

Non-Conformist Heroine: The Assertive Female in Alobwed 'Epie's *The Lady With A Beard*

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Abstract Postcolonial discourse has, for the past decade, been a major area of focus for scholarship in the academia. The issues of alterity, identity, subalternism, violation, religion, and culture which find expression in post-colonial studies has been debated from multiple perspective by scholars representing different and varied interests. This suggest therefore that within the framework of Postcolonial studies the creation of meaning goes along with a vision that maintains that postcolonial societies are caught in complex situations that resist any single interpretation. These complexities are experienced both at the individual and the societal levels. The expectations, roles and the issues attached to gender; the assumptions, the constraints, and the benefits of defined gender binarism in postcolonial societies create avenues for the interpretation and the creation of meaning in a postcolonial text. *The Lady With A Beard* by Cameroonian novelist and scholar, Alobwed 'Epie, is one of such postcolonial texts that open-up new avenues of discourse on the question gender.

Keywords: Gender, Postcolonial, Feminism, identity, anti-establishment

1. Introduction

This paper seeks to show that contrary to some African writers who project the African woman as an oppressed and subjugated girl or wife or widow who can do very little in shaping or changing the system that deprives and oppresses her, Alobwed 'Epie in *The Lady with a Beard* shows that the African woman possess some authority and can make her own choices on how/where to live, can overcome cultural limitations, and can exploit men's vulnerabilities and loopholes in the culture to assert her personality and identify. The paper focuses on the character of Emade with the intent to show that she takes a series of measures to shape her life style as well as exploit the weaknesses of men, and the loopholes of cultural stereotypes to establish her identity with great success.

The choice of this novel is necessitated by the way it deviates from what some feminist critics have defined to be the role of women in male narratives. Some Feminist arguments and critiques find fault with the depiction of female characters in male novels in which they are often "defined by their relationships to men: someone's daughter or wife or mother, shadowy figures who hover on the fringes of the plot, suckling infants, cooking, plating their hair. (Frank, 1987, p14) Frank and others argue that women fall into a "specific category of female stereotypes" amongst which they appear as "men appendages, and prostitutes, or courtesans" (Frank, 1987, p14). This has given rise to interesting and complex analysis of the place and role of female heroines in female narrative. Contrary to this presentation of the female, we find a male novelist (who of course is not the first) to project a woman in a way that is conspicuously different from the perceived male-presentation. In this novel we find a woman whose actions and activities may be individualistic and isolated but who establishes a personal life within what Gordon calls "the framework of possibilities and the limitations of structures and cultures" (Gordon and Gordon, 2005, p17). This novel therefore provides a good template for commenting on the assertive women in action as portrayed in male fiction.

Emade is a widow battling for her rights in a male dominated society. Being assertive is a matter

of survival to the heroine who is not daunted by the obstacles she confronts right from the onset of the novel. A string of events happen to Emade in one evening and she considers these events as the manifestation of wizards. Ntube dashes the food that her mother sends her to deliver to her 'son' Ewang-Ename, she not only throw the food, but breaks Emade's late husband's enamel bowls that she cherishes. The leftover of the meal preserved in the coals catches fire and almost burns down her hut. In the midst of these obstacles, Emade does not show weakness as is expected of women. She dashes into her hut and stops the fire with a gourd of water after which she comes out and challenges the principalities that are trying to bring her down. Chest pounding is a dominantly male thing in African traditional setting but Emade has no qualms, she hushes the women who come to sympathise with her and solves her problems on her own. She says:

All children break utensils. Any person who has a child, or sends one should expect that. So, let each and every one of us go and blow her wet-wood fire and not intrude in other people's affairs. For one thing, she who organizes a hunting expedition, and she who actually kills, are equally responsible for the death of the animal. If what happened was the work of wizards, then all of you who are magnifying it are witches. (Epie, 2008, p16)

Emade is logical in her argument, she asserts that it is common for children to break utensils and everyone should know that. She resents the fact that Ntube's case raises so much interest. She insists that if the village women interpret the incidence as the work of wizards then they too are witches for magnifying the situation. Emade is a nonconformist and this is evident in this instance, yet she follows traditional etiquette to the letter. According to Ambanasom, it is this attachment to culture that leads to her downfall since she is superstitious and believes that things happen for a reason. Though Ambanasom considers this as her flaw, this might not be a weakness but a strength, indicating that Emade is not spiteful but seeks to deal with the challenges that come her way, and also as a woman who seeks to uphold her tradition, without giving up her rights. Men are only frightened by the fact that she is capable of taking care of her own problems and second guesses them, whenever they become chauvinistic.

This behaviour is threatening to the male ego, a woman who is capable of taking care of her problems without resorting to male aid. She is annoyed that the whole village considers Ntube's fall as breaking news, when every child is bound to fall. She hides the stools in her house so that the sympathisers will not sit down.. Scoffing the village women and rejecting their sympathy is regarded as disdain, especially by Eduke who bears an unexplained vendetta against Emade and this defiance does not help matters for Emade. Eduke who is nursing a grudge against Emade takes advantage of this attitude and try to rally the other village women against her. The nullification of native lifestyle as Emade's rejection of sympathy is interpreted is a consequence of self assertion which most of the villagers cannot comprehend. The fact that Emade rejects their sympathy indicates this idea which is that of individualism. Individualism is frowned at in the imagined community in Alobwed 'Epie *the Lady with a Beard* and equally to the real African community. This is why the women take the fact that Emade refuse their sympathy as an affront to them.

Emade makes a point that accidents happen to children all the time and there is no reason for Ntube's to be regarded as something else. She puts it as follows:

All children break utensils. Any person who has a child, or sends one should expect that. So, let each and every one of us go and blow her wet-wood fire and not intrude in other people's affairs... If what happened was the work of wizards, then all of you who are magnifying it are witches. (Epie, 2008, p16)

There is nothing wrong with the logic of what the heroine says. All children break utensils all the time, so why the fuse over this particular incidence? It is mostly Emade's attitude that the other village women contend with. It is expected of the traditional woman to simper and whine at misfortunes, Emade refuse to play this role and is therefore seen as a radical by her peers. Her assertiveness earns her a lot of enemies but she also gain admirers like Mboke who finds the underhanded attempt of Eduke to ostracize Emade disgusting.

2. The Custodians of Culture

The custodians of culture are jealous in their task and will let nothing intervene in this job. Emade is now a thorn in the side of these patriarchs since they are unable to dominate her. After the death of Emade's husband the elders demand that she move to the village centre because it is not proper for a widow with a baby to live in isolation and also that it is not right for a woman to occupy the first compound at the entrance to the village; and also because Muankum was incarnated behind her late husband's house. Emade refuses to move from her home despite the councilors' attempts to evict her. The village elders

assume that Emade is a woman and therefore weak and unable to take care of herself. She proves herself as the lady with a beard, who is capable of protecting herself.

The village women assert that “a deep rooted mushroom, loses its crown” (Epie, 2008, p18) and that no matter how powerful Emade might be, they can still put her down. This proverb suggest that excessive self-indulgence leads to self-destruction, and their hope is that Emade’s attitude will bring ruin to her. This does not come true because Emade moves as if driven by an unstoppable force that is invisible. She continues to strife despite the disdain of the community. She is a force to reckon with and succeeds in many of her endeavours. As a means of sanctioning her for her rebellious behaviour, Emade is suspended from women groups and activities. Although she is banned from these women groups and activities she does not relent. She is equally empowered by the fact that not all the village women are against her. Mboke defies the other women and reports to Emade what the others are planning against her. Ewang-Ename also catches a buffalo and gives it to Emade, she is a situation of power, one which many of the women detest.

The idea of marriage is discussed and it is ironical that it is the radical Emade who contests the idea of marrying outside the tribe. She thinks that had Wobe, Mechane’s daughter married a man from the tribe she would be aware of the mother’s illness and be able to take good care of her. Since she is married to an Ibo man she spends most of her time in Nigeria and thus hardly knows what is happening to the mother. Emade speaks against this issue of marrying outside the tribe because she also has only one daughter whom she will like to have around in her old age. In her assertive manner therefore, she arranges for Ewang-Ename to marry Ntube in future so she would have the company of her daughter in old age. She is very happy therefore that Ntube on her way to visit her mother in Ekenzu, stops by Ewang-Ename’s house. She thinks that “the plantain stem begets the bunch but it is the bunch that dictates where the stem will incline” (Epie, 2008, p27).

The African community is different from the West because they lay more emphasis on the family. At old age the parents depend on their children to carter for them while in the West old people are mostly sent to nursing homes. Emade has an only daughter and she knows that if she should marry out of the tribe, she will have a lonely old age. This is why she nurtures the relationship between Ewang-Ename and her daughter Ntube. By taking Ntube with her to visit Mechane, Emade is showing the daughter how meaningless her life will be if she chose to marry in a far off land.

3. The Woman’s Place

In the Bakossi community depicted by Alobwed ‘Epie in *the Lady with a Beard*, women are weak and can only cry when in time of crises. This is seen in the instance of Mechane’s death, after cleaning the compound the women starts yelling and weeping but to no avail since no one comes around. While the others take the crying into the village to alert the villagers, Emade decides to play the drum which will announce the death of her half sister. This is unheard of since it is not the place of the woman to play the drum; Emade defies convention and play the drum showing her independence and defiance to tradition. Even her manner is controversial since she calls the half-sister “she who wrestled with the gorilla at the cross-roads” (Epie, 2008, p34). The men who listen to the death announcement question whether a woman can wrestle a gorilla. Emade is defiant and this is seen in her statement concerning her playing the drum, she says: “women who guard village entrances must not only understand but must also know how to play the drum, not only the drum announcing death but also the drum announcing war” (Epie, 2008, p35). Emade thus think that it is a matter of capability and not of gender, people should therefore do according to their capabilities without bias which comes as a result of their gender. To Emade learning how to perform tasks that are male oriented is a matter of practicality since she is a widow. Emade is pissed that men are held in such high esteem and she wants to know “how many men are in this village?” (Epie, 2008, p35). Gender roles are prescribed to the woman in the Bakossi society and for Emade this is unfair because the men are not always around all the time and for someone who is a widow might never do anything for themselves. So for practical purposes women with the ability to do work for themselves should not be held back by tradition.

When Emade finds her half-sister dying and unattended, she is furious with the villagers and want to exclude the Muabag people from the burial ceremony since they neglected her in life. This is a reflection of the traditional mind because Emade thinks that it is the obligation of the villagers to carter for the older generation especially when the person in question has lived a generous life and whose daughter always comes home with a stock of presents for them. Emade emphasizes this with the following proverb, “she that eats snails must not dread the slime” (Epie, 2008, p42), this is to say that those who

enjoyed Mechane's hospitality should also take care of her when she falls ill. She goes further to state that:

If the tail had any choice but to follow the head, I would have said that we rule out the Muabag people in this burial. I ruled them out immediately we arrived here and saw what they had done. They had abandoned Mechane to die unattended to. Agreed, their excuse might have been that each person should blow her wet-wood fire. But Mechane was no longer the wet-wood fire of a specific person in this village. (Epie, 2008, p42)

Emade is very angry at the hypocritical nature of the Muabag people who enjoy Mechane's hospitality yet neglect to check on her. Since Mechane is an old woman and lives alone, it is the place of the villagers to watch over her, their failure to perform this task according to Emade is enough reason for the family to exclude the villagers from the burial preparations. She is only complacent with the idea of their inclusion because her elder sister Ahone and Wobe insists.

The nonconformity of Emade is evident in the questions she poses, she will like to know whether "if a woman digs a grave does she remain in it? If a wake is not heavily attended does the corpse refuse to be buried?" (Epie, 2008, p43) This mind frame is "modern" and not peculiar to the community in which the heroine finds herself. A question does arise when one considers the impact of feminine awareness and its roots. There is always the misconceived notion that feminism comes about as a result of education and socialisation with other cultures. This is not the case with Emade who has not had any form of formal education yet she is a radical woman and asserts herself as a human being capable of standing her own ground in the world of men. In some instances she seems to resist new ideas as evident in the instance when she disapproves of Wobe's marriage with an Igbo man yet most of her ideals are quite emancipated. She is mostly angry with the elevation of the man especially when it comes to practical issues. Emade does not only challenge the men and leave it at a verbal attack but goes further to dig the grave which is a slap on the face of the Muabag men.

The reaction of the Atieg and Muabag communities is symbolic of the custodian of tradition's bitterness towards radicals who make their task difficult. Emade is a woman who has refused to conform to the traditional role delegated to the woman, some will say that this is so because she is a widow with no husband and is therefore bound to do most things for herself. But is she the only widow in the community or the first? Equally what is the basis of these male oriented roles, should women be subjected to rules which men put in place to sound and look important?

4. The Lady with the Beard

Grave digging is a man's job in the Bakossi community, the grave digging incidence is regarded as an affront to the Maubag men who had expected to be called upon to perform the task. As usual Emade is defiant and it is only the sister Ahone who apologises on her behalf. The outrage aroused by Emade was mostly because her digging the grave will deprive the Muabag boys of the entertainment which come after such occasions. This is also an affront and a challenge to manhood. Emade accuses these men of being opportunists who only want to take advantage of Wobe's hospitality. She tells them to their face that they neglected Mechane and should be ashamed of themselves. Emade thus dares anybody to dig a grave anywhere else in the compound but where she is digging. She finishes her challenge with the following "this is not a woman digging a grave; this is a woman spitting in your faces" (Epie, 2008, p46). Emade is a heroine in the eyes of the Maubag women, despite her flagrant disregard for propriety, because of her strength of purpose and ability to take charge under difficult situations. Ambanasom reiterates that on her return to her own community, her fame deteriorates and she becomes more of an outcast despite all these great feats.

Emade is a heroine who matches her words with action as evident in the burial ceremony, Wobe's husband is a foreigner and therefore ignorant of the tradition of the land. When the coffin arrives, Wobe is happy and will want to bury her mother in style without resorting to the tradition of the land. Although Emade is angry she performs the burial ritual as a man would and by passing the totemic cloth to Wobe's husband, she is introducing him to the ancestors. One mourner tells Wobe the significance of the ceremony and tells Wobe that her late father could not perform this particular ritual because he did not own a piece of the totemic cloth. Emade does not bluff, she takes the place of the man of the family seriously. That is why she can boast when she says that her father had only daughters but he elected her the spokesperson because he saw her inner strength. This indicates that roles should be awarded according to capability and not because somebody was born with a pair of testicles.

The feminist manifestations of Emade, though unconscious and stifled by the community at every opportunity is a wind of change that affects the whole society. This is evident in the song that the women

sing in Emade's praise when she plays the drum beautifully at the funeral. To them, "If hens crow instead of cocks, the day will still break, o". Emade has thus launched a great momentum which has affected the other women even without their knowledge. When the opportunity was given to the men they failed to play a pleasing tune, they see nothing wrong in the fact that Emade entertains them though she is a woman. So if the men have become so incompetent, they are free to look elsewhere for entertainment. Therefore if the cock has grown so lazy, then hens should crow since the essential thing is for someone to announce the dawn of a new day. Whoever said that the particular individual must be a man? The women are proud and feel empowered that one of their own can do such a great job.

Contrary to the critical opinion that feminism is cultivated only through formal education and interaction with the outside world, Emade has proven this to be untrue. Hers is intuitive and even though she is a widow, she is unwilling to allow the men take what is hers. Emade is angered that other women are not as assertive especially when they are right as she is. She needs a soothsayer and will be happy to consult one who is a woman, but because most women have conformed to the designated roles the men have allocated them there is no hope for Emade. After the encounter with female soothsayer, Emade is disgusted because though talented, she is the mouth piece of patriarchy. Emade resolves to seek her own solutions to her problems and not relent despite the numerous obstacles.

In a keynote address by Ambanasom entitled "Half a Century of Written Anglophone Cameroon Literature", he gives a history of Anglophone literature starting from Sankie Maimo *I am Vindicated* published in 1959, to Bernard Fonlon's unpublished *As I See it* to 2008, half a century later wherein authors like Alobwed 'Epie, John Kemngong Kengasong, Bate Bessong, Bole Butake among others, have made a mark on Cameroon Anglophone Literature with a variety of themes like Feminism, the political situation and marginalisation. Emade's feminist revolt is thus the wind of change that has blown through this literature for the past fifty years. George Ngwane in an interview with Manjoh Pricilla Musoh, supports Ambanasom's view when he indicates that Cameroon Anglophone literature has been generational, the first dealing mostly with culture since protest was totally stamped out by the then President Amadou Ahidjo. Only writers like Fonlon and Albert Mukong were courageous enough to address some political issues.

Women shy away from being called feminist because its detractors insinuate that women are no longer marginalised therefore they have no reason to talk about discrimination. This is fallacious since more archaic discourses are still actively debated; let's take the religious discourse that has been going on for at least two thousand years. Has anyone insinuated that we stop talking about it because it is this old news? When Dan Brown wrote *the Da Vinci Code* was there not sufficient outcry in the Christian world? Have there not been other such works throughout the ages? When Salman Rushdie wrote *the Satanic Verses* are there not still fatwas on his head? So why is the issue of feminism a taboo? Why do writers fear to be termed feminists when women are still raped with bottles, assaulted and abused even today?

Authors like Alobwed 'Epie should be lauded for indicating that there are strong women out there who are capable of holding their own in a world in which men have taken it upon themselves to dominate. Although the author denies that he is a feminist and insists that Emade's behaviour is unwomanly. He speaks like a typical Bakossi man, since women are assigned roles in this community and the tasks that Emade performs are considered manly duties. What else should a widow with an only daughter whose relatives and community are bent on taking the little that she has do? Should she not dig a grave for her half-sister whose community members have abandoned her at death? If the male drummers are lousy, why should Emade not animate the funeral? Women have allowed themselves to be marginalised not only by men in their communities but also by their fellow women. If anyone is capable of performing a task that others men/women alike are incompetent in, why should that individual be ostracised and not praised? Is it because men have egos that have been pampered throughout history that they fail realise that women might have potential which when exploited alongside theirs could lead to the betterment of the community? Ambanasom therefore points out the author's denial of his feminist streak by indicating that Alobwed 'Epie builds up an admirable character and then cut her down to size. He constructs a heroine who deconstructs patriarchy only to deflate her at the end.

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