Urbanity in Post-Colonial African Literature: The Works of Ekwensi, Nwangi, Farah and El Saadani

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Abstract

The environments (city and rural) have been severally depicted by different African writers in post-colonial Africa as places sacred, secular, serene and comfortable on the one hand; inimical, threatening and justice on the other. While many African writers favour the rural life, others have likewise depicted disgust for the city or urban environment. This paper will focus on the works of Cyprian Ekwensi: *Jaguar Nana* (1961), *Jaguar Nana's Dayater* (1986); Meja Nwaugi: *Going Down Rivers Road* (1976), *Kill Me Quick* (1973); Nuruddin Farah: *A Naked Needle* (1976); Nwaal EC Saadawi: woman at point 2010 (1977) and other works of African novelists like Awinata Son Fail: *La Greve Des Bathus* (197); Peter Abrahams: *Mine Boy* (1946). "These novels present the sordiness of the city, its prostitutions, its crime, its suicides and its murders" (Cartey 1969, p.110).this paper discovers that while the male authors view the city as destructive element to the female characters in their novels, women writers have carefully steered away from the thesis of woman-as-victim, woman-as-pawn in the hands of men, and women-as-sexual vignette whose major role is to gladden men's hearts. Few examples will clarify the point. Amaka in Flora Nwapa's *One Is Enough* (1981), Hibira (Dr Li) in Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* (1984), Esi in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes: A Love Story* (1991), Aissatou in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1979), Aku in Promise Okeke's *Femes and Cymbals* (1992) and Omi in Osonye Tess Onwueme's *What Mama Said* (2003). The authors in their various perspectives give a portrayer of the forces of the city, the gradual destruction of the characters by these forces and the subsequent retreat of some of them into the quasi-divine purity of the country which is still identified with childhood innocence and peace. Therefore, the post-colonial African literature successfully

depicted the city as a destructive force against the woman. Female prostitution in modern Africa remains a major challenge to contemporary African elite and leadership hence a major thematic preoccupation in post-colonial literature residing from overbearing influence of the environment on women.

Keywords: Urbanity, African Literature, Patriarchy, Post-colonial, Eco-criticism

Introduction

Literature is the product of environment since literature draws its resources (raw materials) from it. Prehistory, literature and the arts have been drawn to portrayals of physical environment and human environment interactions. Since Aristotle, literary criticism had taken a certain interest in "setting", but not until the late twentieth century did it seriously engage in environment history and issues. The first significant ecocritical study, Joseph Meeker's *The Comedy of Survival*, and the term ecocriticism dates from 1970s. Consequently, literature is linked to the environment in many ways as there is literature in environment and environment in literature since literary writings are concerned with humans' changing relationship to the natural world.

The overview of the nature, significance, and evolution of literature – environment studies may be summarised in more detail six specific centres of interest: (a) the imagination of place and place attachment in literature (b) the enlistment and critique of models of scientific inquiry in the study of literature (c) the examination of the significance of gender difference and environmental representation (d) the cross-pollination of ecocritical and post-colonial scholarship as ecocriticism's has extended its horizons (e) ecocriticism's no less keen and complex attentiveness to artistic representation and the ethics of relations between human and animals, and (f) ecocriticism's evolving interest in indigenous art and thought.

However, this paper explores the environment in the works of Achebe, Mwangi, Farah and El Saadawi; viewing how nature, environment and literature intertwine in a bid to explain the relationship between literature and environment. For Saint Augustine, it is the city of God and for Aristotle, men come together in the city to live the good life. However, we witness a disgust for the city in novels.

Literary Imagination of the City in Ekwensi's Jagua Nana

Cyprian Ekwensi's novelistic concern had been the presentation of the city as an environment of ruin and destruction. Describing his vision of the city in *People of the City* (1954), *Jagua Nana* (1961), *Iska* (1981) and *Jagua Nana's daughter* (1986). Emenyonu (1974) says that for Ekwensi "the city is a terribly corrupting influence" (p.53). Ekwensi views it with the objective and detailed eye of the naturalist. For him, therefore, the city becomes much more than a setting. It becomes the protagonist that grinds down all the other characters. *Jagua Nana* is Ekwensi's portrayal of the forces of the city, the gradual destruction of the characters by these forces.

Jagua Nana is the story Jagua Nana's quest for material satisfaction and salvation, her movement from ignorance to self realisation, from illusion to reality. The author employs the spiral-like pattern of a pull towards the city and then a disheartened retreat to some point of origin. In projecting different aspect, of the city, Ekwensi highlights the residential areas, the Tropicana night club, the lecture hall, the charge office and politics as forces that pull people to them. He juxtaposes splendor with squalor; ebullient with decrepit areas.

The realities in post-colonial Africa compel different people to device various strategies for survival. In some African environments, the rigid and intimidating impact of colonialism and the callous and selfish orientation of neocolonialism result in the asphyxiating poverty and excruciating suffering of the common people. There always exists a gnawing gulf between what leadership is reedy to offer the people, and what the people actually expect. The people's attempt at syncronising the two usually gives rise to schisms (both intra – and inter-personal), many of which incongruous to the socio-cultural ideals of the people. Due to the historical fact in many post-colonial African communities that male education took precedence and wide recognition over female education, women were exposed to very minimal education or none at all. This trend implied that women were hardly involved in significant socio-political and economic matters of modern societies where specialisation determined participation.

It is against such backdrop that Cyprian Ekwensi presents the image of a "battered" and "suffocated" woman, Jagua Nana in his novel *Jagua Nana.* Women

performed largely subsidiary and peripheral roles, but their major activities were domestic, natural and biological. Many African male literary writers have portrayed women in these roles and have been condemned by especially female critics for depicting prejudiced and distorted female images. To state the obvious, the environment necessitated and inflicted this stigma on the woman. For instance, Ikoyi in *Jagua Nana* is presented with all the splendours and glammours of the city; it is an epitome of good life - It is the government reservation area "where whitemen and the Africans high up in civil service lived", where the streets are "straight and smooth" and "a romantic place" with electricity.

Consequently, the dynamics of modern/post-colonial societies pose tremendous challenges to the woman, who is uneducated or minimally educated, unskilled, unmarried or in a repulsive marriage and no prospects of a better future. Her condition is tangential to that of the educated and working-class women. The educated and working-class women are equipped for survival in contemporary society thought personal accomplishments in education, trade or through association with influential and powerful people. Evidence abound in Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* to show that in some parts of Africa and in Nigeria in particular, female education is still considered secondary to the females, thereby raising sobering questions on survival or sustenance of women, especially those with neither education nor skill and those of advance stages in life. To them, migration to the city for prostitution and other illicit businesses is their best option.

When the post-colonial African societies make no provision for this category of women, how can the women provide the basic requirements of life for themselves? This study explores these and other issues by focusing on how the urban environment has caused tremendous damage to the women in the novels selected. These novels portray female experiences which are themselves influenced by both the nuances of tradition and the impact of trado-religious ensemble. In the novel, the recurrent reference to filth, dirt and stench underscores the pervasive squalor and degradation. In Skylark Avenue, we are faced with the same sordid image. "The bucket in the lavatory in Jagua's compound is piled high, the floor messed about, so she could see nowhere to put her silver sandals… the unpleasant side of Lagos life: the flies in the lavatory – big and blue and stubborn settled on breakfast yam and lunch time stew (they were invisible in a stew with greens)" (p.108).

Through the use of minute details, Ekwensi presents this place as an area for the less priviledged, the ignored, and the scum of the earth. Gunle, the next residential area for urban dwellers is the "slum of slums", a place with neither electric light nor pipe-borne water. It is noted for its darkness at night. It is a place where one can see "figures, mere shapes, moving along the dark streets, their lanterns shining on their faces" (Pp.170-171). Thus, the people in this area have lost their humanity, and have become moving objects. These forces delineated above, determine the operations of the characters where movement in the city is spatial and not temporal. For Jagua Nana, it is a circular movement which starts in a slum and ends in the slum of slums. According to Povey (1973):

> If one can point out some effective and serious incidents one is driven to admit that Jagua herself is that clich'e of all clich'es, the prostitute with the heart of gold dogged by misfortune; a Nigerian Sodie Thompson. She is more sinned against than sinning, and the siren voice of Lagos must take much of the blame for bringing her to this position (p.81).

Jagua's life in the village is disgruntled by the failure of a childless marriage and lack of enjoyment. Her marriage with the coal-city man is full of contradictions. She was Jagua, she had "the hot thirst for adventure in her blood…. She refused to adapt herself to his humdrum life", she was bored (p.167). in contrast, her husband was "not Jaguafull, he never took her to parties, and would not dress well…. In no way did his ideas of living attract her" (p.167).

This unbearable life is far from the fast life of Lagos "where girls were glossy, worked in offices like men... were "free" and "fast" with their favours" (p.167). One could go roaming the streets or wandering from one night spot to the other. Ekwensi's words are very carefully chosen; he uses epithets like "glossy, high-heeled, narrow, free and fast" to depict the glamorous and fast nature of Lagos life. Its materialistic nature is also exposed.

Thus when Jagua starts her journey to Lagos, she is imbued with these high ideals. However, when she gets to Lagos, her first port of call is in the slum area, in hot lips' house. Hot lips has no money but style, so she is forced to move to the

dazzling area of Ikoyi by her association with John Martell and she tries to conform to the decorum; she becomes Jagua. This is evidenced in her dressing. She has degenerated into exposing parts of her body. Everything is studied as she tries to perfect her acts or coquetry, deportment and fashion. However, her attachment to Freddie draws her to an intellectual milieu, the lecture hall. Jagua Nana at the lecture hall is juxtaposed with Jagua Nana in the Tropicana club. In the lecture hall, she is bored she feels "drowsy", the hum of the ceiling fans "deadens her sensitiveness. She feels ostracized; it is not the right milieu for her. So, she is forced to move to the Tropicana, her natural habitat. This "modern super sex-market" has become for her "a daily drug, a potent, a habit-forming brew" (p.13). Once in this milieu, Jagua Nana is transformed into something beyond his (Freddie's) reach (p.16). She flirts with a Syrian and abandons Freddie because "in the Tropicana money always claimed the first loyalty" (p.15).

This flirtatious attitude in the Tropicana ends up in a fight with Mama Nancy and the hands of the law decend on her. She makes a temporal exit from the Tropicana and finds herself in a more degrading milieu in the city – the cell where people are "rolling in their own excrements". Ekwensi uses scatological images "smell of human urine", and "excrement" to depict the squalor. Jagua's interest in politics and the subsequent joining as an accomplice to a group of thieves headed by her younger boy friend Dennis Odoma and her association with Rosa further accentuates the negative forces of the environment on the life of women. Jagua has moved from one aspect of the city to the other hoping to find the much coveted salvation. Efforts to find real happiness in the city are completely shattered by the destructive forces of the city. Disappointed therefore, she returns with sober-eyes to appreciate the things in the village. Ironically, her quest depicts the difference between illusion and reality.

Urban Problems in Meja Mwangi's *Going Down River Road*

Going Down River Road displays the characteristics of the new African urban aggregation which the author also depicts in two other successful novels: *Kill Me Quick* and *Carcase For Hoands.* Mwangi's exploration of urban problems is if anything, more detailed, more sensitive, and ultimately more convincing than Ekwensi's exploration in *Jagua Nana.* The squalor, degradation, and misery are painstakingly presented through case histories such as that of Wini, Ben's girl

friend who has a child at the age of fourteen and was forced into prostitution to keep herself and fatherless child, still possessed enough moral courage to see her through a secretarial course. She eventually gets a decent job but is forced to abandon her baby and elope with her boss as a way out of urban impasse. There is a sixteen year-old prostitute who fornicates with Ben in the same room in which she is simultaneously having fun with another man while her nine month-old baby screams in the corner.

The inhabitants of the river road are a occasionally demonstrate a certain comradeship in adversity and the reader is made to experience the warmth of populist amusement-spots such as Eden or the karara centre, but he still senses the absence of real friendship which is ultimately attributable to the dehmumanising effect of the impersonal city where everyone is involved in the scramble to survive. Mwangi does not flinch from presenting the grim realities of the housing racket, the corruption of the politicians, the high cost of living and its consequences, and organised as well as petty crime.

Mwangi's preoccupation with the social realities of the city does not prevent him from creating some interesting characters and exploring some significant relationships. The hero, Ben, is the most fascinating of them all. A central consciousness through whose eyes almost all events and the other characters are viewed, he survives in the mind of the reader as a kind of anti-hero whose huge bulk and physical strength go oddly with his lack of resolution and real guts. The story continues of Ben, a onetime lieutenant who ends up as a casual labourer on a building construction site. He meets with Wini the prostitute and decided to move in with her and her 4-years-old son, but Wini is obviously the dominant person in the household. When it suits her purpose she leaves, abandoning her son, baby, to Ben, as though she were the father and he the mother.

Mwangi's earthly language matches the status and occupations of his characters, but it is perhaps inexcusable or him to lapse into himself in his own narrative. Perhaps Wini's character could also have been more fully developed. One finds it rather unconvincing that the girl who had shown so much fondness for her only child would abandon it unceremoniously without any thought of ever seeing it

again. But these are forces of the city and the urban life that the characters choose to live.

The Urban Environment In Nurudeen Farah's *The Naked Needle*

In *The Naked Needle,* Farah presents disillusioned characters against the background of social and political corruption in a largely urban area, this time Somalia's capital, Mogadiscio. Farah makes copious use of flashbacks and reminiscences interspersing the dialogue. The reader views the decadence of contemporary Mogadiscio. There is certainly comment on city life; there is a bint on of the absurdity of bureaucracy, the corruption of politicians, the squalor of the masses, ministerial incompetence, nepotism, and the destructiveness of the city.

On a first reading it might superficially appear that the poverty of the urban presentation may be due to Farah's greater interest in human relationships, the relationship between men and women or between black men and their white woman in independent Africa. There is that between Koschin's friend Barre and his America wife, which comes to grief because it is based on lies and neither is prepared to make allowance; there is the successful relationship between another friend Mohammed and his wife Barbara which is due to a complete understanding and acceptance of each other's nature and a determination to be flexible; and there is Koschin's relationship with Nancy which is eventually successful because they have both been quite honest with each other. The author is so preoccupied with more social comment to be interested in scenes or in people.

The Environment/Female Prostitution in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*

Woman at point zero projects a refreshing vision for the twenty-first century African women. The vision is prostitution as a survival strategy to cope with the challenges and pressure of modern life. According to Saadawi (1980), "prostitution means sexual intercourse between a man and a woman aimed at satisfying the man's sexual and the woman's economic needs…. Prostitution started with patriarchal system with the division of society into landowners and slaves" (p.56). This is the story of Firdaus, the woman who is incarcerated and ultimately hanged for murdering a man. The author validates the story of Firdaus by stating at the outset that "this is the story of a real woman (p.1). Firdaus tells her own story and

uninterruptedly recounts her life experience sequentially to the author. Beginning the story in *medias res*, Firdaus notes boldly and proudly that at Six O'clock that evening, she would be taken away to the gallows, and then she reflicts on her background and how events unfurled to the present.

In the home environment, Firdaus grows in a large family with several brothers and sisters "like chicks that multiply in the spine, shiver in winter and lose their feathers, and then in summer are stricken with diarrhea, waste away quickly and one by one creep into a corner and die" (p.18). The children are intensely impoverished and malnourished. Their father is the only person who has to eat even when there is short supply of food. Firdaus at age nineteen is forced into marriage with Sheikh Mahmoud, a widower who is over sixty years old. According to Firdaus, Sheikh Mahmoud consistently humiliates her:

> He kept looking at my plate while I ate, and if I left anything over he picked it up, put it in his mouth and after swallowing, quickly told me off for my wastefulness. Yet I was not given to wasting anything and the only food I left on the plate were the scanty remains which stuck to its surface, and could only be removed with soap and water (p.43).

Sheikh Mahmoud's overbearing attitude degenerated into battering Firdaus, sometimes hitting her all over with his shoes. This brutality is defended by Firdaus uncle and his wife who argue that "it is precisely men well versed in their religion permitted such punishment. A virtuous woman was not supposed to complain about her husband. Her duty was perfect obedience" (p.44).

As a result, Firdaus leaves her husband and her marriage for the streets, and ends up with Bayoumi who offers her accommodation in his apartment. Bayoumi is satisfied with Firdaus staying with him to cook and clean all day while he works at his food shop. But Firdaus expressed her dissatisfaction with her role by stating: "I must work. I can't carry on like this…. I cannot continue to live in your house, I'm a woman and you're a man… you haven't even tried to find me a job. I am going out now to look for one" (p.49). This earns Firdaus a slap, "the heaviest slap" Firdaus has ever received in her face. Subsequently, Bayoumi routinely slaps

Firdaus, and then has brutal sex with her. He also brings his friends to have sex with her, while abusing her as a bitch and slut. Firdaus eventually succeeds in escaping from Bayoumi and meets Sherifa, the shrewd and sophisticated woman who introduced Firdaus to formalised prostitution.

She provides Firdaus with luxurious accommodation, feeding as well as men who have sex with Firdaus, but make payments to her, Sherifa. Sherifa trains Firdaus to extricate passion and all feelings from the "business of prostitution", but Firdaus finds that the business rather imprisons her, and she resents that:

> I never used to leave the house. In fact, I never even left the bedroom. Day and night I lay on bed, crucified, and every hour a man would come in. There were so many of them… they were all married, all educated, all carrying swollen leather bags, and swollen letter wallets (p.57).

Realizing that while her vocation implies self-exploitation for her, it implies enrichments for Sherifa, she escapes from Sherifa's home. While walking the street Firdaus is sexually assaulted by a policeman who does not pay anything to her. She meets and spends the night with a man who pays her ten pounds in the morning. Financially empowered, Firdaus treats herself to a good meal and sees herself more positively than before. At that point, she surmounts fear and attains freedom, resolving to do whatever she likes with her life and her body.

At the age of twenty-five, Firdaus is able to rent an apartment for herself, employ a cook and launch herself into full scale sex work. She later seeks responsibility by taking up a paid job. At work place she falls in love with her colleague, Ibrahim. She becomes devastated realising her betrayal through Ibrahim's marriage to another woman. She leaves her job and goes alone the streets again, and then returns to prostitution. She is confronted by a pimp called Marzouk who forces himself on Firdaus, insisting on managing her and sharing in her earnings. Having chosen sex work, Firdaus is conscious that:

> a successful prostitute was better than a misled saint. All women are victims of deception. Men impose deception on women and

> punish them for being deceived, force them down to the lowest level and punish them for falling low, bind them in marriage and then chastise them with mental service for life, or insults, or blows (p.86).

At the peak of Firdaus' disagreement with Marzouk, Firdaus uses Marzouk's knife and kills him, thereby deconstructing the imperialist notion of African womanhood which quitted on the backdrop of muffleness, passiveness, and acquiescence. As Firdaus walks out again on the streets, she ends up spending the night with a wealthy Arab prince who by morning pays her three thousand pounds. Firdaus' bitterness makes her tear up the money, thus symbolically tearing apart the vestiges of the veil that perpetually impeded her full conceptualisation of who she is. She recognises the authenticity of Sherifa's earlier counsel that "a man does not know a woman's value. She is the one who determines her value. The higher you price yourself, the more he will realise what you are really worth, and be prepared to pay with the means at his disposal…" (p.55).

Conclusion

Cyprian Ekwensi in *Jagua Nana* and Nawal El Saadawi in *Woman At Point Zero* have successfully depicted the city as a destructive force. All those who remain in it, especially Women perish. On Jagua, Rosa in *Jagua Nana* who retraces their steps to their roots survived. Firdaus is destroyed at the end. Similarly Meja Mwangi's *Going Down Rivers Road* and Nuruddin Farah's *A Naked Needle* explore the urban problems. The ending of Jagua Nana and Firdaus are remarkably different because of obvious disparity in the environments of the two writers and in the perception of prostitution between the male writer (Cyprian Ekwensi) and the female writer (Nawal El Saadawi) respectively. Jagua, uneducated and often sheepish in action and judgement, is not squashed by prostitution (environment); rather she is empowered and liberated to live ever after with her mother.

Firdaus is destroyed by the end of the novel (Women At Point Zero). In fact, her imprisonment and death represent the climax of a process to which Firdaus was subjected to (in the environment) from infancy. She is a product of a loveless, malnourished family, cast in the rubric of squalor and sexual assault, and then she

becomes a loner, roaming the streets in utter hopelessness. She finds that her sexuality is paradoxically the framework for her freedom and bondage on the one hand, and her means of livelihood and authentic humanity on the other. All these are significant testaments of the post-colonial female predicament from the environment. Jagua and Firdaus are similar in their experiences as sex workers though from two different African environments – Nigeria and Egypt. These women who are oppressed by patriarchal civilisation in their environments resort to prostitution in which man is still the sole determinant of trends.

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