

## Challenging a Tradition: A Feminist Reading of Regina Yaou's *La révolte d'Affiba* and John Pepper Clark's *The wives' revolt*

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### Abstract:

In many cultures and civilizations, the superiority of Man over Woman is a common phenomenon. It is believed that woman is weak in almost everything when compared to their male counterparts. However, in recent times, both in literary writings and in real-life situations, this trend has been challenged. The perceived endangered female gender has proven worthy of adequate recognition in society's affairs in various forms. This study examines Regina Yaou's *La révolte d'Affiba* and John Pepper Clark's *The Wives' Revolt* through the lens of postcolonial feminism with a view to challenging the barbaric traditions and practices that militate against the social transformation of women. The two literary texts are purposefully selected because the two African writers aim to address a major problem surrounding gender inequality. A thematic-textual analysis within a postcolonial feminist framework is adopted as research methodology. Findings reveal that culture and tradition, particularly the patriarchal system, are the root causes of the relegation of women. The efforts of a new generation of committed male and female writers to reconstruct the status of women have started yielding good fruit. Apart from building self-consciousness and confidence, there are now formidable female employers of labour, and State actors such as state house of assembly members, house of representative members, heads of agencies, commissioners, ministers, senators, as well as female Vice Chancellors of Universities, among others.

**Keywords:** African literature, Civilization, Feminism, Revolt, Tradition,

## Introduction

Certain African feminist writers, whether male or female have taken it upon themselves to challenge the old traditions and practices that subjected woman to socioeconomic and political irrelevancy. The purpose is to redress the social imbalances and unfair treatment of the woman in a society that belongs to both male and female. According to Adingwupu and Okoye (2024, p. 1), Some African literary writers use their literary endeavours to uplift women, challenge ingrained attitudes, and showcase the intelligence and capabilities inherent in women, akin to their white counterparts. These writers craft narratives that portray strong and empowered female protagonists, often surpassing their male counterparts, thereby highlighting the immense reservoir of untapped potential in women.

Egya (2013, p. 211) is of the opinion that there is a complex trend embodying diverse voices, tenors, and engagements that can be traced in the current development of African literature. For instance, the feminist movement started in Africa as a response to the overbearing nature of African cultural practices that deny woman fundamental human rights. As a response, certain African feminists debunk those traditions that reduce the personality and dignity of African women. Opara (2013, p. 237) remarks that:

African Feminism has its unique mode. It adopts the Beauvoirean existentialist concept of otherness which is further applied to the binary opposition: subject/object; male/female; oppressor/victim; culture/nature, 1st world/third world.

Meanwhile, postcolonialists are of the view that all the cultural facets of the colonial experience need to be interrogated, challenged, reviewed and reformed. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a female postcolonialist explores the cultural politics of difference to clearly provide the actuality about issues relating to ethnicity, and gender. Deconstruction as a concept allows the voiceless, colonized and non-elite to speak for themselves. This indeed challenges the hegemony, power structure, distribution of resources and dominance of the social order by the ruling class in a given society. Opara (2013, p. 237) observes further that in the light of the political position of the third world man and woman relegated to the sub-category status, African writers and critics have attempted to proffer solutions to Imperialism, violence, oppression and attendant inequalities.

## Analysis

The two selected literary texts are social constructs to deconstruct a social order that stands against growth and development in many spheres of life of any human society. The unfairness caused by inequality which is tied to gender palaver is no longer acceptable and should be discarded. Regina Yaou's *La révolte d'Affiba* is written in French by an Ivorian female writer and John Pepper Clark's *The Wives' Revolt* is written in English by a Nigerian writer. The two writers, even though, are from two different African countries and from two different language blocks, and not of the same gender, have inclination towards addressing a common problem that has incapacitated the development of the continent. The problem that the writers revolt against is the patriarchal system. The arrangement is a male chauvinistic practice that accord respect and dignity for male; whether young or old. Mikailu (2013, p. 281) affirms thus:

Patriarchy is the social system where men are the primary authority figure and their decisions are central to social organization. In this system, women are not accorded much recognition; they are seen as suzerain to be owned, either by a father, an uncle or a husband. Patriarchy has invented women in its own terms as unworthy of social relevant, in this patrimony, women occupy the object position, and are denied subjectivity by the males who control them.

However, postcolonial African feminists, males or females attempt to deconstruct the view that women are inferior to their male counterpart. Hence, writers such as Regina Yaou in *La révolte d'Affiba* and John Pepper Clark in *The Wives' Revolt* challenge the male-dominated system in order to give voice to women. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines revolt as "a protest against authority; especially that of a government; often involving violence, the action of protesting against authority." Simply put, Revolt is synonymous with uprising.

Clark's *The Wives' Revolt* is an exposé on misunderstanding that happens between men and women in an imaginary oil producing community in the Nigeria Niger Delta region. The community is called Erhuwaren. The oil firm that operates in the area believes it is fair to compensate the people whose land carries out its operations. The oil company, therefore, decides to give certain amount of money to the community. Upon receipt of the money, a village meeting is held to share the money. At the venue of the meeting, the women protest the sharing formula adopted by men. The money is said to be divided into three parts: Elders in the community; the men in all their age groups and women, in their age grades. However, Women

unanimously rejected the sharing. They advocate that the oil windfall must be shared into two equal parts; one for the men and the other for the women. The men see this rejection of the sharing formula as preposterous and insulting in consonance with the existing cultural practices and the social order. Hence, a battle line is drawn between men and the women in Erhuwaren community.

As part of the protest, the women withdraw their civil responsibilities. They are also alleged to have resorted to witchcraft and other untold forms of mysticism in African context to press home their demands. The women actually vent their anger on their husbands by embarking on self-exile. They leave their men to do all sorts of house-chores such as cooking and nursing of babies. On the cover page of Clark's *The Wives' Revolt* one obviously see the picture of a man backing a baby by tying a child to his back with a cloth.

The writer's major preoccupation in the play, *The Wives' Revolt*, is the theme of fundamental human rights, particularly the freedom of speech, thought and fair hearing. The women agitate for their rights to thought and conscience which dictate liberty to express themselves. Women are demanding for a community where things are to be shared equally without gender undertone. Hence, women kick against what can be described as an obnoxious sharing formula to deny women, who are in the majority, the rights to own property. Men do not want Women to be self-sufficient so that they can continue to intimidate the latter and overshadow them at will. The truth remains that lack of economic power by Women is the bane of over domination they suffer in the hands of men. The men of Erhuwaren community hold that sharing the oil windfall equally by their women will empower them economically and eventually could liberate their women from perpetual relying on the authorities of their husbands, especially with regard to their financial needs.

Again, one could deduce from the story that women's voices are to be respected in matters of public concern. Men need to develop a better tact and sense of diplomacy in handling women's affairs for peaceful co-existence and societal growth and development. It is sufficed to say that the need to preserve public fund for common good of everybody is significantly important. Clark's *The Wives' Revolt* is indeed a sociocultural cum political satire that puts in proper perspective the rejection of social imbalances in many African communities when it comes to the treatment of female gender. Mikailu (2013, p. 278) argues that:

Patriarchal norms and practices are observed to have enforced some cultural obligations on the women, which inhibit their self-actualization, consciously desiring to check and balance them, but ultimately aspiring to keep them more checked than balanced. Patriarchy, the social system in which the role of the male is the primary and the locus of social structure, makes objects of women as property to be possessed, for the economic, sexual and social stability of the men.

Consolidating the view of Mikailu, in the citation above, Oduyoye (1995, p. 4) asserts that in Africa context, the whole idea of a “free woman” has negative implications and even derogatory since African women are traditionally trained to believe that every woman should always have a Suzerain (someone they could run to or take refuge in) in the name of a father, an uncle or a husband. Fortunately, it is this wrong impression that postcolonial feminists are trying to correct.

Generally, in her literary writings, Regina Yaou reflects on people's day-by day activities and actions. She, however, does not shy away from branding herself as a feminist writer. In her novels, she exposes the adverse effects of African traditions and practices that dehumanize women. In *La révolte d’Affiba* (Affiba's Revolt), she defends the cause of women and advocates for their empowerment and inclusion in the scheme of things if any society is to be developed. Affiba explains thus:

Maman, dit-elle, tu crois qu’il faut voir les choses d’un œil aussi simpliste ? En passant ses soirées dehors, Koffi ne respecte pas ses engagements vis-a-vis de moi. Je ne suis pas la gardienne de sa maison !

...Ah, mère, les choses ont changé, et nous les femmes d’aujourd’hui ne pouvons tolérer ce que vous acceptiez naguère (p. 53)

Mom, she said, do you think we should see things in such a simplistic light? By spending his evenings out, Koffi is not keeping his commitment to me. I am not the guardian of his house!

...Ah, Mother, things have changed, and we women today cannot tolerate what you once accepted (Translation)

In *La révolte d’Affiba*, Regina Yaou narrates the life of Affiba, a young African woman who married Koffi. The two received a scholarship to study abroad. Upon returning to Africa, Koffi advocates that the couple remarry according to African tradition. The true nature of the African man is manifested in Koffi, who leaves his marital home after a minor quarrel to live with another woman. Because of the financial support Koffi's family members received from him, they

couldn't even dissuade him from changing his decision, for fear that he would cut off their support. At the end, Koffi returns to his legally married wife, Affiba with the intervention of Aunt Yaba and the unrelenting efforts of Affiba and her family to resolve the conjugal problem.

Unfortunately, on the account of his two-year absence, Koffi has changed a lot, both psychologically and physically. He sometimes fell ill and later died. Affiba's in-laws came to claim their brother's property from his wife, Affiba. Moreover, they also ordered her to leave the marital home she has built with her husband, insisting that it is the tradition of the people. Affiba, while rebelling against this tradition, points out that she and her husband have worked together before acquiring the assets in question. And, when Kofi is sick, she is the only one who makes efforts to save his life without the help of anyone else. Affiba laments thus:

Oh, mon Dieu, s'écria Affiba, que ne suis-je née ailleurs, que n'ai-je épousé un homme venu d'une autre région ? Ces régions où l'on respecte la veuve, où l'on comprend ce qu'elle éprouve ? N'est-ce déjà pas assez de perdre un compagnon, faut-il encore être torpillé par les héritiers ? Heureusement que je sais, en mon for intérieur, que mon attitude actuelle n'est pas la manifestation d'un penchant prononcé pour le matériel; je me bats contre le principe de dépouiller une femme dès l'agonie de son mari. Nous ne devons pas céder. Les femmes, qui n'exercent aucun métier rémunérateur et ne vivent que du revenu de leur mari, à la rigueur peuvent se laisser faire, quoiqu'elles ne le doivent pas. Mais, nous qui, à la sueur de notre front, aidons nos hommes ! Je travaille ! J'ai gagné assez d'argent pour épauler mon mari dans l'acquisition de tout ce qu'ils convoitent à présent (pp. 138 -139)

Oh, my God, cried Affiba, why wasn't I born somewhere else, why didn't I marry a man from another clime ? Those regions where widows are respected, where their pain is understood? Isn't it enough to lose a companion, do you still have to be tormented by the heirs? Fortunately, I know, deep down, that my current attitude is not the manifestation of a pronounced bias for material things; I fight against the principle of despoiling a woman as soon as her husband dies. We must not give in. Women, who have no paid job and live only on their husband's income, can if necessary, let it happen, although they shouldn't. But we, who, by the sweat of our brow, help our men! I work! I have earned enough money to support my husband in acquiring everything they collected from me now (Translation).

The rhetorical questions in the extract above show Affiba's lamentation and the degree of her frustration with regard to African traditions on how widows are treated upon the demise of their husbands. The revolutionary vision in Yaou's work, especially *La révolte d'Affiba* exceptionally stands out. First, the title of the novel itself contains the word "revolt". Second, the militancy of Affiba as the protagonist and the postcolonialist ideological proclamation of the novelist are indices to adjudge the text a revolutionary master piece. The revolt opposes the promotion of male chauvinism through traditional institutions and certain customary practices such as the bride price (*droit du cuissage*), circumcision, widowhood, and the designation of a second-class citizen to traditional African women. Regina Yaou's literary prowess within the ideological context is an inspiration to many scholars and critics in Africa and beyond. Wosu and Elikwu (2016, p. 5) opine that:

Régina Yaou est une de ces femmes dont l'œuvre s'inscrit dans le contexte d'un féminisme radical qui cherche, par le verbe, à en finir avec les structures traditionnelles nocives qui entravent l'épanouissement de la femme africaine moderne. A travers quelqu'uns de ses romans qui nous sévrons de corpus, nous nous efforcerons de dégager les idées révolutionnaires de notre romancière

Regina Yaou is one of those women whose work is part of a radical feminism that seeks, through words, to put an end to the harmful traditional structures that hinder the development of modern African women. Through some of her novels, which we will be examining in a corpus, we will endeavour to uncover the revolutionary ideas of our novelist. Reacting to the literary works of Regina Yaou:, Semujanga (2004, p. 32 argues thus:

Les récits de Yaou sont des véritables drames où de jeunes couples sont confrontés à des écueils de toute sortes: prostitution, forces surnaturelles, mentalité patriarcale de la société traditionnelle, préjuges de classe, la mort. Comme chez d'autres romancières, on voit se développer un véritable discours amoureux qui revendique le droit à l'amour et questionne les pratiques traditionnelles dans les relations de couple. (...) le style fusionne avec un questionnement socioculturelle et même philosophique, où la femme se cherche une voie entre modernité et tradition, amour et devoir, maternité et activité professionnelle, foi et matérialisme.

Semujanga is convinced that Yaou's stories are true dramas in which young couples face all sorts of pitfalls: prostitution, supernatural forces, the patriarchal mentality of traditional society, class prejudice, and death. As with other female novelists, we see the

development of a true romantic discourse that asserts the right to love and questions traditional practices in couple relationships. (...) the style merges with a sociocultural and even philosophical questioning, where women seek a path between modernity and tradition, love and duty, motherhood and professional activity, faith and materialism.

In *La révolte d’Affiba*, Yaou shows that the struggle is not for one woman but for all women. But when women fight, the struggle becomes more difficult, as we see in the novel under consideration. Affiba is seen struggling and rebelling against the bizarre culture and tradition of her people, and on the other hand, her mother was protecting the same tradition. We cannot talk about the liberation of African women, especially in Côte d’Ivoire, without mentioning the contribution of Régina Yaou. Yaou establishes her vision for women, and she is also determined to pursue this vision through her fiction. Yaou (1985, p. 15 - 16) affirms thus:

Je me contente de créer des personnages pour traiter des problèmes que l’on rencontre dans le pays ou la région où je vis. Ma vision de la femme ne peut être universelle car je ne connais pas tous les types. Mais je vois la femme africaine comme une personne enfermée dans un carcan dont elle a grand mal à s’affranchir. J’ai créé une femme comme Affiba avec l’espoir qu’elle ferait des émules. (...) C’est vrai, de nombreuses femmes qui ne savent pas ce qu’elles valent. Se définir comme projet historique. Non, elles sont trop modestes pour cela.

I simply create characters to address the problems encountered in the country or region where I live. My vision of women cannot be universal because I don't know all the types. But I see the African woman as someone trapped in a straitjacket from which she has great difficulty freeing herself. I created a woman like Affiba with the hope that she would inspire others. (...) It's true, many women don't know their worth. Defining themselves as a historical project. No, they are too modest for that (Translation)

By and large, there are two kinds of revolt displayed in the selected two literary texts for this study. The first is an individual revolt where one person champions a course of an action against a perceived constituted authority. This is the kind of revolt Affiba showcased in Yaou’s novel, *La révolte d’Affiba*. In Clark’s *The Wives’ Revolt*, a collective revolt is presented. In this case, a particular group or class of people in a society protests against an institution that represents an authority. The patriarchal system which is a social order is an authority to be respected in an African traditional society. However, this social order is challenged by

women. Never the less, both the individual and the collective revolts have potency in instituting social transformation in a given society.

### **Conclusion**

From this study, it is evident that patriarchal order is a heavy load on women. It prevents both young girls and women from realizing their potentials and dreams. Hence, some new generation writers decide to take it upon themselves to agitate for women's rights so that they could meaningfully contribute to the socioeconomic and political advancement of their society. Through individual and collective struggles, it is believed that positive changes are attainable. However, it is important to stress that every revolt requires courage, resilience, determination and sacrifice.

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