

# The Twentieth Century African Novel as A Recipe for Gender-Based Disharmony: A Feedback of High School Literature Teachers and Learners in Kigali City

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**Abstract:** *The study presented Literature that demonstrates the influence of the novel and writers in general. Two out of the five novels on Rwandan Advanced School syllabus were analysed in terms of gender debate. As per the illustrations from these novels, it was deduced that the novelists do unfairly subordinate female to male characters. By means of interviews and lesson observations, it was revealed that teachers along with their female students are not impressed with this subjective portrayal of the female sex. We concluded that this could be a recipe for gender-based disharmony. Upon this, we strongly recommend cautious consideration wherever selecting Literature set-books.*

**Keywords:** Influence of the novel; gender-based injustice; male hegemony; school curriculum and public policy.

## 1. Introduction

To match the path of other member States in the East African Community like Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda; in the year 2010, the Rwanda National Curriculum Development Centre (NCDCC) launched Literature in English as a fully-fledged subject at the advanced secondary school level. The subject is composed of three papers prose and poetry being paper one; Drama is paper two; while the Novel is paper three. Within each paper, there is a number of set-books to be covered from Senior four to Senior six.

For the period of 2011 to 2015, the set-books for paper three- the Novel include Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *The River Between*, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*, Camara Laye's *The African Child*, and William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (*Rwanda's Advanced Level Literature Syllabus*, 2010).

Considering that these are authored by remarkable and prize winning novelists, this is indeed a good selection in terms of literary quality. The greatest concern, however revolves on relevance and influence of these novels on the learners' attitude. Many a scholars have stressed the view that art have the power to influence and even turn round our attitudes towards life. In this essay "*The Novelist as a teacher*" collected in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1975), Achebe points out that the novel is much more than a creative ornament. He argues that it offers greater control over our social and personnel lives. Derrick Ariyam is also in agreement with this assertion when he intimates that a novel is a powerful instrument by which social trends are churned out. This could be for the better or worse to human development, depending on the subject of the text. One wonders, therefore, if the selected novels do augur well with the national vision and aspiration of harmonious co-

existence of Banyarwanda. A careless prescription of literary texts for study can plunge a community into disarray.

This study is geared towards establishing the suitability of two African novels among the earlier indicated on Rwanda's Literature Syllabus towards ensuring fairness and harmony amidst gender diversity. This study concerned itself with the impact of the novels on Rwanda's Syllabus on the concept of gender-related justice. Two out of the five novels, that is, *Things fall Apart*, and *The Concubine* have been selected for critical analysis.

## 2. Literature Survey

Our Literature falls within two categories, that is, the influence of the novel as well as writers in general on one hand, and aspects of gender-based injustice in the selected set-books, on the other.

### (a) The influence of the novel and writers in general

The writer's duty as per Chinua Achebe (a novelist himself) in his essay "*The Novelist as Teacher*" argues that art and education are mutually inclusive. He asserts that it's a writer's cardinal duty to educate and regenerate their people about their country's view of themselves, their history, and the world.

He contends that the writer's purpose is often to influence and shape people's beliefs and views. Therefore, a writer is a moulder of mankind and society in general, just like a teacher. In the said essay, Achebe entreats each and every writer, especially the novelist to take upon the task of educating society (*ib written work samples.blogspot.com*).

As quoted by Landow , Achebe further says:

*"[...] a writer should be viewed as a revolutionist whose duty is to help society regain belief in itself and put away the*

complexes of years of denigration and self-abasement. Writing is essentially a question of education, in the best sense of that word."

The novel which is the most read and the most popular form of Literature is a powerful instrument of transformation and attitude construction. Conley (2013) concurs with this view. He says that by writing a novel, the writer acts to keep his or her era alive for future generations, so that our children and grandchildren can understand what we stand for.

Conley uses David Foster Wallace's novel *Broom of the System* to demonstrate how novels influence. The novel, he asserts that it gives one person a platform to use words to dominate other people. Wallace explains that well-constructed words can enslave one person to another person's ideas, no matter how irrational those ideas may be.

Indeed, most novelists, just like media practitioners, are out to sell us an ideology with intent to shape society. Very often, some people are quick to attach themselves to such ideologies and, in essence become what the writer preaches. One commonest case is the existentialist art which often turns its readers around to view life as something empty and meaningless.

With the above observations, selecting literary materials for School curriculum should be done with utmost precaution. Otherwise, some undesirable ideologies may be transmitted to the young generation thus likely to breed disharmony.

### (b) Gender-based injustice in Literature set-books

Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* portrays life in an African traditional society, among other themes, the novelist explores the tendencies of gender-based injustice and unfairness. We are presented with a man-dominated society. Throughout the novel, Elechi Amadi subordinates women to men. In a bid for women characters, especially wives to display love and respect, they are always bound to employ the title "my lord" whenever addressing or referring to their husbands. In this society, social etiquette requires that all married wives address their husbands as "my lord."

Adaku - Ekweume's mother can never forget to address Wigwe - her husband as "My lord" as a sign of respect:

"Adaku", Wigwe turned to his wife, "did I not say that only I can tolerate that much salt?"  
"You did, my lord. But we offered to prepare yams for Ekwe." (*The Concubine*, P.48)

Adaku apologetically explains.

In the same episode, Adaku tries to sweet talk her son Ekweume by promising an early morning meal:  
"Ekwe, my dear, Okorobia, Dimpa, fine boy please don't be angry. I shall prepare a wonderful dish first thing in the morning." (*The Concubine* P.48)

Upon which endearments, Ekweume replies thus:  
"Who wants to eat early in the morning, anyway? That is for the women and children." (*The Concubine* P.48)

More so, while advising his grandson Nwonna against talking as he eats, Ogbuji says: "you will behave like women if you are brought by a woman." (*The Concubine* P.39)

In spite of Ogbuji's irritating remarks about women, his wife Okachi will dutifully address him as "my lord" as she attempts to advance her argument:

"As if all women were fools", Okachi retorted.  
"Well, many of you are", her husband replied.  
"My lord, some men are more foolish than women."  
"Keep quiet, woman, and eat" (*The Concubine* P.39)

Similarly, Ihuoma also addresses Emineke as "my lord":

"Well, a good mother should", her husband replied.  
"and a good father should, too", she retorted.  
"Take note that I have taken only two cobs."  
"My lord, you have miscounted." (*The Concubine* P.10)

In all the above three episodes, wives address their husbands as "my lord" and husband, in turn never reciprocate by using any corresponding endearing remark to express respect to their wives. Thus, a one-way traffic approach of exacting respect between wives and husbands in this society.

The expression "my lord", signifies a fact that wives occupy a lower station in life as compared to their husbands. Besides this status-quo, we also note that Elechi Amadi paints women as worthless and incapable members of their society. For instance, Ekweume rudely tells her mother off that early morning meals are for women and children. Here, Ekweume wants to show an early morning meal would be a shame for a man worth his salt, but not a shame for a woman. He equates women and children. This is to demean and under-rate the integrity of women.

Likewise, Ogbuji's assertion that a child brought by a woman will behave like women testifies Elechi Amadi's unfair portrayal of female members of his society and time. It appears as if women are incapable of worthwhile roles in society. In spite of the fact that Ihuoma is a young woman of exemplary qualities, her father doubts her ability of upbringing her children into upright members of society.

Considering other episodes in the novel, *The Concubine*, the negative attitude towards women seems to be deeply entrenched in this society. Any cowardly behaviour was attributed to, or considered feminine. Wigwe demonstrates this while trying to dissuade Adaku's for fear that Ekweume - their son might abandon due to their interference in his earlier affair with Ihuoma. Wigwe stresses thus:  
"[...] Even if he is annoyed, that is no reason he should run away from home. He would only prove himself a woman." (*The Concubine* P. 115)

This observation implies that all men are perceived to be brave while all women are cowardly. Such a misleading attitude poises the male sex for some more challenging roles as it presses their female counterparts in an inferior status. The author wants to impress it upon us that men are able while women are unable.

The worst injustice against females in this novel is manifested through Madume's relationship with his wife

Wolu. At every slight disagreement, Madume is always at liberty to cane and batter his wife. It is as if assault is a rightful practice, especially by husbands to their wives.

As if the above is not enough, Elechi Amadi hints on the issue of property rights. We learn that females have no right to inherit their parent's property. It hurts Madume to recall that once dead, all his estate would go to his brother's sons:

*"Wolu, Madume's only wife, bore him four daughters – a most annoying thing [...]. The thought of his elder brother's son inheriting his houses and lands filled him with dismay."* (The Concubine P.4)

This social convention on property inheritance borders on male hegemony. This socially constructed injustices against the female sex as portrayed in *The Concubine* are evident of a male-dominated society. Such a situation is a breeding ground for gender-based disharmony in society.

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is also a script for gender-based injustice, gender-based, violence and male-chauvinism. It portrays a man-dominated society. A society where women are treated with disrespect, and a woman comparable to a lesser human being. The conduct and deeds of Okonkwo - the main Character of the novel is devoted to violating the right of and dehumanizing the female sex. He behaves as if assaulting his wife is a God-given right. One day, he angrily reacted about his youngest wife's absence from home for which he heavily beats her up in the full view of crowds of people:

*"Where is Ojingo?" he asked his second wife who came out of her hut to draw water from a gigantic pot in the shade of a small tree in the middle of the compound.*

*"She has gone to plait her hair."*

*Okonkwo bit his lips as anger welled up within him. [...]*

*And when she returned he beat her heavily. [...]. His first two wives ran out in great alarm pleading with him [...]. But Okonkwo was not the man to stop beating somebody half-way through, not even for fear of "*

Assault is one of the highest degree of human rights violation. It is especially so if it is based on gender. After all, a husband and a wife are equal partners in a marriage relationship, and should therefore operate on the basis of mutual understanding and harmony.

Although all children, whatever their sex, are supposed to enjoy the same degree of love from their parents, Okonkwo is of a different view. He feels that male children are of more value. Achebe reveals this several times by taking us through Okonkwo's psychic. His favourite and most reasonable child is Ezinma (who is a girl) but he never ceases to regret as to why she was not a boy:

*"[...] She should have been a boy; he thought as he looked at his ten-year-old daughter. [...] Ezinma took the dish in one hand and the empty water bowl in the other hand went back to her mother's hut.' She should have been a boy', Okonkwo said to himself again."* (Things Fall Apart Pp. 44-45)

Okonkwo's inner preference of a male to female child suggests that male children are of higher value. The

implication is that bringing up a female child is not worth the effort and trouble.

While cautioning his other sons against the possibility of being converted to Christianity like Nwoye, his first born, Okonkwo uses sexist language in favour of males. He equates the act of abandoning the African traditional way of life to a feminine behaviour:

*"I will only have a son who is a man, who will hold his head up among my people. If any one of you prefers to be a woman, let him follow Nwoye now [...]."* (Things Fall Apart Pp. 122)

This sounds as if it's only women who are susceptible of acts of betrayal.

Even outside Okonkwo's family, that is, in the wider society, women are never allowed or involved in the sacred matters and ceremonies of the clan. For instance, they could never be allowed to come close to the Egwugwu house:

*"These women never saw the inside of the hut. No woman ever did. They scrubbed and painted the outside walls under the supervision of men. [...]. No woman ever asked questions about the most powerful and the most secret cult in the clan."* (Things Fall Apart Pp. 63)

The above demonstrates the fact that females are regarded inferior members of their community. They are viewed as a folk incapable of safe-guarding clan secrets. Their male counterparts, on the other hand, are portrayed as custodians of security and authority.

The fact that no woman is ever expected to ask any question about anything manifests their lower placing in the ranks of society. Such a precedent is susceptible of misleading the youth about realities of life. They may tend to believe that leadership roles are meant for the male sex.

### 3. Statement of the Problem

Considering the value of Literature as an academic discipline, its existence on the secondary school curriculum is a welcome decision. But by nature, literary texts are highly infested with ideological views meant to appeal to the learners' reason. These literary texts are an open forum for different authors to spread and popularize their sentiments on their controversial ideas depending on the society, culture and era in human history, some ideologies contained in literary texts could be positive as well as negative.

As per the Literature surveyed and analysed in the preceding section of this article, a novelist and writers in general are informal teachers of the reader. They have the ability to influence and turn round their readers' point of view about life. A close analysis of the two selected novels on the Rwanda's Advanced School curriculum reveals aspects of gender-based injustice and male chauvinism. And the female characters in the novels seem contented with these trends of events.

The situation contradicts the Rwanda's current policy on the relationship between females and males. One, therefore, wonders why curriculum designers cannot take time and precaution to select teaching materials which are commensurate with contemporary policies. For this reason, the researchers opted to investigate the reactions stirred by such novels among learners.

#### 4. Methodology

The study was carried out within four (04) schools in Kigali City. The Schools are Groupe Scolaire Nyanza and Groupe Scolaire Massaka II where one of the investigators was deployed for internship supervision in 2013 and 2014 respectively. The others are Groupe Scolaire Saint Michel and Camp Kigali School where the second investigator carried class observations.

By systematic sampling two teachers of English and Literature at advanced level and ten students picked from the English-French- Kinyarwanda (EFK) option per school were selected. The others were selected from Literature in English main-stream class. We preferred those teachers who cut-across the two options. Besides, there was one student-teacher of English per school who had to teach a literary topic per school.

The teachers were the most resourceful and useful in generating data for this research. First of all, they responded to the researchers' questions pertaining to their personal reactions about the suitability of the current Literature set-books. Secondly, they responded to questions pertaining to their learners' reactions to sensitive episodes, especially those which are sexist in nature.

On request, the student-teachers prepared a lesson topic within which a gender-oriented theme from a set-book of one's own choice. This assisted the researchers to observe and record the learners' reactions on gender-sensitive episodes. By the assistance of student-teachers concerned, ten learners per school were availed for an hour open discussion. We focused on the moral lessons and insights drawn from episodes of literary texts that depict gender-imbalance and male chauvinism.

#### 5. Results and Discussion

Our findings as documented below entail teachers' and learners' responses. They responded about the suitability of the set-books (novels) for the Literature in English curriculum and the reactions aroused by gender-sensitive episodes in these novels. On the whole, the literature teachers interviewed decried the aspect of irrelevancy. They observed that most of the set-books are set in the far past, revolving around events of no interest to Rwanda's contemporary stand-points.

In unison, these teachers pointed out the concept of gender balance and equality. They explained how the authors' treatment of gender debate in the novels, especially Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*, and Camara Laye's *The African Child* is grossly unfair for the female member of the human race. Female characters in these novels are subordinated to their male counterparts,

insulted and emasculated through sexist language. As such, episodes where these controversial ideologies are contained often generate bitter and emotional from female learners of Literature. On the other hand, some male students sometimes use these episodes to ridicule and jeer their female class-mates.

It was noted that whenever most male learners of Literature are commenting on these gender-sensitive episodes, they tend to boastfully argue in support of male chauvinism. Actually, female and male learners in the same class tend to exhibit sharply contradicting responses in relation to the gender debates generated in these novels. Male students are evidently delighted with these episodes that depict females as subordinates. Female students, on the other hand, are bitterly opposed to the subjective and dehumanizing portrayal of a woman in society. They were in favour of doing away with such literary materials for the sake of enhancing equality.

#### 6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The analytical examination of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Elechi Amada's *The Concubine* revealed that the novels contain highly subjective gender ideologies in favour of the male sex. Both the Literature teachers and their students testified that such literary materials are susceptible of breeding gender-based disharmony. Therefore, it would be more prudent for curriculum designers to exercise extra precaution as they collect Literature course- books. Some aspects of the content contained in these novels, or even plays and poetry is not desirable in Rwanda's contemporary society. Such texts are a rich recipe for gender-based disharmony.

It is, therefore, recommended that curriculum designers should:

- 1) Closely liaise with relevant policies in order to select materials which can enhance national goals and vision.
- 2) Give precedence to more recent and culturally relevant literary materials whenever designing a literature curriculum.
- 3) Carry out a thorough base-line survey involving all categories of stakeholders including even experienced secondary school teachers and other relevant personalities. This would assist in objectively vetting the suitability of literary texts for school curriculum.

#### 7. Future Scope

There has never been any exhaustive research in itself, we therefore suggest the following for future study:

- 1) The place of public policy in curriculum design.
- 2) Cultural dynamism and curriculum design.

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