

Dismantling Patriarchal Dominance in Three Female Anglophone Cameroonian Writers' Works: Focus on Perpertia Kamanyang Lola's *The Lock on My Lips* Anne Tanyi Tang's *Ewa* and Other Plays, Margaret Afuh's *born before Her Time*

Evaristus Mbuen Ndong, Erika Ndunela'a, Ndong, Xaverie Mamafombang Ngwana

Department of English, the University of Bamenda

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ABSTRACT

The study set out to discuss Lola, Tanyi Ntang and Afuh as pro-feminist writers, intended to dismantle patriarchy in *The Lock On My Lips*, *Ewa* and *Other Plays*, and in *Born before Her Time*. It starts with the assumption that gender is an ideological construction and that the marginal place which society reserves for women on the bases of their sex is not embraced by women wholeheartedly. Feminism is a movement which seeks to liberate women from all forms of exploitation and oppression. This can either be physical, psychological, spiritual, economic or cultural. These moves seek to give women equal opportunities in deeply patriarchal cultures. The women draw their inner strengths and female networks to create spaces for themselves. Based on this premise, the hypothetical contention of this study is that women, equipped with knowledge and economic viability, women can challenge the status quo and move to the centre. Using insights drawn from the Feminist Critical Perspective together with critical reading and analysis of the play/text this study found out that development would be greatly enhanced if men and women work together on the basis of ability than on the consideration of their sexes. Hence, equal opportunity should be given to everybody in all the spheres of life.

Key Words: Anglophone Cameroon, Dominance, Dismantling, Patriarchy, Writers

INTRODUCTION

The idea of being positioned in the periphery of an existing dominant discourse seems to be the spring board of the idea of boundaries and spaces, the creation of frontiers and enclosures; the stand on which physical enclosures, there exist invisible borders and spatial segregation founded on social class, gender, race and other issues of identities, as people embrace modernism, the need to question existing norms become eminent. One of these norms is the oppression and subjugation of women by men. As Rose Mary Tong posits:

Female subordination is rooted in a set of custom and legal constraints that blocks women's entrance to and success in the so-called public world to the extent that society holds the false belief that women are, by nature, less intellectually and physically capable than men. It tends to discriminate against women in the academy, the forum and the market place (2) Equipped with a common knowledge of their condition, however, women have fought in different ways to dismantle male domination over them so that in different ways today, as insights from literary texts inform us, the border is considerable blurred.

It is important in such a study to give definitions of the operative terms to be used in the course of my discussions. Consequently, the following words will be defined: feminism, patriarchy and dismantling.

This fight for recognition by women is called feminism which according to Judith Butler (2009) "is the rejection of the marginal place which male dominant discourse has carved out for them in order to reclaim the central stage which is supposed to be theirs" (19). In the world of today, as evidence from Lola's *The Lock on My Lips*, Irene Salame's *More Than Dancing*, Tanyi Tang's *Ewa* and other plays and other feminist literatures, a feminized central space is now occupied by women. Hence, the idea that a woman can do what a man does is no longer an illusion.

Patriarchy according to the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* is 'a society controlled by men in which they use their power to their own advantage'.

Apart from this definition, another critic-Marren Akatsa Bukachi defines patriarchy as 'the organization of social life and traditional structures in which men have ultimate control over the most aspects of women's lives and actions.' (2005)

Looking at both definitions, it is clear that the whole idea of power and control is in the hands of the men. In that regard my analysis would use this presumption to demonstrate how these issues are recurrent in the play under consideration and how the characters therein try to break such barriers. Having put the operational definition of patriarchy aside, let me also delve into what dismantling would be expected to mean in this study. That said, the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* defines dismantling simply as 'getting rid of a system or organization...'. The already sets the reader in a state of understanding that he or she would be dealing with a work of art in which the playwright's major concerns would be to bring down such patriarchal structures.

Feminism permeates all the plays conceived in different ways. Ewa in EWA undergoes various forms of oppression and subjugation in the hands of her parents, husband, friends and the society at large. When the play opens, she is locked in the room by her own mother, Nyango with a body burning because she has been smeared in pepper. Her own mother treats her little than an underdog and sees her as a thing that can only be seen when work is available: "the idiot has stopped crying. She will learn to eat only after my children had eaten. ... have you peeled the coco yams? (8). "Her mum and uncle are just waiting for her to reach puberty so that they send her off for marriage" (pg 10). It is a world in which the commoditization of the woman is paramount. Her opinion is not put into consideration and as such she can only be seen and not heard. Even though Ewa is very intelligent in school, her parents do not see the need to sponsor her given that she is female. Mary, Ewa's friend admits that "even though she is brave, her performance in school is incredible" (10). Ewa, being intelligent as a woman questions and deconstructs patriarchal norms. This is because the male folk thinks education and school are meant for them while the women should engage in child-bearing and other domestic chores. When she completes Primary School, Ajoh, her would-be husband is already waiting for her.

Ewa's Marriage turns out to be a nightmare as her husband reduces her to an object of sexual gratification and child-bearing. His dream of reaping some finances from Ewa's parents fails to materialize. The food money the man gives is insufficient to feed both Ewa and her daughter and so she lives on starvation. Post feminist argues that, certain forms of male attitudes combination of these traits, she batters Ewa, despises her, and harasses her sexually and economically. Sexually subjugation is evidence in the text when with a hungry stomach, Attah forces Ewa to have sex while economic exploitation comes in when he takes even the small profit she makes have sex while economic exploitation comes in when he takes even the small profit she makes from the puff she fries and sells. This is what Ajoh tells ewa, an excerpt which epitomizes their marital life: "I saved you from licking pots and freed you from slavery. Now, you can talk. Keep quiet when I am talking. Perhaps you want additional scars. Go and iron my shirt before I kick you (22)"

The days of Ewa's nightmare are however soon drawing to an end as her neighbor, Tua, secures financial help for her from the twin Ministers of Women and Social Affairs. With the thirty thousand francs, Ewa goes to her aunt's residence and starts a business. From the proceeds from the business, she pays her way through secondary school. Tanyi Tang seems to be saying that with economic viability and knowledge, women can move from the periphery to the center. Becoming economically independent and knowledgeable, Ewa reweights herself into a space that shows the woman as competent as a man.

If in *Ewa*, Ewa undergoes torture before defining herself in a world in which the commoditization of the woman is rife, in my bundle of joy, the scale and the perspective of feminism are different. Although Kechen is emancipated and occupies a prestigious post in the society, a woman of law and her husband, a medical, a medical doctor, the couple is not blessed with the fruits of the womb. While mocked is not troubled by their childlessness, Kechen lives in perpetual restlessness as she will stop at nothing till she gets a child of her own. The church, shrines, hospitals, traditional doctors 'houses become her search zones until she is announced pregnant and delivered of a set of twins. Kechen moves from the centre by defiling the low value inherent in the vocabulary of patriarchy as it assigns femininity's qualities to women as "gentleness, modesty, humility, supportive, empathy, nurturance etc? On the contrary kitchen proves that she was determined, steadfast and self-abnegated. It is this assertiveness, rationality and Spartan-hearted nature that make her a figure of worth and recognition in feminist central discourse as if to affirm Conrad (1999) who says "men should understand that women wield sexual power. Women are citizens and have equal rights to men. Women are now entitled to enjoy cultural life as they chose; women reject the claim that they are passive victims of patriarchy" (21).

Arrah shows women in the spotlight. It tells the story of Arrah and her marriage to Ettah. The idea that stands out in this play, is the part women now play in the development of the society at large. Arrah, educated, beautiful, hardworking and above all self-assertive, plays a major part in the contribution of half of her bride price. Arrah's audacity shocks her friends, family and the community as a whole for challenging the general myth that bride price is exclusively a man's affair. Arrah's mother's behaviour sums up the state of her fury and echoes the disappointment of her community on Arrah's might in these words;

Please leave us alone. Return to your homes. I am awfully ashamed of my daughter's behavior. Have you ever heard that a woman contributed part of her own bride-price? These are things I did not consider. Today they are happening. Not just happening, my daughter is the doer of the appalling and unspeakable thing (85)

The lessons Arrah passes on to her parents elude their comprehension for in the view of society, a woman is educated for the share fact that she will fetch a fat bride price when she gets married. This gaze fixed on the woman terms is the root of the thingification of women in patriarchal societies. Arrah's attitude is a serious call for traditional societies which trade the female folk, as Bessem in the book interprets the message, to tone down their material consideration of women people. Bessem seems to be saying women should get married on the bases of love and even if tradition demands rites, the woman should not be sold as a good with a commercial worth.

When Arrah's marriage hits the rocks, Pa Abunaw seeks solution from his grandmother's grave when he feels frustrated." grandmother, are you watching? Arrah is in trouble." only women can offer peace. It is Bessem who consoles him "father, stop worrying. Arrah will be alright. She will handle the problem with dexterity: By praying to her grandmother, Pa Abunaw indicated the love women have for the existence of the family and the power they can will in the lives of human beings Like in Tanyi Tang's Ewa and other plays, Margaret Afuh's *Born Before Her Time* epitomizes efforts made by tradition to hold the female body in patriarchal traps. The novel tells the story of Abo who is betrothed by her father to Wireworm, a man old enough to be her father. The fact that Abo's mother does not oppose her husband on the perpetuation of this inferno points clearly how she has accepted the marginal position which society has constructed for her. Abo's temerity to resist tradition in its entire ramification is both physical and psychological. Physically, Abo stands up to her father when he is to trade her out to Worewum. Although she is tied like a goat and transported to Worewum, her fight is the fight of a collective woman folk crumbling under the yoke of tradition. At Worewum, compound she does not succumb to Worewum willingly. The rope she is tied with becomes symbolically instruments of subjugation. Worewum's brutish force and the many wives he has illustrate the notion of ownership. The idea that these women, belong to him and are at his beg and call, brings him under scrutiny. In order to have his way, Worewum rapes Abo. While this rape signifies subjugation, it is the way Abo reacts to it normal because it is tradition and nobody can bring it under scrutiny. While this rape signifies subjugation, it is the way Abo reacts to it that brings the whole concept of rape and the totalizing power off patriarchy under serious attack. She defiles the physical pains and seeks redress in escape, escape like in the proverbial lore of someone pulling backward to lurk ahead with more vim and determination.

The fight of Abo yields fruit as she eventually marries John, the young man of her choice. Her escape from Worewum and her final choice in the partner she finally gets married to crumbles male domination of the women folk. By marrying John and consequently refuting the dictates of patriarchy Abo moves from the marginal place reserved for women to reclaim the central space which, as it were hers. Abo's resistance is frank when she says," mother, I am sorry I shan't marry this old man. You shouldn't choose a husband for me. I have to make my own choice. After all I'm the one to marry him and live with him and....."

Hei! Stop that nonsense. That's why your father never wanted you to go school. Is that what they teach you in school? to go against your parents' wish? My own father chose mu husband for me and that has been the custom: that parent chooses husbands for their daughters. You are not going to change the order of things. Ebod Api fumed (21).

This excerpt and many more in the book illustrate that unlike her mother who could not speak for herself because she is just "another women:, Abo, with the torch light her education lends her, speaks where her mother could not. Like the subaltern whose voice is clipped in dominant euro-centric discourse but who nonetheless has a voice of her own, Abo speaks for her mother, herself and for the women as a whole.

If in varying ways women, as insights of Ewa and other plays and *Born Before Her Time* have succinctly illustrated, women have come out of their hiding, speaking for themselves in new ways, thus erasing the boundaries that have bonding or even appended them in an all powerfully male dominated world, In Lola's *The Lock on My Lips*, the issue of women's centrality

takes upper stage. The play talks about the might of Mrs. Ghamogha to reclaim her space in a tough male dominated world whose poise to own the woman is backed by Mwerong while holding men in high places. Land, for example, is the exclusive property of men. The traditional council is constituted only by men and men alone have the right to marry as many wives as possible. It is this complex contour in which the male powers circulate in kibaaka that Mrs. Ghamogha sets out to dismantle and successfully too.

In the first place, she buys land for herself much to the consternation of tradition and patriarchy. The reaction of members of the traditional council demonstrates the enormity of what they consider to be a slap on the face of tradition.

ABILITY: A woman has bought land her name.

ELDERS: (In chorus) what?

TARHNTEH: bought land?

TAV BANBOYE: Which woman?

NKFERKIBU: how?

TAV BANBOYE: From who?

NYUYDZE: Not in Kibaaka I quest. (13)

An act of valor which under normal circumstances should be saluted by the male folk is seen 'as am abomination in Kibaaka and the council of elders sets out to dispossess Mrs. Ghamogha of the land. Fortunately her wisdom and the art of barrister Helen Johnson come to her help and she defeats the male folk and keeps the land.

Mrs. Ghamogha puts up another fight as she initiates women into activities that are economically rewarding. She forms the MANDJARA solidarity group, a collective group which liberates women from ignorance and poverty. She fights against polygamy by pointing to women the dangers of such marriages. She conscientizes the men on how to take parental responsibility at home instead of overburdening women with a too heavy family load. The success of Mrs. Ghamogha to keep her land defies tradition and patriarchy as a whole. Her success stories point to the fact that a woman when given the same opportunity as a man can do much. Her action to unlock the lock on her lips and on the lips of the other women erases in a substantial manner the spatial boundary which has veiled the woman for centuries?

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CONCLUSION

By transgressing those boundaries, she is effectively renegotiating them because, as Sara Mills has pointed out, 'social structures should not be seen as necessarily determining particular spatial relations; indeed it is much more of a two-way process' (2005:25). This implies that women and men negotiate their positions in space through their interrogations of their respective social positions, and these space and positions can always be renegotiated, in the postcolonial context as well as in the context of gender as evidence taken from *Ewa and Other Plays*. *Born before Her Time* and *The Lock on My Lips* have succinctly proven.

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