional

women had right to own and acquire property. They were guaranteed rights to land use and earned separate income through the sources. They became economic partners with the head of the family to support the family expenses. They were respected and treated as an equal member. Nyokabi, the second wife of Ngotho in Thiongo's *Weep Not Child* is one such woman who performs the role of a producer equal to man in cultivating land, growing surplus crops for sale and grinding and cooking. Woman also played an active role in creating shelter. But women who played various roles in maintaining their homes and children, were disregarded after colonization.

Colonization denied women the primary status by introducing capitalist economy and granted limited rights and privileges at home and society. Besides, they were corrupted by the western culture by applying cosmetics, using wigs, wearing short dresses and getting employed in foreign offices. The bureaucrats of the government, who had to enhance the status of women, were held responsible for the decline and insensitivity displayed in attaining their needs. The authoritative as well as ordinary men continued to abuse women verbally and physically. They laid their own ethics and did not bother much about the deceit of conduct and action committed. They were careless in attending the needs of the women. An ideology of detracting women slowly developed and in adverse, prostitution spread wide. The prominent features of women were eradicated, and they were looked at only as sexual objects by the Black and the White men. Colonization had affected women and forced them into the dark shadows of subjugation. They were exploited as labourers and held to be slaves.

The new system of monogamous marriage system put forth by the colonial education was not welcomed by the male dominating society. Since the male were much attached to the traditional family system, there prevailed disharmony in the families. It could be witnessed in the case of the couple Kehinde and Albert in Bucchi Emecheta's *Kehinde*. Division of man and woman arose in education. Men were provided formal education while women were deprived of that privilege. Some women, who had easy access to education, entered the fields of teaching and clerical jobs which were considered feminine jobs. Women in the sphere of education and employment raised the ego of men and they began to disrespect women. Thus colonial capitalism exploited women in three forms - their position in production, in family and in colonial society.

The patriarchal principles objectify women and they become instruments of serving the males of the family. Barrenness is the worst affliction that spoils the life of a woman. A woman is deprived of being a wife, since she lacks reproductive powers and the same is with the case of a woman who cannot conceive the children required, even if she is a mother of two or more. She is being objectified in the image of mother and she becomes complete only when she bears sons as seen in the case of Amaka in Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood*. A woman is replaced by a

younger wife where polygamy permits a male to take many wives. Widowed women are compelled to accept the brother of her husband as per custom. Emecheta was forced to establish herself as a single parent, since her partner departed from her. Her personal experiences in life instigated her to ply on the insecure condition of women who confront sexual politics and racial prejudice in their own continent and other countries. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta strongly criticizes the patriarchal society as it regards a woman to be a sexual partner and child bearer.

With marriage women suffered most oppression in the hands of their men and also lost their status. Mariama Ba, a Senegalese writer and feminist brought up by her traditional grandparents, is restrained from getting formal education. She is frustrated with the plight of the African women, and as a crusader pens against the social injustices, such as polygamy. In *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song*, the novelist depicts the woman protagonists as victims of polygamy. In the novel *So Long a Letter*, Ramatoulaye and Aissoton are the two different sufferers who expose their agony in their own way. Ramatoulaye accepts her position as a neglected wife and stays back with her husband, but Aissoton contends with her partner and as a deserted woman walks out of home to discharge her duties as a mother. Mariama Ba has focused on the importance of self-awareness related to women in her novels, so that they may gain a prominent space in the dominant patriarchal African society. In Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah*, the married life has brought in immense difference in Ojiugo. Ojiugo's response to her husband Nicholas at most of the times was 'Yes Nicholas'. She says, "Marriage changes things" (*Americanah*, 240) and she has subjected herself to her husband like all other women. But she is not as suppressive as Beatrice in *Purple Hibiscus*; she has her own circle of friends and gossips.

In *Purple Hibiscus* the perspective of Beatrice and Ifeoma on family and marriage is conflicting. Though Ifeoma's husband Ifedoria is dead, she gains much strength to bring up her children saying, "life begins when marriage ends" (*Purple Hibiscus*, 75). Beatrice could not even envision her life without her husband as she considers a "husband crowns a woman's life..." (*Purple Hibiscus*, 75). She believes that only because of the presence of man at home the life of a woman gets fulfilled. But the life of Beatrice is fraught with contradictions that arise out of her husband's doctrinal domination. Adichie has attempted to unchain woman from the bond of husband by presenting her pain of acquiescence. She details how the inability of Beatrice's experiences to save herself and her children from the nasty punishments of her husband brings in a terrific courage in her to kill him. She realizes that her husband's rule over the family is always obliterating and brings despondency to her children and to herself. Several years of brutal punishment administered by her husband on her daughter precipitates her to entail in such a vigorous and audacious act.

Adichie has produced Beatrice as an example of surreptitious feminine strength who performs her role as a passive woman throughout the novel but for her courage to kill her husband. Beatrice and Ifeoma are the vibrant and intricate paradigms of the postcolonial Nigerian woman. Adichie, as a sturdy feminist, has modeled these women characters to be imperatively opposing replica of the postcolonial feminism. Beatrice thus secures a unique place among other motherly characters like Nnu Ego who remarries in Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood*, Ramatoulaye who dwells with her husband as a dwindled wife and Aissoton who gives up her married life in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*.

While many writers have drawn attention to highlight the deprived state of women, there are also few writers who concentrate on physical, cognitive, emotional, social and behavioural defects and development of young girls. *Gwendolen*, Emecheta's most famous work, offers a critical commentary on the sexual abuse of children. Gwendolen, a young West Indian girl rises to her adolescent life which is filled only of excruciating agony. She has concentrated on young girls being snatched away from the world of innocence by the sexual exploiters. The Nigerian writer, Sefi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* is a coming-of-age novel that tells the story of Etina. The girl grows into a woman in the postcolonial Nigeria and England. Etina struggles to cope with the demands of the patriarchal society. Being the only child, Etina feels difficult to identify herself in a disintegrated home. Her mother as a religious zealot and her father as a manipulative politician restrict her from having a normal childhood. Etina is a resemblance of Kambili in *Purple Hibiscus* who suffers under her father's strict beliefs.

The life of Kambili is a circumscribed one. Her home is silent and suffocating because her needs and wishes is never recognized. Her father Eugene determines her every minute action. He ruins the personal as well as social life of Kambili by interrupting in all her activities. Kambili kills her wishes and does not feel free to speak the truth to her father. Furthermore, when Kambili steps into the outer world, she has to face the people with authority appearing as terrifying figures, overcome the begetting coups that attack children and the public, understand the coded conversation of parents about tyranny, pass the despotic demolition of public properties on her way to school and yet more. Since Adichie has understood that the ultimate purpose of a good literary work is to provide man with opportunities for attaining self-fulfillment she makes aunt Ifeoma to support Kambili and help her to overcome the distress and fulfill her needs.

In the list of psychological, sociological, historical and other novels that focus on women, war novels could also be included. Because one could find the normality of individuals, young girls and women being affected by war. Much women writing emerged after the civil war.

Women in Nigeria bothered about the country and men during the time of the civil war. They involved themselves in demonstrations in the streets, protesting against massacres, demanding secession and condemning the Soviet involvement in the war. It expounds the misery of the Biafrans in losing their family members, money and resources during the pogroms and war. It details the struggle of women and children in attaining their basic necessities.

Women traded beyond the boundary lines and supported the army by distributing materials and supplying information. Olanna in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* experiences the threats of war when the food supply is greatly affected. She trades across enemy lines to support her family. Day-to-day food resources became scarcer that people have to starve and die. Nwapa's short story *Wives at War*, Pauline Onwubiko's novel *Running for Cover*, Catherine Obanaju's play *Into the Heart of Biafra* and Rose Njoku's *Withstand the Storm* are the few literary works that highlight the women who joined in the civilian-militia units.

*Destination Biafra*, a novel by Emecheta written during the period of civil war in Nigeria, paints the struggles of the Biafran people. Debbie Ogedembge, educated at Oxford University, strives to participate in the Biafran war irrespective of being a daughter of a minister corrupted by the Nigerian government. As a traditional Nigerian woman, Emecheta has produced a searing story of conflict in which Biafra rises against Nigeria and emerges as a republic country. Thus the war novels have described the horrors faced by women in the war. The role of women in the war was also commendable.

## Conclusion

All the women writers discussed above have offered their own images in the works produced by them. Their pattern of analyzing women and their insight into women's situation have proved themselves to be committed writers in all the perspectives – as a woman, writer and third world person. In every aspect the works of the women writers are satisfactory but for the attention in portraying the life of successful women and providing guidelines for self-empowerment. The writers should focus on employing more optimistic characters to find a survival for the suppressed group by injecting the need for self-empowerment in their minds.

---

## Works Cited

- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. "Purple Hibiscus." London: Harper Perennial, 2007.  
---. "Half of a Yellow Sun." London: Harper Perennial, 2007.  
---. "Americanah." London: Fourth Estate, 2013.  
Dhawan. R.K, ed. "African Literature Today." New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1994.

- Emecheta, Buchi. "Destination Biafra." Oxford: Heinemann, 1994.
- Sircar, Roopali. "Women In African Literature Today." New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1994.
- Thiong'o, Ngugi Wa. "Weep Not, Child." London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1964.
- . "The River Between." London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd., 1965.
- . "Petals of Blood." New York: Penguin Books, 1977.