Mobility and Femality in Selected Novels of African Female Writers

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Abstract
Most African female novels dealing with female issues, accidentally or by design, chronicle 'femality' which is regarded as female growth of consciousness or search for the female self "from childhood to womanhood" or the expansion of her self-awareness from its first dream nature to that of experience. Since 'growth' implicates 'movement' or 'change,' this paper interrogated the connection between female mobility and female growth of consciousness, including the intricacies of female mobility, in four African female novels namely: Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn*, Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*, and Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*. In addition, it discusses journey and consciousness motifs that are replete in the works. African Feminism – a philosophy that acknowledges that men and women are different but complementary is the main theoretical basis of this research. Like the literary technique of retrospection and dialectical discourse analysis, the present focus seems to be on the revolutionary actions and language associated with female consciousness. The conclusion is that mobility, physical or psychological, is the pivot of femality as recreated by the selected female writers.
Key Words: Mobility, Femality, and African Feminism.

Introduction

Female mobility, according to www.eiturbanmobility.eu, is the movement of women within and across cities ("Urban Mobility"). However, the concept of female mobility in the Humanities is encompassing: it could be said to include the female "journey of growth from naivety to experience, ignorance to knowledge, illusion to disillusion, dream to . . . reality, and from innocent girlhood to mature and assertive womanhood." According to insights from Grace Okereke ("Reviews: The Stillborn" 294), this is achieved amid deeply entrenched patriarchal stereotyping. Okereke implicates another vital but often ignored part of female mobility which is the 'remaining-in-a-place' aspect. With the latter, discussions in this paper focused on the search for the female self by females who (educated or not in the Western way) hardly leave their locations. It asserts that female journey of growth could be both physical and or psychological. Okereke further sees the female growth of consciousness as "the cultivation of the mind [that] empowers the hitherto silenced female to speak out" ("Gender Dialogics" 270). Okereke's "the cultivation of the mind" (270) is a vital feministic language deployed for analytical purposes in this paper. Of importance too is the overt effect of such 'cultivation of the mind' – it empowers the female person to take action that is at first and foremost non-verbal. This non-verbal act is a secondary proof of her 'cultivated mind' or growth of consciousness. Such consequential journey of growth raises the vital question of the place of the reality of female self-abnegation which almost naturally sets in in time.

Femality is akin to femaleness: the consciousness and quality of being or becoming a female person/woman. Since consciousness propels action, the selected female writers recreate the image of the African woman by "vesting her with selfhood – dignity" (259), even as they topple any "male agenda of pulling the conscious woman back retrogressively into the past of male domination and female inferiority" (264). Thus, the world begins to see and tolerate new meanings of words and expressions like gender, sex, author, etc, which until recently were customized and inelastic. As a result, Daphne Spain could define gender as "the socially and culturally constructed distinctions that accompany biological differences associated with a person's sex" (qtd.in Okereke, 260), and no longer as strictly as the 'quality or nature' of being male or female. This growth of consciousness, this search for the female self is a way of deconstructing "the limited, circumscribed space ascribed to the female gender in the traditional patriarchal set-up that constitute her world," as Okereke would say ("Language as Index of Female Space" 41).

While Alkali's *The Stillborn* chronicles the lives of Li, Awa and Faku (adolescent girls), Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* deals with the vicissitudes of Nnu Ego and Adaku's lives and their growth of consciousness in their married life amidst the stereotypes of patriarchy. On the other hand, Ba's *So Long a Letter* deals with similar journey to selfhood from the perspective of two well-educated Senegalese women, Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, and Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* recounts Mara's struggles for self-emancipation from a tradition "in which the female is everywhere subsumed under the male" (Okereke, African Gender Dialogics" 261). This paper therefore, asserts that female physical and psychological mobility are, as Princewill Abakporo and Nwachukwu Ukadi argue, "some survivalist strategies" (97) that emanate from destructive patriarchal traditions.

African Feminism in Perspective

There are many voices in African Feminism. Carole Boyce Davies in "Some Notes on African Feminism" acknowledges the earliest contributions of Filomina Steady (561).

However, Ruvimbo Goredema's insights reflect the purpose of this paper. Goredema says that African feminism focusses on "highlighting the struggles" of the African female person ("African feminism" 33). This work highlights the place of 'mobility' on the African female person who strives to find the self in a male-dominated society. African Feminism is a broad category covering subsets that account for various African female sensibilities discernible on the African continent. It deals with African-oriented female issues, as Helen Chukwuma would imply ("The Identity of Self" xv). The focus of African Feminism is 'the female experience;' whether it "examines what it means to be a woman under the conservative traditional system or the more liberal system of urban existence" (Bamikunle 3). Chukwuma adds that African Feminism (female self-assertion, which could range from the mild to the radical) "is accommodationist, not exclusive and negativistic", [for] "men remain a vital part of the women's lives" (xvi). In this regard, Mary Kolawole sums up African Feminism as "the totality of feminine self-expression, self-retrieval and self-assertion on positive cultural ways" (qtd.in Egbung, 26). For Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, "Feminism in the African sense is not aggressive, quarrelling or fighting for superiority with men; rather it is a principle or ideology that advocates women emancipation and empowerment" (Akubuiro 209). The principles of African Feminism shall be applied to unearth how the African female person navigates the male-dominated society and also maintains certain balance within the society

Female Growth and Consciousness in the Selected Novels

In her "Introduction: The Identity of Self," Helen Chukwuma implicates the centrality of physical mobility in the female growth of consciousness when she says: "educational institutions and many other opportunities are always available in the towns and through these the individual [woman] attains status and social ascendancy" (xii). She states that the woman goes to the "permissive city environment" to assert her individuality (xii). To her, female mobility is a "welcome alternative" (xii). She says: "Nnuego in Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood,* unable to bear children for Amatokwu her husband, is considered a failure. Her welcome alternative is the city of Lagos where she is given as a wife to Nnaife" (xii). However, Chukwuma puts female mobility and a sort of 'female place-confinement' or immobility as binary opposites. Female mobility which she typifies as "the going-away motif" entails a movement from one's cultural space into another that is 'permissive' (xii-xiii). This paper agues that female mobility or 'going-away' is first and foremost psychological. It is a situation in which one moves or elevates oneself from one mode to an improved one, with or without physical mobility. Yet this paper agrees with Chukwuma that the getting-away is a result of the need "to establish a physical and psychic distance between the individual reactor and the system" (xiii).

Can the female-self find fulfilment away from its cultural milieu? Chukwuma's excerpt below opens an important dimension to this discourse:

> The city as of now presents that solace of freedom where the women flee to self-fulfilment but they do not rest there. These women seek their roots, they go back to identity, to present themselves for acclaim. Amaka takes her twin sons home to show off. Aissatou visits Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter* to assure herself of the wisdom of her choice. (xiii)

From the foregoing, Chukwuma seems to suggest that the female-self hardly finds complete fulfilment within her cultural space. Her argument that 'the women do not rest in the city where they run to for fulfilment' presents another cultural space as dissatisfactory not a place of real fulfilment for the woman. The female physical mobility is just part of her process of finding the self. Her "the city as of now presents that solace of freedom" indicates that the female-self finds only momentary fulfilment (xiii). This representation of woman's moving-

away into the city, far or near, as the peak of fulfilment is a myth of African Feminism that this paper demystifies.

Theresa Uka pinpoints that "the journey motif is central to …*The Stillborn"* ("Personal Identity" 177), noting that "the central characters in Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn* ... are mainly adolescent girls who are in search of their personal identity" (176). Uka laments the confinements of the Muslim woman which negates her freedom of association and mobility in the process of seeking personal identity. However, the female growth of consciousness is naturally un-restrictable by confinements. Growth of consciousness is first and foremost a mental or psychological phenomenon that responds to social realities in time in any cultural space. The female-self begins to know the meaning of confinement through the available reality of its binary opposite (freedom) in the same circumstance.

To the question of whether the female-self finds fulfilment away from its cultural milieu, Uka reports: "Li in *The Stillborn* travels from her village to the urban centre, to the teacher training college, to the village and at last goes back to the city" (178). By this token, Uka, like Chukwuma, tends to submit that the complete fulfilment of the female person is strongly linked to her cultural space. Daniel Oppong-Adjei and Dora Essah-Ntiful in ""I Am his Pawn, his Slave and his Property": A Stylistic Analysis of the Abuse of Women in Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon,"* posit that "Darko reveals the struggles and unequal relationships between the "pawn," "slave" and "property" (largely represented by Mara) on the one hand, and the "master," "lord" and "pimp" (represented by Akobi, Oves and Osey) on the other hand" (74). Here, the consciousness that ignites Mara's 'struggles' as Oppong-Adjei and Essah-Ntiful would say, is highlighted.

Reflections on Mobility and Femality in the Selected Novels.

In *The Stillborn,* Zaynab Alkali's hint at Li's growth of consciousness is at the scene of her home experience after completing her primary education in a boarding school. The narrator records the ingredients that activate Li's sense of comparison:

> Li began to find the atmosphere in her father's compound suffocating. She felt trapped and unhappy. Already, she missed the kind of life she had lived at the primary boarding school, free and gay. . . . Li and Sule minded very much the rules they considered stupid and unnecessarily rigid. They abhorred the don'ts' that heavily outnumbered the 'do's. (3)

Mobility is at the heart of Li's sensitivity. Li's journey and exposures in the boarding school activate her sense of comparison. Li's recourse to independent judgment and self-determination becomes evident when she begins to consider some of the rules at home stupid. By this token, Alkali asserts the importance of female mobility or journey via education as a fulcrum to her growth of consciousness about the intricacies of her subjugations by society. The narrator maintains that prior to this time of Li's life and experience in the village, everything was normal, even as her little ones at home still feel the same normalcy (3). The point here is: at an innocent look at the patriarchal system makes everything seem normal, but as the self develops through education and exposures, the self becomes capable of discernment and critical evaluation of the impediments of the girl-child.

Further, Li's exposures also affect her view of religious stereotyping, as seen in the following:

> Those people you call heathens may not have embraced anybody's religion but they have their own ancestral gods . . . Let me be a heathen, Li said more seriously, 'I'd be much happier. At least I could go ease myself without having someone breathing down my neck demanding to know where I have been to'. (3)

Li's sensitivity to binary opposites heightens. She deconstructs the branding of people as 'heathens.' In this work too, Alkali advocates a liberal kind of religion that respects divergent views and accords humanity to all. Li mentions that her family's religion stifles happiness while the stereotyped religion enthrones happiness and freedom. Her exposures turn her from being docile to being vocal.

Similarly, Ramatoulaye, Aissatou's friend, in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, comments on their growth of consciousness through their academic journeys thus:

> To lift us out of the bog of tradition, superstition and custom. To make us appreciate a multitude of civilizations without renouncing our own, to raise our vision of the world, cultivate our personalities, strengthen our qualities, to make up for our inadequacies, to develop universal moral values in us . . . Thus, free from frustrating taboos and capable now of discernment. (15-16)

Ba's assertion here is that female quest for education is the panacea for her lack of awareness of the self. She thus encourages the woman to go out of her cultural milieu either physically or psychologically to acquire Western education so that man, she would become and be seen as capable of discernment, independent thought and actions. In this piece too, Ba notes that female mobility encompasses a movement or a reaching out to "appreciate a multitude of civilizations," to expand her horizon or "vision of the world," to be emboldened or to "cultivate [her] personalities," and to "strengthen her qualities," to develop universal moral values, thus evidently becoming "capable of discernment," like man (16). The female-narrator's acknowledgement of "to make up for our inadequacies" (16) is at the root of African Feminism. Biological differences make the female person incapable of certain cultural actions in comparison with the man, but by the cultivation of the female self, the female person could scale up her relevance. It is on this note that Okereke, in "Language as Index of Female Space in Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough,* speaks of "a progressive growth of the female . . . from a largely domestic . . . creature to a liberated entity with self-controlled destiny" (141).

Aissatou's growth of consciousness from her education as a teenager emboldens her to reject Dauda Dieng for a husband against the wishes of her parents and people:

> Free from frustrating taboos and capable now of discernment, why should I follow my mother's finger pointing at Dauda Dieng, still a bachelor but too mature for my eighteen years…. Dauda Dieng also knew how to win hearts. Useful presents for my mother, ranging from a sack of rice appreciated in that period of penury, to the frivolous gifts for me . . .. But I preferred the man in the eternal Khaki suit (16).

She is able to discern love beyond gifting. Aissatou refuses to be her parent's commodity – sold to the highest bidder. Liberated from the darkness of patriarchal tradition, she sees beyond the affluence of Dieng, and insists that he is "too mature" for her tender body (16). She rejects her parents' stereotyping of Modou Fall as "the man in eternal Khaki Suit", and she loves and prefers Fall for his personality. The emphasis of this research is on Aissatou's cultivated ability to break and withstand deeply entrenched patriarchal traditions against her femality. Aissatou's view that "marriage is a personal thing" (17) not a family or even a community affair projects the perception of "the new woman" of Africa (Egya 211).

The 'new woman of Africa' thrives as the offender while patriarchy becomes the offended. She boasts: "Our marriage was celebrated without dowry, without pomp, under the disapproving looks of my father, before the painful indignation of my frustrated mother, under the sarcasm of my surprised sisters, and our town struck dumb with astonishment"

(16). She thus breaks the rule, for, to her, the rules are "social constraints" (19) against "the new woman" (Egya 211).

In Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*, the vitality of the female journey as key to her growth of consciousness is implicated when Mara, the protagonist, says in her retrospection: "once, long ago, I believed mother when she said to me, 'your life is your road, Mara. God puts you at the start of this road and propels you to walk on'" (3). Mara sits back to reflect on the education her mother gave her – a simple but mind-transforming education that stresses the importance of journey to the female growth of consciousness. Mara's life is her road, which she must walk on to her destination in full realization of her potentials. However, the education from Mara's mother underscores the consciousness that the road and its realities are natural and divine. On the other hand Mara's city encounter presents countereducation and "false' consciousness. The city-woman, Mama Kiosk bursts out in anger:

> Your husband is one of those men who have no respect for village people; … tradition demands that the wife respects, obeys and worships her husband but it demands, in return, care, good care of the wife. Your husband neglects you and yet demands respect and complete worship from you. That is not normal. (13)

This education or enlightenment from Mama Kiosk, her matron and somewhat her teacher, stimulates her to discerning what should and should not be tolerated in marriage. The education sharpens Mara's vision of the world as an existing drama where man makes himself the hero and wants to remain so over his subject, woman. Now, capable of discernment, the female sees this situation as abnormal.

Remarkably, mama Kiosk upholds the principles of African Feminism. She preaches complementarity and acceptance of some healthy aspects of patriarchy. As the woman respects and 'worships' the husband, in relative terms, he gives the woman "good care" in all the sense of the word (13). The implication of the quote "your husband is one of those who do not respect village people" is that some, even most men do respect the traditional institution of marriage (13).

> Prior to her counter education, Mara confesses:
> 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)

The above shows that patriarchy has its strongest hold in the rural settings where everyone is practically condemned to seeing everything as normal. So, her journey to the city, its accompanying experiences, and education expose the contradictions and inhumanity of some patriarchal traditions, especially in marriage. Thus, her journey to the city "raise[s] [her] vision of the world" (*So Long Letter* 15) or simply put, grows her consciousness.

Like Mara, Nnu Ego in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, believes that everything around her is in the hands of a said hardened female 'Chi" or personal god who decides to make her life miserable by denying her children of her own (9). Nnu Ego's mobility becomes a purposefully imagined resolution to the encumbrances against her femality and motherhood shaped by her Ibuza mythology of a personal *chi*. But the reality of Nnu Ego's life ridicules such patriarchal mythology for, in time, Nnu Ego gives birth to sons and daughters. By that token Emecheta insists that patriarchal system is riddled with and thrives on myth which must be exposed for what it is.

> At the peak of Nnu Ego's self-realisation, she explodes:
> The men make it look as if we must aspire for children or die. That's why when l lost my first son l wanted to die, because l failed to live up to the standard expected of me

> by the males in my life . . . Who made this law that we should not hope in our daughters. We women subscribed to that law more than anyone. Until we change all this, it is still a man's world, which women will always help to build. (187)

Nnu Ego advocates a change in the consciousness of both men and women of the African world. While acknowledging man to be behind the world of inhuman traditions, the narrator blames woman for being at the centre of the projection and practice of such traditions. This is at the heart of African Feminism. It urges men and women to reject any traces of inhumanity against women and men.

Consequently, female mobility is reflected in the selected novels in the female journeys of life, ranging from journey from girlhood to adolescence, the village to the city and her journeys of marriage to journey to the patriarchal sense of motherhood, even 'complete motherhood'. This deep reflection of her 'self's walk' or psychological journey through her road of life and her encounters grows her consciousness – makes her capable of discernment and emboldens her to vehemently questions the strongholds of the patriarchal system. She questions a woman's aspiration for children as the peak of life the lack of which means death or at best irrelevance of the woman. She begins to see her foolishness at wanting to die at the death of her son-child and begins to see her actions as a failure to the female self and a promotion or vindication of men's world which women only help to build. She discerns it as self-inhumanity. In her growth of consciousness, she becomes saddened with herself for subscribing to the patriarchal law of not hoping in her daughters. She begins to see that as gross insensibility, insensitivity and inhumanity to the girl-child and to the self

The character's journeys and growth of consciousness from girlhood in a rural setting to adulthood and subsequently through the experience of married life are constructed around breaking patriarchal myths and impediments to enable the women live a fulfilled life. Li's movement out of the village to meet with heartbreaking experience of polygamy, her movement back home for armchair philosophy or self-rejuvenation, her eventual move for more education - to train as a teacher –all typifying her passage to womanhood and struggle for independence. Okereke maintains that "she returns not from a position of weakness or inferiority but from one of strength determined never to let her "baby" (Love) be "stillborn" again" (*MasterPieces* 291). Ezeigbo notes that as "Nnu Ego journeys through life, she realizes that her values, expectations and priorities have been misplaced" ("Reviews: The Joys of Motherhood" 257). The woman's mobility and growth of consciousness is accompanied by aspirations or positive dreams about her liberated present and future life. In her retrospection, Ramatoulaye relishes and asks, rhetorically: "How many dreams did we nourish hopelessly that could have been fulfilled as lasting happiness and that we abandoned to embrace others, those that have burst miserably like soap bubbles, leaving us empty handed?" (15). While this paper does not intend to venture into the unnecessarily long and unending debate about the potency or otherwise of dreams, the above piece points out that the woman's mobility and growth of consciousness are propelled by positive dreams or aspirations about her present and future life. To Ramatoulaye and her friend, it is a dream of "lasting happiness" (15) not a truncated one. Thus, the burning desire to actualise that dream propels them to self-assertion.

A dream is a psychological journey. It projects a desire which signals the self's awareness of what is, what is not and what should be for a complete selfhood. Such a psychological journey does not involve any change of location but a change in consciousness that elevates the self from its contrivances to warm ideals. It is possessive. At one such time, Nnu Ego cries out: "O my chi, …please make this dream come true …. If I should become pregnant –

hm …" (45). These positive aspirations or dreams become the anchor of hope that keeps her on the road to her life. The narrator also reports that "in her exhaustion, she dreamed that her chi was handing her a baby boy, by the banks of the Atakpo stream in Ibuza" (45). Such dreams make her to put up with the inadequacies of Nnaife her husband, confident that a change of circumstance is in view.

> Likewise, in Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*, Mara reports:
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> One dream that I vividly remembered the next morning was an unclear scene in a large room somewhere that was filled with thick misty smoke, and in which I saw no one and heard no one until suddenly Akobi's deep-throated laughter filled the room and with it faces of all kinds and sizes … encircled me. (56)

This dream of travelling abroad and seeing her husband Akobi who has been away for long, fills her with freshness and hope in her journey for selfhood. At such a time Mara travels on a psychological plane that removes her from her immediate cultural space to one she desires. In reality the journey increases her burning desire for a change in her circumstance.

Finally, in *The Stillborn*, the narrator says of Li, "If her daydreams were anything to go by, she should be dreaming about paradise" and "whether or not dreams were figments of her imagination, she had such dreams before" (10-11). The recourse to dream is a prominent motif in the selected novels. The conspicuous element of dream, thematically, bears the beacon of hope in the female search for self. The dreams also serve to project the female characters' aspirations and determinations to grow above patriarchal impediments for self and societal advancements. And as a style, the dream motif thrives with retrospection, even with a blissful projection into the future.

As noted earlier, journey motif is at the core of this discourse. The female characters encountered so far are always in a journey – physical or imaginary – out of their traditional milieu as an antidote to their feelings of estrangement in a patriarchal system. The journey is a record of their encounters with various forms of patriarchal impediments and how they overcome them to carving a niche for themselves. Sometimes the journey and its accompanying growth of consciousness lead to a walk away in marriage as the case of Emecheta's Adaku, Nnu Ego's co-wife; Darko's Mara, Akobi's wife; and Ba's Aissatou, Mawdo Ba's wife, while to others a better self, wife and mother in marriage as in the case of Ba's Ramatoulaye, Moudo Fall's wife; Alkali's Li, Habu Adam's wife; and Emecheta's Nnu Ego, Nnaife's wife.

Female mobility and growth of consciousness or the politics of selfhood is constructed with revolutionary vocality. Revolutionary vocality is like a propagandist strategy, a language of protest or liberation that ignores any known codes or terms of courtesy, rather, tainted with vehemence that shocks the reader or audience. Revolutionary or radical vocality is marked with extreme boldness. As Li arms herself with this tool, she defines their home laws as abhorrent, stupid, suffocating, and unnecessarily rigid and unnecessarily numerous (3).

On the other hand, Ramatoulaye boldly speaks of "the bog of tradition, superstition and custom" (15). Here she means that the trio amount to 'mire' or a stocking mud to the female self. She lashes at the taboos as "frustrating" (16). With such vehemence, she shocks the reader, upturns the strongholds of patriarchy and galvanises support for herself and her views. With similar extreme vocality, Mama Kiosk educates Mara on the abnormalities with her husband and his traditions. She describes the man, Akobi as "one of those who have no respect for village people. She prefaces the calculated reckless speech, with: "Your husband neglects you and yet demands respect and complete worship from you. That is not normal"

(13). Here too, she hints that if the woman should worship the man, as of a god, the man should care for the woman as a way of respecting the traditional norms. This mode of instruction becomes all that Mara needs to set out on the road to selfhood. Also, Nnu Ego's demeanor as she asks rhetorically, "Who made the law that we should not hope in our daughters? We women subscribe to that law more than anyone. Until we change all this, it is still a man's world which women will always help to build" (187).

Conclusion

Through the selected novels of Emecheta, Ba, Alkali and Darko, this papermakes the bold statement that female mobility, either physical, imaginary or psychological, is the gateway for female growth in consciousness which is her most potent tool in understanding, evaluating, rejecting and subverting any patriarchal impediments around her. Thus, her language is charcterised by extreme vocality, even as positive dreams are her anchor as she grows from 'naivety to experience.' While physical journeys enable the female person to experience varied forms of selfhood, including an enhanced ability for comparison, her psychological journeys fill her with dreams and the consciousness of what is, what is not, and what should be. The selected female authors as demonstrated in this paper engage female mobility as thematic as well as stylistic tools in their recreation of the African woman and her African world.

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