

Introduction

Used as a form of creative expression to resist racial and misogynistic oppression, African female poet's from Nigeria, Bombay India, Algeria and Zimbabwe will be explored and framed against the different tones in African women's voice to resistance. Varying poems will be analyzed for language and thematic relevance arguing that perhaps African women literature is an act of artistic rebellion that is not confined to just one universal voice. The geographical differences open up a global platform for third-world female voices to be heard.

African Women's Voice: Renegotiating Old Colonial Narratives Under New Terms

Abstract

This study will focus on African literature, its relationships to patriarchy and racism and its ties to the colonial narratives that tried to own black bodies. This research will aim to understand African women writers in this regard by identifying whether or not there is a connection between gender and racial oppression and whether African women's creative expression mainly poetry is a direct connection to their resistance of gender and racial oppression. The treatment of African women under a Euro-white male dominated patriarchal system is closely examined against their efforts to use creative expression as a means to resist it. The rationale of African women resistance in addition to selected poems by female African writers are explored and analyzed for language and thematic relevance to the voice of female resistance.

Introduction

This study is essential in understanding African identity and voice from underneath a colonized umbrella. It aims to venture out beyond the scope of westernized views of identifying

black bodies through fictional storytelling. By utilizing creative writing as a necessary means to dispel the idea of colonial singular-narratives as outlined, black female bodies are, perhaps able to reclaim agency over their bodies by bringing a global awareness to their voice. The study of African female writers attempt to dispel the stereotype tropes of colonial-storytelling within this context of inquiry.

The treatment of African women under a white-supremest patriarchy system will be visited as a way to better understand the rationale of how the expression of creative writing was used as a means to resist oppression. Varying African women approaches will be briefly examined and used as a historical reference in identifying the different tones in varying African women's voices of resistance in comparison to other African women poetry writers around the African continent. Next, a short background on the effects of colonial narratives as it relates to African female stereotype tropes and characters will be understood in regards to its connection to the disregard of black bodies weighted against the notion of owning black bodies. Finally, selected African poems from Nigeria, Bombay India, Algeria and Zimbabwe will be analyzed for language and thematic relevance to the voice of female resistance. In this overall regard African women literature, can be viewed as an act of rebellion and their writing serves as a form of expression to resistance in which I argue opens up a global platform for black bodies to be heard.

Part 1

A historical background and the effects that colonial narratives and its degradation had against Black female bodies

White European males have historically dominated the worldly perceptions of African women identities, and colonial narratives have dictated how black bodies were accepted. Female black bodies were either dismissed entirely or were disregarded as submissive and weak. Lwanga in

her essay “Women in African Colonial Histories, “challenges the notion in African colonial history, which has often cast women as passive agents of colonial rule” (117).

She further asserts,

“The diversity and reflexivity of early contact with colonialists was apparent for both genders, albeit African women were motivated by their own agenda for strategic engagement in shaping the content of their life under the most historically brutal colonial circumstances” (117).

These practices have arguably solidified a position of African women as inferior because the rationale behind this assertion relies heavily on the historical depictions of third-world African women as enslaved breeders, inherently evil, uneducated and over sexualized savages. These perceptions aided in the systematic gender and racial divide and contributed to the sexual violence against African women. In, *The Colonial Roots of the Racial Fetishization of Black Women*, Holmes scholarly notes,

“Colonizers perceived black men and women as subhuman byproducts of manifest destiny. Slaves were stripped of their agency and desire; they were dehumanized, morally, physically, intellectually, and sexually. Slaves were sexualized as animals through the institutionalized system of chattel slavery. Slave women considered most capable of producing children were commonly referred to as “breeders,” and were bought and sold based on their reproductive efficiency” (4).

These descriptions aided in the degradation of African women's identity. It weakened the social infrastructure and perceptions of black bodies. The passage, "Slaves were stripped of their agency and desire;" demonstrate how powerful and influential systematic colonial rule was over the African identity.

Lyakhovskaya argues in, "'Beauty of the Past': Traditional Aesthetic Canon and Female Characters in Francophone African Literatures," how the depiction of characters in African literature is vital in how we view black women bodies and ultimately their identities. And, by reframing stereotypical roles away from past colonial narratives we are able to redirect these stories. African characters in literature and its connection to the African women aesthetic brings into question the consequences of what can happen when these character depictions are colonized. Traditional representations of women in Africa in African novels, poetry and their influences on society demonstrate the impact that these characters have on society and on African women's perception. The psychological nuances that negative images have on black bodies as they relate to protagonist female figures is critical to how these characters have become reflective of the role and position that has been imposed. False historical artifacts can become problematic and dangerous to black bodies when there is nothing else to base its validity on. Lyakhovskaya further asserts, "Female characters including protagonists in African novels lack any psychological nuances and are poorly individuated" and this has a lot to do with the history of black body perceptions from the past (91). These ideas don't necessarily complicate these assertions but it does, however, add to the complexity of establishing an identity through the chaos of European white colonization.

Colonization arguably stripped African women of their identities because black bodies were not seen as having the same value as white male and female bodies collectively. However,

scholars like Lwanga and others argue that history does not necessarily dictate the fragility of female African voice. Moreover, while European white males have historically controlled the narratives of how we view African women's bodies, these falsehoods have instead compelled African women to challenge old colonial narratives by raising their own voices to the forefront of the conversation.

African Women voice of resistance and the varying geographic approaches to gender and racial oppression

The history of South African women's racial and gender oppression and the varying influences and approaches to resistance of gender and racial oppression are important to the creative responses in poetry from African women. South African women is the primary focus of this essay, but African women writers vary in geographic location and so does their voice. The varying approaches may arguably also influence how they respond to patriarchy and racial discourse in their own writing. In "Responses to Patriarchy in African Women's Poetry," Eke highlights African writers like: "Gwendoline C., a Central African poet; Ifi Amadiume, from West Africa; Shakuntala Hawoldar, from East Africa; Leila Djabali, from North Africa; and Kristina Rungano, from Southern Africa." All of the writers have diverse perspectives on these issues. The variations demonstrate the creative linguistic differences among all of the writers (Eke 4). These differences also lets us know that all African women aren't the same although they are usually all lumped under this assumption. The assumption that all black bodies are the same feeds into historical stereotypes about black bodies which further silences their voice.

For instance, Eke suggest in her analysis of African writers that South African female writers seem to have a more radical approach than some of the other African women writers in different

geographic locations. This dynamic is significant because it brings into question whether their responses could be reflective of geography or simply be reflective of unfortunate life circumstances? It also demonstrates how women respond differently to systemic patriarchy abuse further suggesting that patriarchy attitudes may differ based on the geographic location of where the women were colonized. Eke's "study seeks to show the various ways in which African women poets have responded to the issue of patriarchy" by focusing on the themes of colonial rule over black bodies and how word usage in their poetry differs due to geographic location. The women's lived experiences can be compared to their creative responses (Eke 3).

The research in this essay doesn't aim to discover geographic responses from African women as a thesis but it may in part bring into question whether patriarchal attitudes are globally universal and whether South African voices reflect all African women voices or simply their own. Walum, a South African female writer for instance, approaches the theme of patriarchy from two perspectives, bio-genetic theory and bio-cultural. Both perspectives offer a meaningful rationale for patriarchy although both approaches also appear to be centered around a binary concept of gender. Bio-cultural refers to the differences in male and female biological abilities. Walum argues that biological male dominance may be a factor in patriarchal attitudes. This approach seems to coincide with traditional gender roles but it's not the only rationale to the problem. Iglitzin, a West African writer on the contrary takes a religious angle approach and plays it against the "moral imperfections and weak virtue attributed to Eve. Muslim, Jewish, and Christian religions share the view that woman was solely responsible for the fall of man [...] women, sex, and sin are interconnected in religious teachings.³" (Eke 7). The West African writer's rationale offers insight into the outside influences and its attachment to cultural norms

and traditions and how such beliefs might permit the justification for inferiority beliefs about African women.

These approaches can be important to the voice of resistance because, each woman brings in a different perspective while also uniting under the same theme. This unity perhaps implies that resistance doesn't have just one face nor does it have a universal language. And, perhaps resistance can also be viewed as a physical and symbolic expression that removes the stigma of exploitation away from black bodies geographically. It complicates the idea of African identity as being more complex and multi-layered than what has been portrayed which is an assertion that contradicts prior historical images of black female bodies.

South African female writers are the focus here, but it's important to note that examining African writers from varying geographic locations can be influential to how they each respond to oppression in their writing styles and approaches. This underscores the idea that all African women are submissive to white males and are hiding in the shadows out of fear of a system that oppresses them. These ideas also support Lwanga's prior assertion in this essay that, "Female black bodies are either dismissed entirely or are disregarded as submissive and weak" which negates the idea that there is just one voice for one global issue that may assist in strengthening their position and removing the veil of silence from their voices (117). Varying perspectives offer more than one way to approach the problem which gears away from the racial stereotypes that women of color are often associated with. In part 2 of this essay South African character stereotypes and its influence on South African literature will be further explored.

Part 2

Female South African character stereotypes and their influence on African identity

A background of writing as a form of resistance to South African character stereotypes have historically aided in the systemic racism and patriarchy ideas against women. Therefore, to better understand their resistance, perhaps a review into the background of how such identities were formed is a necessary inquiry. In, "A Dangerous Single Story: Dispelling Stereotypes Through African Literature," Brooks brings into question character stereotypes in African literature that coincide with the assertion that women of color are bad people. Comparisons are drawn between westernized literature depictions and the perpetuation of single-story storytelling and how this limits the scope of global reality. Brooks points out, "The Danger of a Single Story" by referencing Rudyard Kipling's chronicling of Africans as "half-devil, half-child" as well as London merchant, John Loche, who wrote in his journal of his voyage to Africa in 1561 that Africans are "beasts who have no houses" (Adichie, "Danger") (Brooks 2018). Brooks further argues how the dangers of colonial single-story narratives in African literature reinforce negative stereotypes which further strip away at female African identity. Brooks also notes how "The single story creates stereotypes and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete; they make one story become the only story" (Adichie, "Danger"). (2018). Brook's inquiry raises questions about negative mind frames and how this perhaps contributes to the common colonial narrative stereotypes that were often published and mainstreamed. This is problematic in the sense that it further pushes African women's voices behind whites because these images automatically place the African identity as an inferior one and as threatening and/or invaluable to her society. For these reasons one could argue that stereotypes offer a rationale for South African women to resist a system that has oppressed them.

South African female characters are visited in Brook's text and examined for stereotype tropes and the degradation of identity from past history and in current-day Africa are reflected upon in this regard. Brooks asserts, "writers such as Adichie and Zimbabwean author NoViolet Bulawayo expose popular stereotypes about South African people in their novels through controversial depictions and subject matters as a way to disrupt these stereotypes" (21).

To further her assertions Brook's notes,

I believe writers use stereotypes as a point of entry to relate the complex issues and experiences that people face within African societies. They allow writers to introduce these matters in a creative, yet authentic, manner. Thus, writers can provide deeper explanations and elaborate on matters that global media often leaves out. The power dynamics between the insiders and outsiders telling these stories--native writers and those looking at South African societies via a narrow lens--change. I believe writers use stereotypes as a point of entry to relate the complex issues and experiences that people face within African societies. They allow writers to introduce these matters in a creative, yet authentic, manner. Thus, writers can provide deeper explanations and elaborate on matters that global media often leaves out. The power dynamics between the insiders and outsiders telling these stories--native writers and those looking at African societies via a narrow lens—change" (21).

Brooks ultimately points out in this insert how South African women writers are largely ignored while male writers are glorified and have historically been the leaders of the narratives that are published about South African women's identities. Movies such as Black Panther which is a film

that sheds to dispel African women stereotype characters helps reframe black identities. For example, Marvel's fictional narrative of Black Panther as an upscale technology driven society perhaps broadens the perspective of negative images by leaving one to interrogate the validity of non-stereotypical African characters.

Thus far we've explored historical content that places female African voices into a perspective of what could be at the core of African female oppression by offering a credible rationale behind their resistance. We also visited how colonial narratives and stereotypes aided in the degradation of African women identity. The final portion of the essay will now cover a close analysis of how South African female writers used their oppression to weaponize themselves against all of these things by writing poetry. Poetry serves as a language-of-resistance for all of oppression and by utilizing a nonviolent approach we are safely able to vividly hear, smell and see their voices on the page. Specific word choice and thematic relevance are explored in this section that support the themes of resistance and regaining back agency over black bodies.

Part 3

Resistance to male oppression examining the language-of-resistance in South African poetry

“A central feature of Konie's poem, a South African poet is the use of apostrophe. The "female" speaker addresses an imaginary "Brother," telling him that his behavior has really made her angry. The "I" of the poem is representing both the speaker and womenfolk as a whole. Although it is not explicitly stated, the speaker's "anger" arises out of the prevalence of gender inequality in society” (Eke 4). Konie's poem offers insight into the theme of agency and voiceless black bodies through the use of words. Eke argues, “The poet is protesting against

assigning a lower value to females and treating them as second-class human beings. The female voice is instead in the removal of all forms of inequality through the creation of a more egalitarian system” (6). The varying approaches suggest that patriarchy and racism isn’t a universal language and perhaps shouldn’t be regarded as such therefore, we should perhaps pay attention to what these women are saying.

Byrne analyzes the relationship between the language that is used in South African works in “Stealing the Fire’: Language as Theme and Strategy in South African Women’s Poetry” against the theme of resisting racism and patriarchy under these terms. By analyzing the language in the poems we may aim to understand South African women writers voice which can assist us in making connections between whether writing serves as a form of resistance to regain back agency over black bodies or not.

For example, Haidee Kruger is a South African poet that Byrne highlights in, “Stealing the Fire’: Language as Theme and Strategy in South African Women’s Poetry.” Byrne questions the critique of South African women poetry and highlights how women poets have utilized the power of words as an empowering tool to overcome gender and racial oppression. She argues how male poets have historically outshined South African women and their work. Colonial narratives have assisted in these efforts which have not always been honestly depicted to South African women identity. The power of words has become the only way for South African women to weaponize themselves against it. Byrne brings these ideas into question by focusing on specific language that is used to resist male domination. Byrne notes, “it is almost a cliché that women frequently feel silenced by male discourse, and that the colonized (even the formerly colonized) feel the need to assert their right to speak” (30). Byrne’s observation is significant because it demonstrates how silencing the voice of black female bodies is deeply rooted into

historical colonial narratives. Speaking for another group especially an oppressed group boldly takes away their agency. These ideals seem to be deeply rooted in patriarchal notions of control and rule leaving female African bodies up for anyone to steal and fictionalize their identity.

Women poets in South Africa use poetry to fight this system and her writing is her refuge.

The poem “the little a” reflects on women’s identity for example while, at the same time, affirming “women’s language”(31). Kruger is a South African female poet whose work reflects the freedoms and identity of female voice through language that society tries to restrain.

Kruger’s poem states,

Words become me.

They are the flowers in my hair,

jewels at my neck and ears.

Beyond the fence

wild words gallop free, (35)

Byrne analyzes Kruger’s words and notes, “she explains her understanding of herself as a poet-healer.” (35). This is important in connecting the relationship between using writing to resist a system that takes away one’s freedoms.

Kruger’s poem further reads,

“Stealing the fire”

yet to be harnessed to my plough.

And those are the ones

most beautiful to me:

I want to be a cowgirl with a noose

lassoing wild words

and in my own field
 setting them loose.

(2010: 13) (34).

Kruger's poem through the celebration of positive word reinforcement reframes negative language and establishes a healing voice. This expression is weighted against male dominance and racial hatred. Words such as: "become me," "beyond the fence," and "wild words gallop free" demonstrates the breaking away of a colonized society that is consumed by patriarchy ideals and practices. And instead, it leads the way towards South African women's pride and empowerment. The line, "I want to be a cowgirl with a noose" demonstrates the reversal of male and female roles. The colonized victim, a female South African woman is renegotiating these terms by demanding that she should be the only person that is in control of her life and not a white male dominated system.

A "cowgirl" is symbolic to one being free. A "noose" in the poem is symbolic to the way that violence was carried out towards black female bodies. A noose may also be symbolic for one reclaiming back their agency against systematic control. Riding a horse can be seen as removing one's self from underneath patriarchal control. "The horse is a universal symbol of freedom without restraint, because riding a horse made people feel they could free themselves from their own bindings. Also linked with riding horses, they are symbols of travel, movement, and desire" (More Animal Symbolism). The idea of a woman riding naked on a horse through the wilderness is an image that could also support this claim, because South African women's desire to reclaim their identities and reclaim their rightful position in society is reflective of riding for freedoms.

Men are usually the dominant face of a cowboy and the image of the cowboy is often viewed as being a hyper-masculine role by societal standards. Therefore, the image of a woman riding

on a horse steer wrestling a rope is arguably a rebellious one, because she is relinquishing the power away from white men ruling over her body. The symbolic language in Kruger's poem challenges these roles and their positioning by reversing the idea of them. Reversing these roles according to this poem potentially rebels against white colonial norms that white males are superior and black female bodies are inferior. We see an example of this when Kruger uses words like "my own" and "stealing the fire" for instance, the symbol of the free cowgirl arguably supports these assertions. "Beyond the fence" could also be referencing the desire to be free because it questions what is on the other side of that fence. Could there be a free South African woman on the other side?

There is also freedom in words just as there is freedom in riding a horse. The language in Kruger's poem sheds to change old systematic viewpoints and ideas about a South African woman's place in society and in the world that was falsely created for her. The overall message of Kruger's poem is that black bodies do not need to be perceived as invisible anymore and the power of words are a way to renegotiate these terms for a new African identity.

Conclusion and tying it all together

The continual disregard of black bodies under the colonized umbrella could be due to the lack of caring or that the existent narratives about this group of African women has become so tarnished that no one bothers to question its validity anymore. It is therefore crucial that we

consider the lost identities of varying African women writers and all third-world women who aren't white and mainstreamed so that their voices too may continue to shine through as contributing vital records of historical literature. African women writers are a group that were often forgotten by mainstream countries, but their voice doesn't have to remain in the shadows anymore because poetry although is not the solution to the problem, nonetheless has given them a secure leg to stand on. Kruger's poems and other African poets can now be viewed as voices of reason instead of voices of silence. Their voices should continue to guide honest conversations about the effects that gender and racial oppression may have on stolen identities. Female South African writers have encountered the same adversity as other women worldwide. Therefore, the priority in the fight against resistance to male oppression and racial hatred should garner a global recognition that is worthy of inclusion for the creative African women who often risk their lives to tell their stories.

It is apparent in this essay that African women in all regions suffered, but what is even more significant is how they were able to stand up and fight back by weaponizing themselves with words. In this regard this essay was successful. Black bodies offer a unique voice to diversity and it is essential in understanding African identity and voice from underneath a colonized umbrella with an open mind and a fresh sense of gender and racial ideas. And as we venture out beyond the scope of colonial narratives and westernized views of identifying black bodies perhaps the way that we proceed going forward is to continue to tell these stories with words of freedom and inclusion. The identities of African women were exploited by white European men but the power of poetic language has renegotiated these terms and they have reclaimed back their agency over black bodies. Moreover, if the power of words has become the only way for African women to weaponize themselves against oppression maybe we should allow them to renegotiate the terms

of their voices in this way so they may continue to travel down their own righteous path of inclusion and acceptance.

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