

Interrogating patriarchy and traditions in Chenjerai Hove's *Ancestors* and Calixthe Beyala's *The Plantation*

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Abstract:

This article interrogates the portrayal and subversion of women and girls by patriarchy and tradition in post-colonial Zimbabwe. The study centres on Chenjerai Hove's *Ancestors* and Calixthe Beyala's *The Plantation*. Against the backdrop of patriarchy and domination, this article presents the pains of dishonoured maternity. In this regard, the cultural practices which not only degrade women but similarly exclude them from making decisions are also uncovered. This study questions the tyrannical powers that relegate women. Drawing from the feminist and sociological theories, this work aims to answer the following question: how do patriarchy and traditions hinder women's autonomy? Finally, it is proposed that patriarchy is the reason for the problems of perpetual female subordination.

Key words: patriarchy, subordination, tradition, women, Zimbabwe.

1.Introduction:

There are a lot of African literature works that show male supremacy but incompetently beseech the situation of women. In a male-controlled culture, women are confronted with all kinds of dehumanisation, including lack, neglect, cruelty, sidelining, domination, suppression, abuse, disgrace and even segregation. All of these negative attributes originate from facets of the people's philosophy. On this background, the women call out for such characteristics of the culture that weaken their happiness and liberation to be eliminated. They, therefore, struggle for equality and emancipation in the male dominated African society. In this direction, literature becomes a tool for them to create awareness to the fact that the modern African woman through educational attainments is not just fighting for rights and privileges but also for something that must let the society understand that the women demand equal opportunities as human beings. Literature therefore opens a new lens for society to reflect on the harsh realities that women experience. The women as wives are expected to be submissive, obedient, unquestioning and servile while any challenge to these attributes attracts social disfavour. Hence, the clearly defined roles for women are passed on to the girl-child as she grows. As soon as she is able to do things for herself, she starts assuming the roles society through patriarchy and traditions has mapped out for her.

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This paper, therefore, takes a critical look into Hove and Beyala's novels which advocate a new dawn for the oppressed women. According to Kumah (2000: 10) "as a consequence of the male-dominated literary tradition, many of the depictions of African women are reductive-perpetuating popular myths of female subordination"

This article analyses patriarchy and traditions in Chenjerai Hove's *Ancestors* and Calixthe Beyala's *The Plantation*. *Ancestors* describes a complex examination of women and girls who are caught in the jaws of patriarchy and traditions. The novel questions matters of maternity, forced and arranged marriages as well as disrupted girlhood on the backdrop of masculinity and patriarchy. This narration depicts women and girls who are perceived traditionally as inferior in a largely male universe. *The Plantation*, on the other hand depicts the lives of women and girls who are also affected by patriarchy as well as colonial oppression. *The Plantation* depicts women who are oppressed sexually. The choice of these novels is based on the fact that they focus on the historical growth of women's awareness. *Ancestors* and *The Plantation* propose that escape from patriarchy is crucial to women's struggle for self-protection and growth. Hove and Beyala have conceptualised and presented the problems associated with women's struggles in the Zimbabwean experience. How they have depicted their sensibilities and choices are crucial concerns of this article. Ojaide (2018:5) asserts that "African literature and culture are at a critical crossroads. We find ourselves at a period in history which globalization is so important that it could impact Africans more than colonialism did to us socio-culturally."

The objectives of this study are as follows: to question the various aspects of patriarchy and traditions in the Zimbabwean society as presented in the selected novels and to examine the factors and tendencies that outline and impact patriarchal and traditional conduct in the selected novels.

This study adopts a two-fold methodological approach, namely: sociological and feminist. This enables the analysis of the connection between the novels and society. The feminism theory responds to women's pursuit for parity with men. It targets at altering the position of women in society as women have all along been viewed as inadequate and inferior to men. Watkins (2015:1) defines feminism as "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression." It is significant to perceive that the feminist literary approach is connected to the Marxist approach since both methods emphasis the eradication of classes in society. Feminism is thus used as an investigative tool to interrogate not just Hove and Beyala's representation of women and girls, but likewise the entirety of circumstances that outline their conduct. Kendall (2021) believes that providing for rudimentary human necessities are a feminist concern; these include food provision, adequate salary and access to education. Lee and Oren (2020) argue that feminism is method, a movement, a critique and an identity. They in turn interrogate its uses, limits and reinventions. In short, feminism revolves around the acknowledgment of current women's domination and addresses the predominant unfair and prejudiced gender relations.

Within this analytical framework this work explores the refrains brought about by silencing through patriarchy and traditions as contracting shackles that restrain the goals of women. It is on this background that this article analyses forced marriage, traditions in *Ancestors*, sexuality in *The Plantation*.

2. Forced marriage in *Ancestors*

Miriro is born deaf and dumb. From an early age, she faces many problems including marriage offers from older men. One day some preachers come to the homestead. The

text reveals the following: “The preachers say they want to take her and bring her up in the ways which you do not understand, and they will make her their wife too...” (18) Her mother objects, saying “not my silent one.” (*ibid*) It is ironic that “father did not mind. He saw the opportunity to rid the homestead of whispers into the night. If they want to bring her up in their own way, let them take her. He told my mother, his voice full of hidden joy.” (19) This extract illustrates the polemic that exists between patriarchy and matriarchy. Against the backdrop of traditions, Miriro’s father is overjoyed at any slight opportunity to get rid of his disabled daughter. Jick and Nkweteyim (2016) assert that in male-controlled communities, men have an upper hand over women. This delineation offers them power to successfully use supremacy over women. Patriarchy thus affords a framework in which prejudice becomes operational and functions as a foundation for men to subjugate women.

“The silent one! The silent one!” the man shouts...I will marry the silent one. The one everybody despises. Give her to me.” (p. 146) In a meeting, the elders agree to hand over Miriro in marriage to the madman. It is ironic that “those who have taken her to her husband come back with smiles on their faces. She will do well they say. She works hard as a woman. What more does a man need in a wife?” (146) This statement is part of the list of anticipated attributes of a woman which are opined on the conviction that women are different as well as lower than men. This expected conduct is part of the practices of developed customary laws that subjugate women’s needs and ambitions. This forced and arranged marriage is intolerable to Miriro, it marks the degree of her betrayal, her denial by her family in particular and the society in general. Miriro is not given a chance to make choices in life. The text clearly demonstrates how the largely patriarchal and traditional shona culture is saturated with undesirable undertones to women and girls.

With bitterness, Tariro takes her own life only to resurface as a dream and a voice through Mucha more than a hundred years after her death. Mucha must now recount her lived experiences, be her voice so to speak, to lay bare the pain she went through as a mortal. Tariro, unlike Miriro, is born with a voice but one that is never taken seriously. She too, like Miriro is forced into early marriage, even before she understands what marriage is all about. Her happiness is nipped in the bud because just as she looks forward to enjoying her teenage life, as she yearns for the day she will be courted by the most handsome lad in the village, she is led to marry old Musindo, an act described by Mafunga’s wife as “marrying a grave” (p. 112). Like all Hove’s female characters Tariro is unlettered. School to her is a waste of time. “As for school, it can wait until her own children go to waste their time with the angry school teacher...Tariro has seen girls whose girlhood was wasted at the school. Big girls, listening to children’s stories told badly by the teacher. No man wanted to marry them.” (p. 105)

“When a few days later she has taken her own life, with her own hands, the elders sit again and cry: nothing like this has ever happened in our blood. Nothing. They shake their heads, silence descending upon them like a cloud of smoke” (147) While there is a feeling of a looming threat from the wronged women, this threat is not clearly defined, neither has it been witnessed anywhere in the text. While it appears logical that Miriro comes to haunt a man and forces him to tell her story, a more productive approach, however, would have been to have Miriro and Tariro’s stories told by a woman. Such an approach would have afforded Hove an opportunity to make visible

the women thus increase their physical participation in seeking a new order. By choosing to give the main narrative voice to a male, Hove's depiction of women naturally becomes androcentric. It is questionable why the author chooses to put the female voice in a male body.

1.2. Implications of the forced marriage

Such portrayal, rather than highlighting the plight of women in traditional African set ups serves to ridicule them and show them as deserving the ill-treatment they get. Top most on Tariro's mind is marriage, a marriage in which she would serve her husband dutifully in the traditional sense. What irks Tariro is the fact that in all of this, she is never consulted, but she is expected to obey the dictates of patriarchy without question. Accepting this arrangement would, however, totally shatter her dream of an ideal marriage hence she decides to run away to Lusaka hoping that her rebellion would deter patriarchy from similar abuse of the girl child in the future. While her rebellion is a positive move against male domination, her death is some kind of anti-climax. Her earlier bravery is totally obliterated and it appears it was all labour lost. Hove again, betrays his heroine and makes it appear as if the struggle against male domination is all in vain. A more meaningful depiction would have at least empowered Tariro to survive her ordeal so as to give some kind of hope in the text. Tariro like several other women characters worry about trivial issues that point to a very shallow understanding of their predicament. Their yearnings are largely male yearnings in the sense that what they aspire to become serves the interests of patriarchy. Their dreams do not in any way threaten the continued existence of male defined social structures. It is such depiction of the female psyche that makes Hove's characterization essentially androcentric.

3. Traditions in *Ancestors*

In *Ancestors*, over and above the voices of Miriro and Tariro, Hove also presents Tariro's mother's voice. Tariro's mother, pained by losing her child challenges the ancestors by speaking against traditional practices that bring pain to women. She says "if the ancestors take away my daughter, I curse them,...No, my child must never return if she returns to the hands of an old man. No, my child was born like everyone else. She must come back to me, not anywhere else...(p. 121. Her defiance though commendable, comes a bit too late. She had quietly conspired with the male order to have Tariro 'marry a grave'. Her disobedience is registered now because the marriage has not worked out and Tariro has disappeared. Her outburst is therefore not a genuine complaint against this practice of forced marriages, but more of a lament for her daughter. In other words, had Tariro stayed and accepted the marriage, her voice would not have been heard. In any case she too had been treated like her daughter, she had been made to marry her first husband, the carver, when very young. Fortunately for her, her marriage had worked. Using the Marxist philosophy of the haves and the have-nots, this analysis points to the marginal position of women in Africa as reflected in novels under study. In this context, women epitomize the subjugated and the outcasts of society.

In her society, it is taboo to curse the ancestors hence the reward she gets for speaking against traditional practices is rejection by her husband, who says "from now on, I will not consider you my wife" (125). She is banished from her matrimonial home together with her children for whom she now has to fend for. Without her husband, she becomes helpless, totally vulnerable and does not appear to have any working

alternative in a life without Tariro's father. Hove does not reward her brave voice but instead seems to suggest that her rebellion is imprudent through showing her suffering thereafter. Through such a portrayal, Hove perpetuates negative perceptions of women by showing her socio-economic status declining as a result of her rebellion. Since she is uneducated, she writes a letter to her elder son Fanwell through Mucha, asking him to help by providing a home for her young children.

"Things are not right for me and the children, I have told you this...Soon I will be sent away. Where do I go? What do I do with these children?" (162). Mucha's mother is very exposed, a condition that will not be envied by any woman. Such a depiction of women is counter-productive. It can hardly inspire a defiant attitude in other women. The world of *Ancestors* remains male centred, with women remaining appendages to men for their survival. All Hove's women characters are uneducated, simple rural women whose chances of directing change are very limited. In fact, their simplicity is their undoing. In addition, Hove's central female characters in *Ancestors*, namely Miriro and Tariro never really develop to have a meaningful physical presence in the text. They remain peripheral characters more in the dream world of Mucha's life, which appears to curtail their effectiveness as agents of change. It is sad to not that even in their privileged, supposedly powerful world of the preternatural they seem incapable of bringing up meaningful change to women's lived experiences. They remain essentially shadowy figures merely recounting their painful experiences through Mucha, but still with no real power to move the less powerful terrestrial beings into new frames of thinking as regards male-female relationships. Mucha's father cannot be said to be affected by Miriro's coming back anywhere. Not only has he had encounters with her in his own dreams, but he is also aware that she has been troubling his son to tell her story. He, however, remains intransigent, he does not listen to her message, and in fact he continues to ignore his wife's feelings. "You know my pain and pretend that it is not a pain" (p. 125) she tells him. Lorde urges women to "transform silence into language and action." It is on this background that Beyala and Hove empower their women characters to speak through their actions.

He goes on to chase her away from their matrimonial home and she, it appears, ends up the loser. We cannot say any of the men-folk are punished for ill-treating women. If anyone is punished, it is Mucha who is forced to recount his nightmarish encounters with Miriro, in a case of the sins of the fathers being visited on the sons. In the final analysis, the women are the losers in this text, as indeed is the case in the other two novels, the males go unpunished. At the end of the text, both Tariro and Miriro do not seem to have achieved anything. The two are walking away from the land of their ancestors as if defeated. Mucha tells us, "Miriro's words are getting fainter and fainter, feeble like the words of a dying old man...The two walk from this land of ancestors in which they have lived with tears in their eyes and burdens in their hearts" (p. 195). The restlessness continues, with no sense of achievement at all in spite of the fact that their stories have been told. This is a pessimistic ending to the text which seems to suggest that efforts to accommodate women in a male world are in vain.

4. Sexuality in *The Plantation*

In Africa, women continue to be relegated in almost all domains of life, henceforth there is a need to explore methods that can help to bring expressive integrity and parity in the way society observes them. Food and sexual activity are fundamental aspects of life. Being an essential need, if we don't eat we die. The same can be said of sexuality because, at the level of reproduction, the absence of sexuality could lead

to death through the absence of procreation. Sex and food are two essential activities which guarantee the survival of mankind. They are intimately linked in the popular imagination, which thus illustrates the juxtaposition of the saint and the layman, the unspeakable and the nameable. The product of a mixed culture, the African literary field frequently explores the relationship between sexuality and food. In her work on the myth of the burning mother in African verbal traditions, Denise Paulme (1976), asserts that patriarchal norms are at the origin of this myth and also maintains that in most languages, the expressions which designate the copulation and consumption can get along with each other. We thus understand the frequent assimilation between intimate relations and food.

In fact, in the novel *Plantation*, Rosa declares to Blues that Franck “does not eat the same meal twice” (101). Through this quote, the character aims to show that Franck Enio only sleeps once with a woman. The narration presents Franck as a “fast food lover, consumable and disposable” (102). This implies that Franck has several sexual partners and he does not spend a lot of time with the same woman. Of Erwin, the narrative mentions that he “went so far as to pay a piece of such a maid’s hut to satisfy her sexual bulimia” (101). The word “bulimia” suggests gastronomy.

5. Conclusion:

This article thus, has shown that while Hove in his novels seeks to give a voice to marginalized women, while he seeks to negotiate spaces for them in a predominantly patriarchal world, his presentation is largely androcentric. What he articulates about women is largely from a male point of view whose effect is to further entrench societal views of women instead of changing them. Hove just presents women as women, helpless, wronged and needing male sympathy. His women do not meaningfully take the initiative to change their positions in relation to men they live in response to the whims of men and remain largely simplistic in their interpretation of their socio-historical circumstances. What Hove simply does is to invite the reader to share in and witness the pain the women go through at the hands of patriarchy, and then as if in despair, presents their fate as an immutable given. It is such a portrayal that does very little to further the cause for women, hence its androcentric nature. Both colonialism and patriarchy confine women to the fringes of existence.

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