

Issues of Globalization in Contemporary Feminist African Fiction

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Abstract

Globalization is phenomenon influencing everything and permeating all areas of human life, shaping life as it is lived and continuously exerting its influence across the world. It therefore poses a problem to writers and scholars in terms of understanding its impact and meaning for human life and existence. This paper seeks to tease out the different perspectives and perceptions attributable to globalization in the understanding of feminism in African literature; particularly with regard to the movement from 'women's experiences of gender oppression (that) are shaped by other forms of oppression such as those based on race, class, disability and sexual orientation,' to the argument about gender oppression interacting with these systems of oppression, along with other forms of systemic disadvantage that arise within the global context. The focus would be on showing the extent to which there are other forms of systemic disadvantage to women that arise from within the global context as a manifestation of the impact of globalization on feminist thinking and reflections of such realities in contemporary works of fiction by two contemporary female writers. The two novels: Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* and Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*, will be examined.

Keywords: African literature, contemporary, feminism, gender oppression, globalization

Introduction: Feminism and the Globalized World

Feminism has come a long way as a theory to analyse the experience of being a woman. Feminist scholars have advanced from merely protesting against oppression of women to challenging patriarchal structures that make the oppression possible. For example, Parekh and Shelley explain:

Early feminist analyses focused on issues that were widely believed to be of particular importance to women around the world, such as domestic violence, workplace discrimination, and human rights violations against women (N.pag).

These issues and the critical approach to them have become stereotypical, if not simplistic; those early feminist analyses failed to acknowledge that certain 'structural gendered injustices' are 'systemic'.

As quoted by Parekh and Shelley, Jaggar clearly explains this idea:

Although gender oppression takes different forms in different social, cultural, and geographical locations, women in every society face systematic disadvantages, such as those resulting from their socially assigned responsibility for domestic work. Because of these structural injustices, women of all nationalities tend to suffer more from the poverty, overwork, deprivation, and political marginalization associated with neoliberal policies. Thus more recent feminist analyses of globalization tend to understand the outcomes of globalization not as disparate or contingent phenomena, but rather as a result of systemic, structural injustices on a global scale (N. pag.).

However, in spite of the weakness or failure of globalization to offer a clear understanding of the female experience, Western women are still able to work round the idea, creating a new methodology. They are not able to carry along women in Africa or other developing countries, because they are usually taken for granted and not seen as serious, except 'they reflect the norms and values of the West and conform to Western expectations' (Parekh and Shelley N. pag.). Yet their experiences are clearly different from those of the Western women. This is why Schuttles (quoted by Parekh and Shelley), 'insists that feminists must engage in methodological practices that de-centre their

habitual standpoints and fore-ground perspectives that challenge accepted ways of thinking' (N. pag.).

Chandra Talpade Mohanty has observed 'that Western feminists' scholarship tends to adapt an ethnocentric perspective, depicting the so-called Third World women as one-dimensional, non-agentic, and homogenous' (22). This is why the proposed all-time solution of the 'grand narrative' seems to have failed.

There are advantages highlighted under globalization but they accrue only to Western nations and Western women. As for women in developing countries, it has never been so bad. In the view of Neuswirth, as far as women in developing countries are concerned, "globalization" is a negative word because it has brought great harm to many women ... by facilitating the systemic exploitation of women as a source of cheap domestic and migrant labour, for example, and accelerating the international operation of organized crime, drastically increasing the trade in women and girls for various forms of commercial sexual exploitation' (N. pag.).

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The unfavourable position of African women under the culture of globalization is being reflected in female writing. According to Sharmila Rege, 'the grand theories of globalization have erased gender as integral to social and economic dimensions, thus leading to an implicit masculinization of macro structural models'(4560). Thus, new experiences of women, especially African women, have not been properly highlighted in new works of female writers. Such thematic engagements as migration, women in Diaspora, women trafficking and 'the feminization of migration (that) ... has translated into women's labour being sexualized' (4560). These are all new issues arising from the reality encountered under globalization. Since 'literature is life', as espoused by some scholars, and can be expressed in any form, contemporary experience of women in Africa should be captured in new African writings.

No doubt, globalization has impacted on lives in the contemporary period. As observed by Rege:

The concrete everyday experience of the global against the abstractions of theory is not a feminist repudiation of theory, nor does the focus on sites mean an isolation from larger contexts in which they are located. In fact, the focus on the lived experiences of globalization in feminist scholarship helps historicize theory both in spatial and temporal senses and to recognize its limitations in dealing with differences. It gives voice to those who inhabit these sites as compared to 'purveyors of abstractions' who claim omniscience by virtue of being outside these sites (4561).

Such is the expectation of a writer trying to highlight the realities of the contemporary globalized world. The works of two new female African writers clearly express these sentiments. To the fictional works we now turn.

The Global Feminist Perspective in Kaine Agary's *Yellow-Yellow* and Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*

Contemporary works of writers in today's complex world, no doubt, reflect the complexity of life in a difficult terrain that is the twenty-first century human society. In Africa, as always, (since the end of colonialism), especially for the women, the situation has been that of double or triple jeopardy. While the world is trying to cope with the challenges of economic imbalance and weather crisis, Africa continues to battle with the old issues of underdevelopment, as well as fall-out from years of colonialism and new crises emerging from the disadvantages arising from the post-colonial condition. The 'booby-traps' set up by the colonial masters in the socio-economic and political systems of the formerly colonized states, continue to cause problems for the states. Many of these issues have become magnified and problematic in a world that is ever more interconnected under globalization; these issues that Africa does not have the capability to contain have therefore placed her at a disadvantage in a world that has stronger political states as key players. Such issues as oil spill, illegal

migration, women trafficking, child trafficking, corruption and political instability have been major problems for developing countries.

Yellow-Yellow is the story of a young girl, Zilayefa, nicknamed Yellow-Yellow from the undeveloped creeks of the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria. She leaves her village in search of a better life in the city, but she ends up learning 'life's lessons' the hardest way. The terrain, ravaged by the negative effects of oil spill, as a result of oil exploration going on in the area, has become almost uninhabitable for the people. The oil exploration going on in the region, which has destroyed the means of livelihood (fishing) of the poor indigent people, has not brought any economic benefit to the people, in spite of the enormous wealth it has provided for the Nigerian state. As a result of this situation and the attendant poverty it has brought on the people, many young people leave the region in search of a better life elsewhere. Parents send out their children to the cities, to pursue a better life than the one they have had. The remaining youths left behind have taken to violence to vent their anger on the system. We read,

Sometimes, when I would sit outside with boys and girls in my age group, we would listen to the radio, and sometimes we would hear an Ijaw person, living in Port Harcourt or Lagos, speaking about how the oil companies had destroyed our Niger Delta with impunity. They would discuss how the Ijaws and other ethnic groups were suffering and even dying while the wealth of their soil fed others. ... These broadcasts drove the boys in my village to violence (*Yellow-Yellow* 9).

In an interesting essay, Olukayode describes such experience as 'economic globalization ... (that) brings about marginalization on a massive scale ... turning into a ... wholesale plunder of the neo-colonies' (244). Agary paints a more realistic picture in her book, describing the oil spill and the economic woes it portends for her people:

There was so much oil, and we could do nothing with it – viscous oil that would not dry out, black oil that was knee-deep. I stayed there,

in a daze ... And so, in a single day, my mother lost her main source of sustenance (4).

To escape this nightmare, many parents would rather have their children removed from the source of the crisis and sent far away 'to another life', 'to live a normal life' and pursue a better dream. To such parents, like Zilayefa's mother, Bibi, education is the key to such 'freedom' from the nightmare that is the life of the village.

Unlike other parents who kept their children busy, my mother would not allow me to do many chores around the house or follow her into the bush for firewood and for the other things that people went into the bush for. It was almost as though she was obsessed, consumed by the idea that my education would save me from what I had yet to understand and what she could not explain to me. Perchance in saving me, she hoped to save herself (9).

The birth of Zilayefa herself (a product of a Greek father and an Ijaw mother) could be linked to a negative effect of globalization, which Neuswirth believes 'has brought great harm to many women ... by facilitating the systemic exploitation of women ... drastically increasing the trade in women and girls for various forms of commercial sexual exploitation (N. pag.)'. As experienced by Bibi, Zilayefa's mother, one could not but notice the unfortunate situation in which the young woman finds herself as a result of her lack of experience and the overwhelming influence of a globalized Western character. Yellow-Yellow narrates:

My father was a sailor whose ship had docked briefly in Nigeria about one year before I was born. After months at sea, he was just happy to see a woman and would have told her anything to have her company. The woman he chose was my mother, a young and naïve eighteen year old who had just moved to Port Harcourt from her small village with visions of instant prosperity. She had completed her secondary-school education and had passed her school-leaving examinations. With that qualification, she hoped to get a good job in Port Harcourt. After all, Nigeria was in the middle of the oil boom, and there were many businessmen around. She saw

herself working as a secretary for one of them. Instead, she met my father at a disco and fell for him (7).

And Zilayefa herself almost falls into the same ditch when she meets a Spanish man, Sergio, but for Providence:

It turns out that Sergio was an antique-furniture dealer from Spain who travelled extensively for his business (22).

To Zilayefa, the man has the key to her escape from the drudgery of life in the village; but when this does not work out, she makes other plans. She eventually makes it to the big city, Port Harcourt, where she is lucky to find herself among the elite of the city. The experience in the city gives her perspective on womanhood, which is different from that she has had in the village. Her experience also presents us with 'a different narrative' in the multiple perspectives of globalization; while the girls from the village who visit the city without any education or means of livelihood sell themselves to the men, especially expatriates for money, the smart women like Sisi (Zilayefa's benefactor) learn the tricks of business and other globalization 'tools' and use them to their advantage. Zilayefa has considered the unpleasant option of selling her body but is saved from that by Sisi after she learns of her achievements:

I started to consider the options that had never crossed my mind before, ... I could find my way to a place like Bonny, the base of expatriates working for oil companies, and sell my body to a whitey. Some girls from my town did that in order to send money home to their families. They all had the same look, whether they sold themselves in Warri, Bonny, or in Port Harcourt.... Girls did anything to get a whitey (37).

On the other hand:

Sisi had not attended school beyond primary six, preferring instead to work. She had been exposed to all the influences that had converged in Port Harcourt in those days, long before Nigerian independence from the British. Sisi used that exposure and the influence of her elder brother to get contract jobs for construction and even food supply in the government-run hospitals. She opened

her boutique soon after her first supply contract in the late sixties (54).

And for Lolo:

After Lolo graduated, she spent her year of National Youth Service Corps (or Now Your Suffering Continues) working with the oil Company, Elf Acquitane in Lagos. Everyone had expected her to remain in Lagos, once her year was up, to pursue a permanent job with Elf, but she returned to Port Harcourt instead. The move turned out to be to her parents' benefit, as TT was over seventy years old and beginning to slow down. ... Lolo quickly jumped into the role of custodian, managing her parents' investments and properties ...

Even though Lolo's parents and her brothers had been very protective of her when she was growing up, she was very adventurous. 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 (58-59).

The different life stories of these women, their encounter with globalization and their different strategies of coping with life's troubles are of interest. The different responses of the women, which result in either a negative or positive impact on their lives, have to do with their educational background and their experiences in terms of their understanding of the socioeconomic system. For according to Schutte (in Parekh and Shelley 2014: n. pag.), 'feminists must engage in methodological practices that de-centre their habitual standpoints and foreground perspectives that challenge accepted ways of thinking.'

It is lack of this knowledge and understanding of the 'methodological practices' that leads Zilayefa to derail and lose focus when she starts a relationship with the Admiral, following the advice of her friend, Emem. She does not (yet) understand the difference between the 'low life' women who are under the influence of the negative effect of globalization and the others who are able to rise above the negative perception of society. In fact, it is in Port Harcourt that she comes to understand the conditions of her existence:

Folks in my town knew me as Yellow-Yellow, but I never thought much about the circumstances of my existence until I got to Port Harcourt. In Port Harcourt, being yellow defined my interactions with people I met. Most people did not just ask where I was from; they asked where my father was from. I came to understand that people had preconceived notions about others of mixed race – they thought we were conceited, promiscuous, undisciplined, and confused. A mixed race woman in a position of power must have gotten there because of her looks. She was not there because she was intelligent. There was even much less regard for *born-troways* such as me. We were products of women of easy virtue who did not have morals to pass on to their children (74).

In the end, she learns the hard way; she struggles with ‘accepting the void left by not knowing her father and (trying) to fill that void with attention of an older lover’ (blurb), but she fails because she does not understand the appropriate ‘methodological practice’ to choose to be able to ‘challenge the accepted ways of thinking’. Finally, when she reaches the point of ‘epiphany’, it becomes clear to her:

Then one thought suppressed all others- I could take care of my problem myself, cover my shame, and look forward to my own tomorrow with a clean slate...

As much as I enjoyed the drama of working in the hotel, I knew in my heart that it was not what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. I wanted the confidence that Lolo had, and if Sisi was right, the choices also came with an education.

Emem possessed a lack of seriousness that I did not envy and she thrived on the kind of chaos that I could only appreciate from a distance. I knew that if I was around it long enough without my own focus, I could be sucked into it. (176-177).

While Zilayefa learns the hard way, and is able to confront the negative effect of globalization on her life, with a prospect of turning things around to be able to write a positive ‘narrative’ for herself, Mara’s experience is quite different. This protagonist of Amma Darko’s *Beyond the Horizon* is eventually ‘sucked into it’. Like Zilayefa, she also comes

from a poor background, a backward village in a remote countryside in Ghana, and is married out by her father to the son of the village undertaker who resides in the city. Although the story has all the trappings of a feminist story, the twists and turns about the characters' experience in the city, and the subsequent challenges encountered in their lives' journey bring about a 'globalized' narrative.

The story of Mara is a story of deceit, greed, manipulation and betrayal; it is the story of man's inhumanity to a woman; but it is also the story of 'the plight of African women in Europe, and the false hopes of those they leave behind' (Blurb). From the opening of the story, we are confronted with a young wife in a city trying to cope with the challenges of city life, while also enduring the pain of an abusive marriage. However, globalization manifests in the narrative in the form of the love of the African for Europe and European products. Mama Kiosk explains to Mara:

These our men they always leave for Europe and say they'll be back in one [,] two or three years. ... (b)ut they go and never return again (46).

And for Mara, who is a naïve village girl, after experiencing life in the city, she becomes sucked into its 'vortex; returning to the village becomes a challenge. She explains:

City life was so drastically different from village life that once one allowed oneself to get infected, reverting to village life was like cycling uphill. ... (47)

It is love for city life and the unabashed worship of Europe that prove to be the fatal weakness of Mara, the village girl. She paints the picture of Europe as registered in her head:

Europe to me was a place so special and so very very far away, somewhere unimaginable, may be even somewhere near heaven, where not just anybody could go (34).

The lack of knowledge of the reality of life in Europe and of the real situation in human society renders Mara a 'goat prepared for the slaughter'. Even when she has to play 'a maid' in her husband's European house, with his European 'wife', it is all part of the 'game', to

keep European woman in blissful ignorance, while she is milked dry of her wealth.

The truth is Darko's novel 'focused on issues that were widely believed to be of particular importance to women [like] domestic violence, workplace discrimination, and human rights violations against women. Even as a young girl, Mara's own father does not consider her to be of any importance. She explains:

I only know that the choice, for my father, could not have come at a better time. A man he owed money to had come and forcefully claimed his debt in the form of eight of father's eleven goats. So my dowry came in handy. And then, too, he was flattered that the first Naka son with a school certificate should choose his daughter for a wife. So much so that I later learnt that, drunk from palm wine and belching boisterously, he had proclaimed that he would gladly have given me away for one goat (7).

And it is not long after she is brought to the city that she begins to experience the bitter pills of 'domestic violence':

Akobi returned home that night just after midnight. Though I heard him I continued to feign a deep sleep, when suddenly I felt a painful kick in my rib (11).

Yet, being a naïve village girl, Mara submits to it all, believing the bitter experiences to be normal. She comments:

Initially, many things that happened in my marriage appeared to me to be matter-of-course things that happened in all marriages and to all wives. I didn't see much difference from my parents' marriage either, so why should I think differently just because I was living in the city? (12)

To her, it is the lot of women in life, so it should just be accepted. And what more, even in faraway Europe, the lot of the woman remains the same; Osey, Akobi's friend, does not hide the fact that he beats up his wife regularly:

I beat her up just before you came. I beat the sense out of her. Ask your wife. She went somewhere and refused to tell me (75).

The description of the initiation of Mara into prostitution by her own husband lends credence to Sharmila Rege's (4560) idea of the 'feminization of migration', that is, women trafficking for the purpose of men's sexual gratification.

The situation was this: the three of us were watching a video film that showed me completely naked, with men's hands moving all over my body. Then some held my two legs apart while one after the other, men, many men, white, black, brown, even one who looked Chinese, took turns upon me. All this was captured clearly on the video film. And this was what Osey and Akobi blackmailed me with so that I agreed to do the job at Peepy (115).

The observation of Jaggar, as quoted by Parekh and Shelley (n. pag.), is quite appropriate when she concludes that 'more recent feminist analyses of globalization tend to understand the outcomes of globalization not as disparate or contingent phenomena, but rather as a result of systemic, structural injustices on a global scale.

The unfortunate end of Mara clearly backs the point. And her own conclusion of the bitter end that awaits her is quite pathetic.

At Oves' brothel, I have plunged into my profession down to the marrow in my bones. ... I am so much a whore now that I can no longer remember or imagine what being a non-whore is. I have problems recollecting what I was like before I turned into what I am now.

And to rub in the pain, she has been initiated into the cult of another globalization 'tool':

So when I am down, when any of us is feeling down, Oves gives us 'snow' to sniff, to make us high. Now I can't go through a day without sniffing 'snow'. I am hooked on it (139).

It is this sort of dehumanization that the African woman is faced with under globalization. Even when she could 'challenge the accepted ways of thinking', the odds against her are just too much for her to be able to win the battle.

Conclusion

Globalization, with its ‘multiplicity of perspectives’, is actually ‘the grand narrative’ of contemporary scholarship. The phenomenon impacts every area of human experience. Its influence, whether positive or negative, is deep and far-reaching. Certainly, the impact of globalization on Africa has been strong and far reaching, from its economic root, through its political link, to the social and technological waves of the day. The effort in the paper to examine one strand of globalization in African literature, precisely in the works of the two contemporary female African writers, is an attempt to contribute an African voice to a major controversial discourse of this era. And since the phenomenon could not be wished away, then it is important for African scholars, in whatever field, to continue to interrogate it in order to weave a unique African ‘strand’ into the ‘grand narrative’. The paper has pointed to a direction in African literature that could lead to a further probe of the African voice within the ‘grand narrative’ that is globalization.

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