

## **National Advancement and Nation Building: The Role of the Female Literary Artist/Writer**

Prof. (Mrs). Asabe Kabir Usman

### **Abstract**

*This paper examines the role of female literary artists and writers in national advancement and nation-building, with a focus on Nigeria. It highlights how gender has become a crucial determinant in literary discourse and explores the contributions of female writers in shaping societal values, beliefs, and ideals. The study traces the evolution of Nigerian female literary writers, from early depictions of passive women in male-authored works to the emergence of strong, independent female characters in contemporary literature. It discusses the impact of feminism and womanism in redefining the representation of women in literature and emphasizes how education and economic independence have empowered female writers and their fictional characters. Through critical analyses of works by notable Nigerian female authors such as Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Zaynab Alkali, the paper demonstrates how literature serves as a tool for advocating gender equality, social change, and national development. Ultimately, it argues that the recognition and appreciation of female literary voices are essential for fostering a balanced and progressive society.*

**Keywords:** *national advancement, nation building, female literary writer, gender roles*

### **Introduction**

Without mincing words, it is a well-known fact that women in any society are productive and innovative contributors to nation-building and societal advancement. Today, gender issues are so important that they have been regarded as a “crucial determinant in the production, circulation, and consumption of literary discourse” (Showalter, 1989, p. 1). In recent times, gender has become an acknowledged and observable fact, making it nearly impossible to discuss any issue

whether literary, social, political, philosophical, or economic—without specific reference to gender.

Like their male counterparts, female literary writers and artists cannot be separated from their society, as they are integral to it. Through their creative works, they provide critical evaluations, productive analyses, and viewpoints on the political, social, and economic affairs of their society, thereby shaping and conveying their beliefs, values, ideals, and thoughts on building a productive nation. We believe that with fair play among all members of society, gender equality, gender balance, and empowerment, female writers and artists have played and continue to play significant roles in national advancement and nation-building, not only in Nigeria but around the world.

**The Literary Artist/Writer in Nigeria:**

Literary writing is a venture in which words and language are used imaginatively to express, explore, and discover feelings, ideas, and values across various forms, including prose, poetry, drama, fiction, and creative non-fiction. Regardless of the genre, a literary work reflects the way of life of its creators, capturing the reality of their experiences through devices such as language, setting, plot, figurative language, and characterization. A literary writer or artist channels creativity and imagination into writing or performance. Often, the literary writer or artist is depicted in various and sometimes conflicting ways. They may be viewed as a visionary or a madman, a prophet or a conformist, a creator or a destroyer. Thus, the literary writer or artist represents many things to many people; however, a recurring image emerges: the artistic quality, the gift of imagination, and the ability to visualize. The act of writing engages a writer's imagination and creativity in a critical sense. The writer writes about someone and for someone because:

Literature is a social institution: it is  
created by the writer, who is a member of

the society. Its medium is language, which is a social creation. It represents life, which is a social reality. It is addressed to men who form a social body. It is centrally conditioned by social and other forces and, in turn, exerts social influence (Demeterio, 2011, p. 11).

The literary writer as a member of the society projects his/her ideas on observations and happenings in the society through literary writings. Writing about the involvement of the writer in politics, Achebe states according to Dasylyva that:

...any African who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary African will end up being completely irrelevant like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his house burning to pursue a rat fleeing from the flames (2003, p. 209).

Within the academic realm/circle, the literary writer is viewed as an academic or scholar in the field of knowledge. With this knowledge, the literary writer can then inform, educate, direct and when the need arises criticize happenings in the society with a view to effecting positive change. The literary writer uses this knowledge in:

a specialized creative manner and with the sole aim of sourcing for relevant materials from the pool of experiences. The selected materials (experiences) he/she interprets, recreates imaginatively, and reflects or refracts, depending on his/her level of consciousness and degree of commitment (Dasylyva, 2003, p. 201).

The power of the literary writer's imagination and innovative creativity is essential for development of a nation or society. A nation without visionaries or innovators of ideas and possibilities is a nation on the way to self-destruction. How then do the literary writer and his/her writings contribute to national development in a heterogeneous society like Nigeria?

The literary writer/artist and his/her creative works are one and the same. There might be an academic futility in trying to disengage one from the other for, one might be engaging in the dilemma of "who could not tell the hunter from the hunted". Therefore our discussion will alternate these terms; the literary writer(s)/artist(s) and literary writings/ arts/literature.

**Nigerian Female Literary Writers:**

Just like in other endeavors, male African writers were present in the literary scene long before women began to write. Consequently, their depiction of women in fictional works has been biased, presenting characters who seem satisfied with the subjugated roles assigned to them by society. The shadowy portrayal of women in early Nigerian literature reflects the patriarchal nature of society. Although women were integral and significant members of most traditional societies, they were often relegated to the background, hardly recognized or visible, and restricted to domestic chores. Meanwhile, developmental efforts and leadership struggles were primarily led by men. These authors focused on the male characters of society, while women remained unnoticed and invisible, often portrayed in abstract terms. With colonial domination, Western education became the standard for measuring advancement and civilization, yet schools were predominantly male-dominated. As a result, men were depicted as the pursuers of nation-building, societal advancement, and peaceful coexistence, while the few educated women were portrayed as girlfriends, socialites, wives, free women, mothers, or prostitutes.

Defending this action, (Taiwo, 1984, pp. 11-12) believes: "It is not because the male writers want to be biased, but women are portrayed as they are because the writer wants to be faithful to the realities of the world he represents".

Today, Nigerian women like their African Counterparts, are very active in the literary scene. Since Flora Nwapa wrote and got her first literary work *Efuru* published in London in 1966, more and more women have flooded the Nigerian literary scene. And by the early 1970s there emerged female writers like, Zulu Sofola, Catherine Acholonu, Adaora Lily Ulasi, Buchi Emecheta, Zaynab Alkali etc. The emergence of women writers on the literary scene in Nigeria marks the beginning of female centered novels. Today, Nigeria has an avalanche of female writers from different parts of the country writing variously in the English language as well as in the different indigenous languages like; Hausa, Yoruba, Ibo, Nupe etc. The new generations of female writers in recent times have no doubt been more visible than their contemporaries. The likes of; Stella Oyedepo, Zaynab Alkali, Ifeoma Okoye, Balkisu Salisu Ahmad Funtua, Habiba Imam Ikara, Saliha Abdullahi Zaria, Mable Segun, Remi Adededeji, Folashayo Ogunrinde, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Asabe Kabir Usman Kaine Agary Razinatu Muhammad, Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie, Chika Unigwe etc are all household names in the literary world.

#### **The Roles of Nigerian Female Literary Writers in National Advancement and Nation Building:**

The female character in African fiction before the advent of female writers into the literary scene was that lack luster being, the docile and quiet member of the household who was satisfied with bearing children and taking care of the children. It is a presentation of a being that is satisfied with the subjugated role assigned her in a male dominated society; she is never part of any decision making whatsoever, even those that affect her directly and as (Chukwuma,

1989, p. 132) asserts, "A woman's limitations are many and in an argument, the husband is always right."

Many female writers believe that when a woman writes, she writes based on her personal experiences which in most cases have to do with things that affect them directly or indirectly especially gender related issues. Many of them have resorted to writing about their beliefs of the social, political and economic responsibilities as they affect the sexes. This ideology has been termed by critics' as feminism.

Feminism as a movement advocates for the social, political and economic equality of both sexes. It believes that women are discriminated upon by society, and that they have most often been excluded from contributing their quota to available social, political, economic arenas and institutions. Chukwuma, (1994, p. ix) believes feminism "means a rejection of inferiority and striving for recognition. It seeks to give the woman a sense of self as a worthy, effectual and contributing human being; women conditioning in Africa is the greatest barrier toward a fulfillment of self". Furthermore;

Feminism can be described as: a movement seeking the re-organization of the world upon a basis of gender equality in all human relations; a movement which would reject every differentiation between individuals upon the grounds of gender, that would abolish all gender privileges and burdens, and would strive to set up the recognition of the common humanity of women and men as the foundation of law and custom. (Kramarae and Treichler, 1986, p. 158)

Feminism therefore seeks out to advocate the social change in women's status by changing the way in which society views them. The term

"feminism" has negative connotation in Africa even by female writers and it is sometimes regarded as a diversion or even a curse. African women scholars like Emecheta (1981), Kolawole (1997), Badejo (1999) and Ogunyemi (1985) have disowned and rejected the label "feminism" as they explore women's voicelessness and/or (in) audibility and human oppression in their writings. They have accused Western feminism of universalizing women's experience and hence occasioning cultural imperialism. Said (1993) confirms that Third World societies are designated in exclusionary terms and so women are excluded from most discourses even those that concern them. Min-Ha (1989) holds the same view when he argues that third world women are treated as an out-group to be spoken for by mainstream in-group.

To avoid this exclusion, African woman came up with a term "womanism". Womanism is a woman centered ideology which is compromising in nature and believes in the freedom and independence of women (Ogunyemi 1996). The womanists believe it is time for women to be heard, listened to, and their meaningful contributions to society accepted as relevant in social, political and economic development. "Womanism thus, desires that man and woman should be in harmony in the home and in the society at large" (Ogini, 1996, p.15); womanism seeks to support all women and what they stand for and to expose all infringements committed against them. "Womanist theory has always played a pivotal role in consciousness-raising, while it also acts in the public spotlight to improve the life of women in general" (Peter, 2010, p. 204). "Womanism is black centred; it is accommodationist. It believes in the freedom and independence of women like feminism but, unlike radical feminism, it wants meaningful union between black women and black men" (Ogunyemi, 1985, p. 60). Unlike western feminism, womanism does not work against men but rather accommodates them. This is because most African women are also committed to the institution of the family and even though they

hold their men in high regard and do not want to do without them, they certainly do not want to be maltreated by them.

It takes into account the African philosophy of life which emphasizes marriage as a social institution. However, it condemns all forms of patriarchy which dehumanizes woman and portrays her as a second-class citizen. Rooted in African historical and cultural experiences, it advances the view of the complementarities between man and woman by stressing the Male-Female principle in the creative order. (Maduka, 2005, pp. 8-9)

Female writers from Nigeria like Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ifeoma Okoye, Zaynab Alkali, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Kaine Agary, etc all respond differently to their characterization of women in their fictional works: thus, they depict most of their women as significant beings whose roles in society are so pertinent and vital that without them, the male characters in the fictional works cannot function successfully. The earlier presentation of the submissive, lack luster, uneducated woman is replaced by a modern woman, who is educated to a certain level, a self-confident figure who knows what she wants and is ready to fight for, claim, and keep what she feels rightly belongs to her. These heroines are portrayed as important and viable individuals, participating in a world shared with their male counterparts, defining their own space and contributing to the social realities of their societies. These female authors try to build their characters as important component of their societies who strive in their different ways to make meaningful contributions to national advancement and nation building. A few examples from selected novels written by Nigerian female writers will illustrate our arguments.

Buchi Emecheta's female in *Second Class Citizen*, *Kehinde*, *Destination Biafra* etc, try to extricate themselves from the dogmas of tradition which tie them down to be responsible members of the society, thereby helping to build and advance its development:

The women excel in their roles. They are forceful and articulate thinking beings whom the reader is brought to recognize and appreciate as individuals not types. Each character brings to bear on a shifting situation her own peculiar way of solving the problem hence we appreciate them for what they are and have become and not so much what they are supposed to be (Chukwuma, 1989, p. 9).

This we see in the characters of Adah in *Second Class Citizen*; Kehinde in *Kehinde*; Nnuego and Adaku in *The Joys of Motherhood*. For instance, Debbie in Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*;

Wanted to do something more than just child breeding and rearing and being a good passive wife to a man whose ego she must boost all her days while making sure to submerge every impulse that made her a full human.... Surely every person should have the right to live as he or she wished, however different that life might seem to another (45).

We see these women like Debbie struggling and surviving by any means, creating, planning, organizing and responding to a society that seeks to deny them a place, a voice, value and sometimes even visibility.

Agary in *Yellow-Yellow* builds her formidable characters around Sisi, Zilayefa, Lolo and Bibi, the four prominent female characters. In Sisi,

Agary portrays an independent, society woman who was a business tycoon:

Sisi was so business savvy and creative that she was very good at coming up with ideas, with projects that she would sell to the procurement officer of an establishment for the oil companies. She supplied everything from toilet paper to pickup trucks for lease. That was how she made her money. When she started, she was the only woman in Port Harcourt who won contracts of large value from most companies, and she was the only woman, period who had contracts from the oil companies (54-55).

We see in Bibi the depiction of a very courageous woman who could go an extra mile to make sure her daughter gets the best in life. In Lolo, Agary creates a role model for Zilayefa, because, after her youth service at Elf Acquaintance in Lagos, she went back to Port-Harcourt and jumped into the family business. "Lolo quickly jumped into the role of custodian, managing her parents' investments and properties" (58). Clara described Lolo to Zilayefa as "small but mighty" (59). Lolo was depicted as a courageous and open minded person who strives to achieve what she feels she wants in life and "even though Lolo's parents and her brothers had been very protective of her when she was growing up, she was very ambitious. She knew the value of her name in Port-Harcourt and knew how to use it to open doors. She used her connections to get contracts with the oil companies", (59).

In *Yellow-Yellow*, Agary creates a new vision of African women who seek self-identity by defining themselves, doing what they want, and seeking how best they can achieve their dreams by escaping the

traditional and cultural roles assigned them as wives, mothers, daughters or sisters. In general, Agary's female characters are portrayed as hardworking, industrious, business-like and economically independent.

Adichie, in her second novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* tackles issues which are thematically related to what is in *Purple Hibiscus*. The author projects women characters struggling to keep their families, hopeful even when the country is going through a civil war. In *Half of a Yellow Sun* women are portrayed as determined and progressive. They give direction when and where necessary and guide their men and society in time of difficulties. For example, they frantically and continuously search for food and medicine during the war and that way sustain their communities. Kainene for example, introduces the idea of growing crops to feed the refugees during the time when there is no food forthcoming to the Biafrans. Olanna on the other hand goes ahead to try and get an alternative job for her husband who appears reserved as the war gets fierce. She also starts a school to teach the children such that there would be continuity after the war.

In *Purple Hibiscus* Auntie Ifeoma and Auntie Phillipa are educated and thus enlightened. Ifeoma's forthrightness and assertiveness are as a result of the power of education. She is educated and aware when things are going wrong. Adichie uses her so that she can contrast her with the sister-in-law Beatrice who depends on her husband economically. Women also come together for the sake of their communities by supplying food and singlet to the Biafra army. Women supply things to the army in their win-the-war efforts: Madu says: "there is a group of women at the barracks every other day, from all sorts of backwater villages, bringing yams and plantains and fruits to the soldiers" (183). Women also organize a seminar in Nsukka titled "In Case of War", in an effort to prepare fellow women in case war breaks out.

The theme of women education in Adichie's novels resonates well with Mariama Ba in *So Long a Letter* where education has the potential to provide women with the possibility of crafting new identity beyond that of womanhood and acquire consciousness of empowerment that impacts on their relationship with males at the family and societal levels. This we see in the character of Assatou.

Abdulmajid in *Mace Mutum* like other contemporary Hausa women writers, in reality draws the reader and the critic into reading their novels as their contributions to the ongoing debate over a number of very important issues that pose as challenges to traditional and contemporary Hausa women and the marriage institution within the cultural, historical, and social contexts of a traditional society that has nonetheless undergone tremendous social changes. These changes include education and its role in raising the woman to the apex in her society. In fact these women "Strive to extricate their feet from cultural impediments as they embark on the journey to their dream land" (Opara, 1990, p. 160).

In *Sa'adatu Sa'ar Mata (Sa'adatu the Glowing Star)*, Balkisu Ahmad creates a new vision of a Hausa woman character who seeks self identity by defining herself, doing what she wants, and seeking how best she can achieve her dreams without necessarily defying the religious, traditional and cultural roles assigned her first as daughter, later as wife and finally as mother. Balkisu Ahmad depicted Sa'adatu as a hardworking, industrious, business-like and economically independent character. We see this when Sa'adatu went for a professional course in the United Kingdom and she used the little money she was earning in her spare time to start a business. This business later became a partnership with a colleague Cinvia, whom she had met in the United Kingdom.

In Zaynab Alkali's *The Descendants*, Seytu the heroine is portrayed as rising from a very humble background to become a medical doctor.

Through Seytu, Alkali voices out her disgust at women who are weak and do not have a focus in life. She illustrates the value of education and self determination for aspiring woman who struggle against sexual discrimination, unhappy marital life to achieve individuality and independence. This same view was asserted once by Emecheta (1998, p. 175), when she says:

I have no sympathy for a woman who deserts her children neither do I have sympathy for a woman who insists in staying in a marriage with a brute of a man; simply to be respectable. I want very much to further the education of women in Africa because education really helps the women.

Education is one of the most significant devices of empowerment highlighted by female writers. Most of them write about the virtues and values of education to the life of the girl-child which eventually leads her to the apex in society. For example Seytu in Alkali's *The Descendants* rises to become the chief medical director of a hospital. Hawwa her daughter becomes the commissioner for health in her state. Their rise to these positions enables them to contribute their quota to the development of their societies. Hasiya the heroine of Balkisu Salisu Funtua's *Allura Cikin Ruwa* is portrayed as a very successful barrister; Fatima in *Wa Ya San Gobe* becomes the Commissioner for Education in her state; while Saadatu in *Saadatu Sa'ar Mata* becomes a renowned business woman.

Most of these female writers believe that the only thing that can save the girl-child from negative cultural values is "a good and sound education". Their views on the education of the female child as a weapon for liberation was echoed sometimes ago by a renowned writer the late Alhaji Abubakar Gimba (1999), when he advocated in "A letter to my Daughter that:

Your education...will.... enable you to be able to stand on your own and take care of yourself, but also help you to be a good mother. A good mother brings up good and responsible children, who will be future good wives and good husbands...On good mothers depend the evolution of good families and good families make for a wonderful nation....so a good mother is the bedrock of a good society (105).

As a result, in Nigeria as in other African Countries, the perception that women's education ends in the kitchen is fast fading as women today, have managed to combine, wifedom and womanhood with their respective careers. With education women strive to have a say in the developmental process of their societies. Gone are the days when you have the women being relegated to the background. They have successfully survived both roles and they are found at the top in the society. For example, as a result of education, women in Nigeria today hold important and sensitive positions in their pursuit for nation building, advancement and socioeconomic development of their societies. In Nigeria today, there are female judges, ministers, permanent Secretaries, heads of tertiary institutions, heads of Federal government agencies, special advisers, ambassadors and high commissioners who are forces to reckon with in building the Nigerian nation as well as advancing her development. Illustrations of these successful females most times form the characters of the female literary writer/artist in her quest in positing the roles of the female literary writer in national advancement and nation building.

### **Conclusion**

The portrayals of female characters created by most early Nigerian contemporary male and female writers revolve around marriage and procreation. This depiction suggests that a woman's life is incomplete without a life partner or children, especially male children. Women are often forced to live in men's bondage, with their identities defined

solely by their fathers, brothers, husbands, or sons never by themselves. As Arndth (2002, p. 109) notes, "this adversely weakens their position in society." The most compelling factor contributing to female subjugation in Nigeria, as in other African countries, has always been a lack of education and economic dependence on male family members, along with traditional and social demands that keep women tied to societal expectations, as their identities are rooted there. Today, the narrative is changing. Nigerian female writers are challenging these depictions by portraying their female characters as vital and capable individuals who participate equally in a world shared with their male counterparts. These characters define their own spaces and contribute to the social realities of their lives. They possess substantial life experience and strive to determine their own paths. These new heroines break free from cultural constraints, as noted by Opara (1990, p. 160): "They strive to extricate their feet from cultural impediments as they embark on the journey to their dream land." It is no wonder that their female characters are portrayed as heroines of reality. From the examples provided, it is clear that female-authored texts offer self-images, patterns of self-analysis, and insights into women's experiences that have been overlooked by male and colonial writers. Similarly, female writers highlight their femaleness and femininity in their narratives, emphasizing the power differences between men and women. For a country to achieve success in national advancement and nation-building, its female literary writers must be recognized and appreciated. To remain relevant, female literary writers must be attuned to the social realities of their society to advocate for national progress through their characters, as "social experience is the primary source of literature" (Amuta, 1986, p. 85).

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## ***Sanditon and the Woman Figure: A Struggle for Wholeness***

Umma Abubakar, PhD.

### **Abstract**

*The study examined Sanditon, an unfinished novella written by Jane Austen, the English woman writer of the nineteenth century whose ideology was mostly considered to be antediluvian. It investigated the genesis of women's oppression and social position during the Victorian era and argued that there is a discontinuity in the author's focus in this fragmentary novella for rather than the naïve, docile "feminine ideal" that permeate her earlier novels, Sanditon challenges traditional gender roles by presenting independent female characters who symbolise female agency, female desire, autonomy and self-determination. The novella again critiques patriarchal society through a satirical depiction of masculine agency and the exposure of gender-based oppression.*

**Keywords:** *Nineteenth Century Ideology, Sex/Gender Distinction, Female Oppression, Female agency, Desire and Autonomy.*

### **Introduction**

Jane Austen is often known, studied and interpreted as a writer too plain "plain Jane," domesticated and obsessed with depicting human life "all human life," despite the elegant character depiction in her novels, her precision of language and exquisite narrative strategy (see amongst others, Dicks 1992:39-43 & Reeves 1968:41-3). The writer has been criticised of always portraying female characters, trivial life, and writing about the prosperous people in the society. It is against this background that this study seeks to re-evaluate Austen's *Sanditon*, a fragmentary novella written at the height of her literary career, from a distinct female perspective, a perspective that breaks away from earlier misconceptions that lump her work into historical narratives governed by presuppositions that remain predominantly masculine.