

Original Paper

Rethinking Language and Gender in African Fiction: Towards De-gendering and Re-gendering

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Abstract

The recognition and acceptance of the social construction of gender and the coercive nature of gendered subjectivities has been at the centre of feminist discourse which challenges the subjugation of the woman. G.D. Nyamndi, therefore, in his Facing Meamba attempts to address these concerns and proffer feasible solutions. The representation of women in literature, the role of gender in both literary creation and literary criticism, as studied in gynocriticism, the connection between gender and various aspects of literary form in such genre and metre embody masculine values of heroism, war, and adventure. This androcentric stand has compromised the rights of the woman, resulting in her marginalization, alienation and exclusion from socio-cultural activities. She is maligned with a sense of inadequacy. The patriarchal centre prevails and dominates the woman who has been pushed to the margin of the society. In this regard, Nyamndi demonstrates that, the African woman still has a place within the postcolonial context even though the man is imbued with more powers than the woman. Informed by the postcolonial theory, this study argues that, gendering constitutes a grave danger to a harmonious existence between the two genders. The study revealed that, de-gendering and re-gendering can create harmony between the man and woman because the two concepts are basis for gender equality. To achieve this, language which constitutes a semiotic mould has been exploited to deploy themes like, gender inequality and cultural issues.

Keywords

Rethinking, Language, Gender, Re-gender, De-gender, Postcolonialism

1. Introduction

In the process of gendering, men and women are constituted as a difference, and this difference is used to justify unequal treatment with men as a category valued more highly than women. The women on their part are socially and culturally constructed as voiceless, weak and hidden. For gendering to be undone, de-gendering and re-gendering are important because they are the basis of gender relations which can function along less hierarchical and egalitarian lines.

G.D.Nyamndi in *Facing Meamba* uses language, symbols, myths and other elements of fiction to comment on gender politics in the Cameroonian society. Setting, characterization, feminist voices and myths are all used to convey the author's social, cultural and gender agenda in the postcolonial Cameroonian society. Thus, setting, characterization, themes, incidents/actions, names and language all become a semiotic mould representing style, qualities, attitudes and way of being.

Meamba and Nwemba where the events in *Facing Meamba* take place represent two different world-views, namely, the pro-western and the anti-west. It demonstrates the persisting dualisms such as micro/macro, structure/agency, centre/margin, man/woman and society/individual, occidental/oriental, colonizer/colonized which are common in postcolonial discourse. De-gendering and re-gendering overcome the persisting dualisms such as man/woman, structure/agency and centre/margin. The direction that this paper assumes is the effort of the author at de-gendering and re-gendering which paves the way for gender equality in the society.

2. Cameroon: A Socio-historical and Cultural Overview

Cameroon was colonized by the Germans, and later partitioned between France and Britain following the defeat of Germany by the Allied Powers in the First World War of 1914-1916. The French administered sphere, known as French Cameroon was administered by the French, while the western part of the country known as British Cameroon was further divided into Northern and Southern Cameroons and administered as an integral part of the Federation of Nigeria. In the 11th February 1961 Plebiscite organized by the United Nations, Southern Cameroons joined the Eastern part which gained independence on 1 January 1960 as *La Republique du Cameroun* or the Cameroun Republic to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon. On 20th May 1972 through a referendum, this federal structure was dismantled, and a unitary state was put in place.

The setting of *Facing Meamba* is in the Anglophone Cameroon region where patriarchy dictates the pace of socio-cultural and economic activities. Here, the men are in control of everything; the women are at the background.

Cameroon is found in West Africa, and it has about two hundred and fifty six indigenous languages. This means that, this bilingual and multicultural country which has been described as "Africa in miniature" has about two hundred and fifty six ethnic groups with different cultures, traditions, indigenous languages and belief systems. In all of these, patriarchy takes centre stage as the masculine point of view dominates, and in the process of gendering, men and women are constituted as difference.

This difference is used to justify unequal treatment with men as a category valued more highly than women, and with men imbued with power over women as a category. G.D. Nyamndi's *Facing Meamba* which was published in 2012 is informed by this repressive and oppressive politics of patriarchy. Patriarchy and gendering are common practices in postcolonial Cameroon wherein the woman is seen and not heard. For example, the three rules and regulation of the woman in such a society as indicated in *Facing Meamba* are: "children making, food cooking and satisfying their men in the nights" (p. 20). In view of this, Nyamndi's novelistic vision is to undo gendering in order to restructure gender relations along more egalitarian and inclusive lines.

Secondly, considering the centrality of language in any culture, Nyamndi attempts to abrogate and appropriate the English language to set a linguistic agenda. He adds his voice to Achebe's to say that, although the white man has given the Africans the English language, they are not obliged to use it the way the white man has prescribed it. Language appropriation and language abrogation in *Facing Meamba* take centre stage. In order to get closer to his cultural roots in the spirit of postcoloniality, *Facing Meamba* is basically an exercise in transliteration. This Okaraian and Tutuolan style of writing brings readers closer to their cultural roots, and exhorts them to go back to their roots if they want to be relevant, credible and authentic in this postcolonial dispensation.

3. Contextualization and the State of the Art

A socio-historical and literary investigation into Cameroonian literature in English reveals that, the issue of patriarchy which undermines women's rights is topical and crucial. In fact, silence is the only noise the women make in a typical traditional and culturally oriented Cameroonian society. The women are seen when cooking food for their husbands and also when satisfying them in the nights. This marginal role ascribed to the Cameroonian woman is rejected by Nyamndi. The three genres of Cameroon literature in English bring out the oppression of the Cameroonian woman and her strength as well.

Within the context of Anglophone Cameroonian poetry, many poetic voices have emerged trying to give the woman a place and a voice in a male dominated society. In Mathew Takwi's poem entitled, "When Women Decide", the poet brings out the potentials and God given weight of the Cameroonian women. He intimates that, if they were to rise up as one person with one voice, there will be social change. This call for solidarity and unity is crucial. The poet states: "When women decide, Fountains from barren rocks would bulge/And men's mean manners swept off/Rising dirty plates for fresh food to be served" (p. 48). Gahlia Gwangwa'a, another poet who in "Who are we?" undertakes a socio-political epic journey and brings out the raping of Cameroonian women by the military which is predominantly men: "If husbands watch the contemptuous/Rape of their wives by pseudo law/Enforcement bandits without remorse, /Then who are we? (p. 17). It is obvious that in the domain of poetry, Anglophone Cameroonian poets have also addressed the issue of gender stereotypes.

In the sphere of drama, Bole Butake and Victor Epie Ngome are two prominent playwrights who have dramatized the oppression and marginalization of the Cameroonian woman. In Butake's *Lake God and And Palm Wine Will Flow*, the oppressive power of the men is very obvious. It takes the strategy of sexual starvation employed by the women to make their husbands see reason; and this move brings the men (who had hitherto been reluctant to protest) into the mainstream of the struggle to confront Fon Joseph who has been oppressing the people. Again, in *And Palm Wine Will Flow*, the solidarity and collective resolve of the women brings down patriarchy symbolized by the dictatorial Fon of Ewawa.

The social and cultural construct of the woman has always been a source of stimulation, confirmation, insight, self-affirmation, doubt, questioning and reappraisal: it has the potential to alter the perception both sexes see themselves and the world. The radicalism exhibited by the female characters in both dramatic texts mentioned above underscores the reorientation of women's perception of their social and cultural construct, and has also enriched these researchers' potentialities of feminist inquiry. When the incorrigible dictators in the two dramatic texts become too autocratic, the women are left with no option but to fight back.

Finally, in Victor Epie Ngome's *What God Has Put Asunder*, the orphan girl, Weka who is married to Miche Garba is treated shabbily by her husband. Garba marries Weka not because of love, but because of the rich plantation she inherited from her father. Given that the foundation of their marriage is not based on love, Weka is tormented and tortured by Garba on a daily basis. In the wake of this matrimonial crisis, the court steps in to nullify the marriage.

Within the context of the novel, many examples abound. In Margaret Afuh's *Born Before her Time*, Abo is betrothed to Worewum, a man old enough to be her grandfather, but since she cannot fight back, her parents tie her up and take her to Worewum's house and he rapes her and in the process, she becomes unconscious. This underscores the vocabulary of silence and absence that adumbrates and imbricates the novel in Anglophone Cameroon. She would eventually escape and marry the man of her choice.

From the foregoing brief review of literature, it is clear that, G.D. Nyamndi's artistic and novelistic vision is an additional voice to women's relation to society as a whole and the traditional role they played for so long; the reason for it, and the ways that this role should now change. In that regard, de-gendering and re-gendering become important ingredients in stabilizing the society.

4. Aim and Objectives of the Study

The aim of this study is to examine how Nyamndi uses the concepts of de-gendering and re-gendering to surmount the persisting dualisms of man/woman, society/individual and structure/agency in *Facing Meamba*. The argument of this paper, broadly speaking, is that, gendering has to be undone in order to foster development and growth in the areas of social, political, economic, gender and culture. In trying to push ahead his agenda, the author uses language which is inseparable from the construction of the dominant socio-cultural and gender ideologies in African societies. Secondly, this study preoccupies

itself with the efficacy of Nyamndi's novelistic technique and how it enhances his social, gender and cultural vision. The ultimate objective is to explore and establish the authorial vision which is embedded in gender issues.

5. Conceptualization

Two terms are fundamentally crucial in the understanding of this paper. This is in keeping with Bernard Fonlon's submission in "The Idea of Literature" that the first principle of any scientific discourse is the definition of one's terms or concepts so as to know "clearly and precisely right from the start" what these terms or concepts mean (p. 179). These terms are: language and gender.

Language is defined by *The American Heritage Dictionary* (Second College Edition) as "The use by human beings of voice sounds and often of written symbols that represent these sounds, in organized combinations and patterns to express and communicate thoughts and feelings" (p. 713). This definition is relevant here because the major concern of this article is to examine the efficacy of language in enhancing themes and the authorial vision in Nyamndi's novel under study. This study demonstrates how language and the other elements of fiction such as setting, characterization, plot and symbolism enhance the socio-cultural, political, gender, economic and philosophical realities in the texts.

Gender is the state of being male or female, but in most cases, it is defined with reference to social and cultural differences rather than biological differences. Gender is not determined biologically as a result of sexual characteristics of either women or men; it is rather constructed socially and culturally. This socio-cultural construct has submerged and suppressed the female folk in all sphere of life. Their literary history is characterized by the vocabulary of silence, absence and hiding views with one of revelation, uncovering and discovery. The birth of female consciousness has interrogated the place of patriarchy in the African society. Patriarchy has created an imbalanced situation in African socio-cultural and political system, and this as presented in African creative works, has disrupted the harmony between the two genders. Nyamndi tries in this particular novel to build and create a new woman by giving her a voice.

6. Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

Women are not inferior in nature, but are inferiorized by culture. Gendering in postcolonial discourse constitutes a grave danger to the collective and harmonious existence between the male folk and female folk. The absence of this harmonious existence is brought about by the process of gendering in which men and women are constituted as difference. This difference is used to justify unequal treatment with men as a category valued more highly than women, and with men imbued with power over women as a category. From this standpoint, the following questions arose: Are women inferior in nature or inferiorized by culture? What is the relationship between language and gender in the postcolonial context? What is the place of degendering and re-gendering? What is the relationship between the cultural code and the message in the text?

In view of the statement of the problem and the research questions raised, this paper contends that, G.D. Nyamndi in *Facing Meamba* uses language artistically and consciously to de-narrativize the meta-narrative of patriarchy and subvert both the social and cultural construct ascribed to the woman by trying to undo gendering to be able to restructure gender relations along more egalitarian and inclusive lines. Nyamndi in *Facing Meamba* writes with the consciousness and conviction that envisions a non-hierarchical society. This study further contends that, de-gendering and re-gendering are meant to create stability and harmonious existence between the two genders. De-gendering and re-gendering become vital tools used to work out less hierarchical and dominating ways of being men in the world.

7. Theoretical Consideration

Sustaining all critical effort is the whole matter of suasion, especially given that no writing is without intent. If writing is not an end in itself, reading cannot be. Reading is a quest both for pleasure and for persuasive material. Each text, upon completion, remains in the balance until it is tipped into oblivion or relevance by the studied verdict of readership-criticism. And that verdict is facilitated by a critical theory particular to each reader and each context. Texts therefore undergo a new birth each time they are (re)read against the backdrop of a critical theory. Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952) owes its life in African letters to the critical act, in other words the aesthetic verdict, of a singular reader, Dylan Thomas. This study is informed by the postcolonial theory. Since the complex phenomenon of "postcolonialism" is rooted in the history of imperialism, it is worth discussing this history. The word imperialism is derived from the Latin word, *imperium*, which has numerous meanings including power, authority, command, domination, realm and empire. Though imperialism is understood as a strategy whereby a state aims to extend its control forcibly beyond its own borders over other states and people, it should be remembered that such control is usually not just military but economic and cultural. A ruling state will often impose not only its own terms of trade, but also its political ideals, its own cultural values, and often its own language, upon a subject state.

Three major phases have characterized imperialism. Between 1492 and the mid-eighteenth century, Spain and Portugal, England, France, and the Netherlands established colonies and empires in the Americas, the East Indies, and India. Then between the mid-nineteenth century and World War 1, there was an immense scramble for imperialistic power between Britain, France, Germany, Italy, and other nations. By the end of nineteenth century, more than one fifth of the land area of the world and a quarter of its population had been brought under the British Empire: India, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Burma and the Sudan. The next largest colonial power was France, whose possessions included Algeria, French West Africa, Equatorial Africa and Indochina. Germany, Italy, and Japan also entered the race for colonies. In 1855 Belgium established the Belgian Congo in the heart of Africa, a colonization whose horrors were expressed in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Colonization has adversely affected Africa's culture and the collective consciousness of its people

because postcolonial literature and criticism arose both during and after the struggles of many nations in Africa, Asia and Latin America, now referred to as “tricontinent.”

Postcolonial criticism has embraced a number of aims:

- 1) To re-examine the history of colonialism from the perspective of the colonized;
- 2) To determine the economic, political, and cultural impact of colonialism on both the colonized peoples and the colonizing powers;
- 3) To analyze the process of decolonization;
- 4) To participate in the goals of political liberation which include equal access to material resources, the contestation of forms of domination, and the articulation of political and cultural identities;
- 5) The need to develop or return to indigenous literary traditions so as to exorcize their cultural heritage of the spectres of imperial domination.

Although some voices have advocated an adaptation of Western ideals towards their own political and cultural ends, the fundamental framework of postcolonial thought has been furnished by the Marxist critique of colonialism and imperialism, which has been adapted to their localized contexts by thinkers from Frantz Fanon to Gayatri Spivak.

Postcolonialism cuts across race, gender oppression, class division, culture, power and language, hence, postcolonial discourse potentially embraces and is intimately linked with a broad range of dialogues within the colonizing powers, addressing various forms of “internal colonization” as treated by minority studies of various kinds such as African-American, native American, Latin American, and women’s studies. All of these discourses have challenged the main streams of Western philosophy, literature and ideology.

8. Analysis and Discussion

Nyamndi’s penchant for a stable and harmonious society is motivated by a desire to see the real conditions of existence of African women and how they can relate to their culture and their fellow men. To get a full appreciation of his cultural ideology, we should understand his stand on the role of western ideology and patriarchy in the contemporary African society. Although the analysis in this paper is done under five thematic clusters, namely, setting and characters as language, the cultural significance of the fishing contest, the traditional versus the new woman: degendering and regendering, language and myth as symbols and myth as symbol, it should be considered holistically.

9. Setting and Characters as Language

Characterization and setting constitute the semiotic mould which is used to deploy the gender agenda in the novel. *Facing Meamba* is set in both Meamba and Nwemba. The former symbolizes westernization and latter represents the African way of life.

The two major characters, Pa Gakobi'ngui, the narrator's father and Winjala the Crude work for Pete Harrington, the white man in Meamba. Pa Gakobi'ngui works as washer man, (which is a duty performed by women), while Winjala works as a gardener, a job meant for the men. Those who identify with the western culture are perceived as weaklings. Considering Gakobi'ngui's love for the white man's culture and the nature of his job (he is Harrington's washer man), the author makes him a weakling, and that explains why he dies facing Meamba, symbolizing the fact that the destiny of Nwemba' lies in the hands of those in Meamba. He is culturally and socially constructed as a woman by virtue of the job that he does.

Banda, Pa Gakobi'ngui's son explains: "father's whisper?" "The whisper...that is it. He turned his face towards Meamba and died. How can I forget?" (p. 76). Banda's father's passion for western culture would eventually play on the psycho-moral and cultural formulations of Banda. Meamba as a city stands for western values. Nyamndi uses Meamba and its inhabitants to echo and to enrich symbols and also to imply allegorizations in the novel. Anyone who identifies with Meamba is socially and culturally constructed as a woman.

While Pa Gakobi'ngui sees the destiny of Nwemba inextricably tied to Meamba, Winjala thinks that the destiny of Nwemba lies in the hands of the Nwembans. Within the context of postcolonial discourse, Meamba is a metaphor for the Centre, while Nwemba symbolizes the Margin. It is in Meamba that official policies that affect the collective existence of those in Nwemba are conceived.

In spite of Pa Gakobi'ngui's strong claims that the destiny of Nwemba is linked to Meamba, traditionalists like Winjala the Crude with their pastoral vision think that the destiny of Nwemba lies in the hands of the Nwembans. This category of people thinks that the countryside symbolically suggests innocence and a clearer perspective to life. In other words, the village to this group of people is a cultural bastion which can provide both individual and collective fulfillments. This is the position taken by early postcolonial writers like Frantz Fanon and Gayatri Spivak; that is, the first step of postcolonial discourse is going back to the ancestral roots. In Meamba city, while Pa Gakobi'ngui encourages Banda, the narrator of the story to take western education seriously, Winjala the Crude insists that his son Tankeh take his wrestling sports and hunting expedition seriously. Education which represents cultural imperialism is embraced by Banda's father, while Tankeh is advised to stick to his cultural roots and practices. Wrestling, hunting and fishing are hallmarks of African cultural heritage. Hear Tankeh's father's wise counsel to Tankeh:

That place where the white man has gathered children and ordered them to sing in his own language is not for you. *That their song will not help you when we return.* It will not tap palm

wine for you or catch animals during the hunting season. Your chance is in the wrestling field.
(p. 165)

Winjala the Crude does not see how a foreign culture will impact their lives positively, and that is why he encourages Tankeh to take his wrestling exercise seriously and disregard the language of the white man. In other words, the solution to African problem cannot come from the West. He is suspicious of the western system as abstracting and falsifying. To him, therefore, truth is in nuances and particularities of African cultural practices. That is, one's culture should provide the platform on which he/she functions. This divergence of approach to life exhibited by Pa Gakobi'ngui and Winjala in the novel provides the locus for the conflict; and this is eventually passed on to both Banda and Tankeh.

The novel is a communication to the reader which suggests more than it says, offering an aesthetic for the way of life in a global and postcolonial context. Banda who is an epitome of western values by virtue of his exposure to western education is presented in a series of paradoxes and irreconcilable opposites: "He was both disease and cure, both thief and anti-thief, builder and destroyer, all in one" (p. 145). The awareness of the co-existence of terror and peace within the soul and relationship of reality and art finds aesthetic expression in Nyamndi's novelistic vision. The novelist in exploiting this stylistic device avoids the distanced self-consciousness, philosophical reflectiveness and formality of novels set in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Banda understandably is a child of two worlds, a hybrid, and the series of paradoxes which suggests an oxymoron reinforce his hybridity. The author perceives hybridity as a danger to the African collective existence.

Again, Meamba is perceived by the traditionalists as a symbol of weakness and those who associate with her are as frail as women. Though PaGakobi'ngui and Winjala the Crude work for the white man respectively as washer man and yard man, the former is castigated on grounds that he did women's job; consequently, he is not worthy to be called a man; the latter is accepted within the rank of men because even in Nwemba men clear farms for their wives (pp. 111-112). This social and cultural construct is a threat to co-existence in any society. In psychoanalytical discourse, Meamba is a catalyst that speeds up the castration process in those who have anything to do with her. For example, when the white men in white cassocks from Meamba visited Nwemba, and asked them to close their eyes, their eyes metaphorically remain closed forever. The missionary's mission in Africa was to destroy Africa's rich cultural heritage. "It was in that moment, when they closed their eyes, that their manhood was taken from them and they became women...The men could no longer say no to the white man. Everything he said was right; everything he did was correct" (p. 112).

The woman in the patriarchal set up is not treated decently, as anything that is weak is attributed only to her. PaGakobi'ngui who is ascribed the features of a woman is to some degree responsible for the cultural destruction in Nwemba. It should be underscored here that, the woman in postcolonial studies has always been represented as lost, hidden or victimized.

The presence of these white men in the "ngomba house" also renders members of the ngomba sacred society weak. The "ngomba secret society" in the North West Region of Cameroon is a powerful group

meant only for men of caliber. This secret society plays a regulatory role as it is only the “ngomba secret society” that can discipline the Chief/Fon. It signifies the core cultural values of the people of the North West region of Cameroon. That the white man succeeds in getting right into that secret society means rendering these men powerless. This is indicative of how western cultural values have eroded and destroyed African culture in the continent. Nyamndi in a compelling and compulsive tone exhorts Africans to re-think their blind embrace of western cultural values that have diluted and compromised their way of life.

If the white man could penetrate the very core of the African cultural heritage epitomized by the “ngomba”, sacred society, then, it means that cultural imperialism has made tremendous in-roads into the cultural fabrics of the African way of life. In psychoanalytic terms, for the white man to colonize Africans, he started by removing their manhood, that is castrating them, rendering them weak. The writer highlights the danger of cultural imperialism on the people of Nwemba. To him, this alien culture threatens the collective survival of the people and deftly shifts their own lives, the community’s life, and its surroundings. Any association with the white man renders them impotent, weak and useless. The white man and anything he stands for symbolize weakness and a threat to the way of life of the people of Nwemba. Banda and his father represent this phenomenon.

Finally, Pete Harrington is one of the symbolic characters in the novel. He is an archetypal symbol of the colonial presence in Africa. In Meamba where he is based, Harrington has made his assimilation policy impact felt within his domestic staff. Banda’s father for instance has confessed that he does not only work for the white man, but also copies what he does. This apish attitude of Banda’s father explains why he detests and despises Pa Yaro’s polygamous lifestyle condemned by the holy Bible.

The conversation between Banda and his father is an eloquent illustration and a demonstration of his psycho-moral formulation with regard to his world-view. Banda asks his father, “But you no longer think that way?” And his father answers, “No, not ever since we moved here. Since I entered the white man’s service I do not only work for him. I also watch the way he does his things.” (p. 32). This shows the extent to which Banda’s father has been assimilated. It could therefore be concluded that Pete Harrington is a personification of those Europeans who came to Africa with “a hidden agenda,” an agenda intended to make Africans move away from their physical, psychological and cultural roots. Nyamndi frowns at this and makes a passionate appeal to Africans to get connected to their roots because it accounts for their very existence.

All art builds on previous art and is a form of imitation, modification, or revolution. Nyamndi’s Pete Harrington is reminiscent of Achebe’s Winterbottom in *Arrow of God*, Mr. Green in *No Longer at Ease* and Fraudsham in Ngugi’s *Petals of Blood*. These three characters represent the imperialist ideology in the Continent. The presence of Harrington in Meamba symbolizes the expansion and extension of the Imperial tentacles to the African continent. He is the Self/Occidental, while Banda and Tankeh’s fathers, and the entire Nwembans represent the Other/Oriental.

Secondly, actions, events and incidents like setting and characterization are also symbolic. One of such actions/incidents in the text is the fishing contest with its cultural colorations and connotations. This contest emphasizes African culture over western culture. The author suggests a move towards African cultural roots. Ali Mazrui in *The Africans: A Triple Heritage* has prescribed a dual approach to life in Africa. That is, while maintaining the African cultural roots, the African should also try to come to terms with technological and global issues. He avers:

Two broad principles should influence and inform social reform in Africa in the coming decades. One is the imperative of looking inwards toward ancestry; the other is the imperative of looking outward towards the wider humanity. The inward imperative requires a more systematic investigation into the cultural preconditions of the success of each project, of each piece of legislation, of each system of government. (p. 20)

Nyamndi uses the fishing competition as a microcosm of the macroscopic African cultural activity. This fishing competition is very deep, veiled and revealing.

10. The Cultural Significance of the Fishing Contest

The fishing contest constitutes one of the major symbols in the novel. This contest demonstrates that there is the desire to be settled, to be home, to be done with both physical and psychological alienation and the pains of life. This is why during this fishing contest, although Banda emerges first, it is Tankeh's catch that is bigger. Consequently, Tankeh is declared winner by chief Ndelu at the end. This results in protests from characters like Abua. The author intimates that, for one to be relevant in the present socio-cultural dispensation in Africa, his foundation must be rooted in African cultural values and not western. Banda who comes first in this contest is perceived as an embodiment of western values, while Tankeh who emerges second is a symbol of African values. Banda through his father has already imbibed the western culture. This culturally places him in the second position even though he came first.

Again, that Tankeh comes second and with a bigger catch indicates the central space African cultural values, ethos and mores should occupy in the lives of Africans. Banda in the very first chapter has complained about the tiny space occupied by western ideology in his "kolanut head" (p. 7). A cursory glance at the first pages of the novel gives a clue to the relevance of Tankeh's victory. This demonstrates the fact that, while the African values are at the centre, the western values are at the margin. The various catches at the end of the novel constitute both an allegorical and metaphorical cultural statement the author tries to make. The two fishes caught by Banda and Tankeh respectively constitute dense symbols with metaphorical possibilities. The author intentionally makes Banda's own fish to be smaller than Tankeh's indicating his stand.

Paradoxes are a feature of the novel where the past is linked to the present in strange and unpredictable ways. Though Banda emerges first in the contest, he loses the first position given the size of his catch;

Tankeh, on the other hand comes second, but his catch is bigger than that of Banda, and he is declared winner by Chief Ndelu in spite of protests from characters like Abua.

Finally, this contest is concerned with psychology, especially the anxieties of those who had lived in various cultures and retain difficulties—to explain emotions resulting from their past. A move towards African cultural values, mores and ethos is perceived as the only way forward in this postcolonial dispensation. The author insinuates that, there are centres of cultures and not only a single cultural centre. The author calls for “decentering” of the imperial centre by creating more cultural centres.

To authenticate the effectiveness of symbolism, Tankeh gets married to Lemea, Banda’s younger sister who did not go to school. If Lemea is an extended symbol of Banda, then the author does not reject western values as irrelevant; he only expresses fears of survival in a world power of conquest, fears of losing one’s identity to an alien culture and being unable to protect one’s culture. This text could be read as an allegory of the writer’s vocation and life. The narrative is of cunning, survival, victory, fantasy, desire and fears. Absolute rejection of western culture and technology would lead to stagnation; total acceptance of western values threatens the identity of the people of Nwemba. Such symbolism in which the personal is projected on the external, especially on the natural world suggests the significance and relevance of African values over alien ones. This is the author’s major concern in his novel.

The author also uses some of the female characters as archetypal symbols to enhance his ideological posture. Here, characters like Lemea, Ma-Lenghi and Aunt Sabina represent different concepts and values. While Lemea sees life, especially marriage from a different perspective, Aunt Sabina thinks that young ladies like Lemea should be given husbands; they do not have the right to choose their life partners. The author uses Lemea who personifies “the new woman” as a counter discourse to the traditional women symbolized by characters like Ma-Lenghi and Aunt Sabina.

11. The Traditional versus the New Woman: De-gendering and Re-gendering

Across the centuries, the woman has been the subject of innumerable reconfigurations and with every reinscription come the necessity of re-reading. Nyamndi thinks that the postcolonial woman in the present dispensation can both be defamed and defended. That is, while the traditional woman is submissive, compromising and docile, the new woman is resilient, assertive, vocal, aggressive, uncompromising and revolutionary.

The novel underscores a fundamental feminist message. Though women are not inferior in nature, they are inferiorized by culture. Kathy E. Ferguson argues that, “Having been excluded, historically, from public life, and still occupying largely peripheral and powerless positions when they do enter that realm, women have developed a different voice, a submerged discourse” (p. 23). This submerged voice is that of the traditional woman.

Nwemba is patriarchal in perception and execution; women live in the shadow of men and are subjected to all forms of oppression and repression. They are perceived and treated by the menfolk as

objects which must be used in fostering their activities. Ferguson's contention above is an exemplification of this phenomenon in the novel under reference. The women themselves have admitted their marginal role in this patriarchal community. Abua streamlines the three sacred rules of his wife thus: "...my children, my food, my nights". (p. 20). Women are baby-making machines; they are cooks and warmers of their husbands' beds. They do not have a say in the event of their daughter's marriage. Chief Ndelu explains, "A man sends his daughter into marriage. It has always been like that; and it will always be like that. And tell the women: nights are for their men, not for kpa kpa kpa". (p. 17)

Given the predicament of the women in the text, Nyamndi creates another female character, Lemeawho has a revolutionary vision. She is rebellious, resilient and resourceful. She rejects and resists all attempts by Aunt Sabina and uncle Abua to push her into a forceful marriage with Dinga. Lemea is the very antithesis of Aunt Sabina and Ma Lenghi in the novel. She explains to her brother Banda,

Uncle Abua...he rose to slap me the day I said to him that I will not allow another person to choose a husband for me, that such a thing was my business....Marriage should be a thing of the mind first, Banda, and then only a formality with the rest of the family. (p. 129)

Lemea provides a counter discourse to the patriarchal ideology imbibed by Aunt Sabina and Ma Lenghi. Though she did not go to school, she fights for her rights. She is assertive and confrontational. Such characters like Lemea constitute a huge threat to the very foundation of patriarchy in Nwemba. Lemea's actions signify a declaration of cultural space and independence for the traditional woman both in private and public.

Nyamndi insinuates that a woman must not go to school to assert and fight for her rights. Lemea symbolizes the new woman who challenges male supremacy. Since the early 1990s, there has been an increasing focus on women as dangerous to the menfolk. Lemea resists the imposition of Dinga on her as her husband and eventually marries her own choice of man, Tankeh. That she has a child for Tankeh at the end of the novel symbolically represents both the triumph of the new woman over patriarchy and the docile traditional woman. Lemea and Tankeh's child is therefore the hope for Nwemba and by extension Africa.

Lemea and Tankeh's child is an allegorization and a pointer to an emerging new Africa. Though there are signs of crisis and tension in the relationship between the old woman and the new woman, there is a growing awareness of a new dispensation. The acceptance of change is seen as the only continuity in its increased openness about marriages born out of love and not material wants. Culture or tradition seems arbitrary, casual, a clutter and is taken over by new perspectives of seeing life. This explains why Lemea resists Aunt Sabina's proposal with vehemence. According to Aunt Sabina,

This family will not be the dumping ground for any filth. Dinga of Meamba has approached me about you and I've already given my word. On your marriage day your mother and I will walk with our heads up and pride in our hearts. On that day your dead father will beat his chest with pride. (p. 124)

According to the author, though Lemea is a girl, she has the heart of a lion. Only the mane is missing from the back of her neck. But what is missing outside, she has inside, in her temperament, in her blindness to fear. She is intrepid. Though Banda is the boy in the family, in certain ways she is more of that boy than him (p. 71). This underscores Lemea's fighting spirit to liberate her society from patriarchy.

Lemea who represents the new woman has a fuller and richer voice than the traditional women in the text who are subservient to their husbands. Aunt Sabina does not know that times have changed and things too have got to change. It can be argued that, Nyamndi's novel is concerned with the relationship of particulars and individual identity, or fixity to the ever-changing flux or river of life. The novel uses the family as a symbolic metaphor for the varied, unexpected but influential ties between the past, present and future. Lemea's aunt and uncle are still basking in the euphoria of arranged marriages, but Lemea charts the future of marriage in the Nwemba society; women will have to choose their husbands. Even in Meamba, her mother had tuned and positioned her to be submissive and subservient. Her mother explains: "...as a girl you had no say in the decision taken in your father's house that you went where that decision sent you" (p. 135). Lemea sharply disagrees with both mother and father on such dictatorial style of administration. This is the beginning of Lemea's socio-cultural consciousness. In fact the woman who was represented as lost, hidden or victimized, the woman who was silent or who had to be kept silent until her consciousness was suitably raised, the woman who was angry and deranged has now burst forth in unstoppable volcanic voice. Lemea is a metaphor of this new woman.

Lemea's reaction towards Sabina and Abua's proposal of the arranged marriage is a demonstration of the fact that all life is related and somehow casually determined yet unpredictable and changing. While continuing to affirm the importance of the actual, immediate and the physical in contrast to the spiritual, the author appears increasingly concerned with the chaos of modern life. While Sabina thinks that the marriage between Dinga and Lemea will appease Lemea's late father, Lemea does not agree with her: The narrator comments that, "Sabina's power of conviction had sent many girls of the family to marriages they had not sued for; and it was known that whenever she set to work, the marriage was as good as sealed" (p. 153). Lemea's confessional and confrontational tone during her rehearsal in anticipation of meeting Sabina and uncle Abua is very telling. This is the imaginary confrontation she would have with them:

...No I will not marry Dinga

...My daughter!

Auntie, I do not know the man you are talking about.

I did not know my own man before I entered his house.

That was you.

Just wait. What I am hearing? Lemea put your eyes in my eyes." (p. 154)

She also rehearses on what she will tell Abua:

Uncle, I do not know the man you are talking about.

I do not know the man; I do not know the man...

Uncle I cannot marry a man I do not know. (ibid)

It is a pointer toward the birth of a new woman who is assertive, rebellious, aggressive, uncompromising, philosophical and analytical.

Lemea's protest and subsequent withdrawal from her dictatorial aunt and uncle make a lasting impression on the narrative structure of the novel; she laughs last as she gets married to the one she loves. This is Nyamndi's point of view; that women have the right to choose the man they will spend their entire lives with. The author insinuates here that, just as our biological past lives in the physical body, our social and cultural past lives in the many cultural bodies we inherit- our languages, arts, religions and life-cycle rites. That is why Lemea reacts the way she does; and that is why aunt Sabina behaves the way she does.

The heroine's revolutionary and rebellious attitude started as far back as her days in Meamba when she would resist the dreadful Njitifuh who always came to frighten and scare them. She would compare Aunt Sabina's imposing choice of a husband on her to the dreadful Njitifuh. This comparison is a stylistic device par excellence because it brings out the undignified recycling of both the romantic and material worlds. Aunt Sabina wants Lemea to marry Dinga because of his wealth not because of love:

The other little girls had asked her whether she was not afraid that Njitifuh would beat her and maybe pierce one of her eyes or even both. She had only laughed and asked them whether she would be sleeping. (p. 130)

What Aunt Sabina and the rest of the family members wanted to put her through was not different from Njitifuh's intrusions into their play in Meamba. Lemea compares the actions of Aunt Sabina and the other members of the family to a monster that threatens the collective survival of the people.

Nyamndi by creating a new woman who contradicts what the old woman stands for wants the concept of gendering to be reviewed and revised. This is because in the process of gendering, men and women constitute a difference, and this difference is used to justify unequal treatment with men as a category valued more highly than the women. The author thinks that de-gendering and re-gendering can overcome the persisting dualism between the man and the woman. Men should therefore engage in projects that involve de-gendering, even as they engage in re-gendering of gender regimes such as the family.

12. Language and Myth as Symbols

Myths arise from man's attempt to externalize and communicate his inner intuitions. For Nyamndi to do this effectively, myths and symbols are tied together. One of the devices exploited by Nyamndi is the abrogation of the English language. He starts by subverting the Imperial Centre's claim to language. This symbolically represents the trajectory and trend writers in Africa have taken: the adopt phase, the adapt stage and the adept stage. The first two chapters constitute a subversion to the Centre's claim to

language and culture. The narrator argues that since he is an heir of two traditions, nobody should expect perfection from him in terms of language competence or perfect linguistic expression and manipulation. After all, the English language is first and foremost not his language.

The Imperial Centre has given the colonized African the English language, and with it an unstated history of consequences, an unknown history of future intensions. This gift of language meant not only English in particular but speech and concept as a way, a method, and a necessary avenue towards areas of the self which could not be reached in any other way. It is in this other way that Nyamndi makes the reader aware of these possibilities in general.

Facing Meambais a text which in postcolonial discourse emphasizes fullness in terms of one's mastery of his language/culture. This is presented metaphorically as a cassava plant without roots. The protagonist has had the misfortune of spending part of his life in Meamba which symbolizes western values. Hear Banda, the narrator: "This thing of roots is another thing which is very important. Imagine a cassava without roots. No garri...no bobolo...no kumkum...no water foofoo. Starvation. The people will starve. Curse of the gods! When the gods want to curse you they deny you roots" (p. 3).

Though he has received some exposure of these western values, he laments that the influence of the white man's culture did not touch his very being. "The white man half of my kola nut head is small. But I will use it. Or how do I talk to you who are not of my people? I may not be able to deliver the tree to you with its roots. Only bough and branches. Just take what I give you" (p. 7). Banda laments that, although the white man blames Africans for poor mastery of the culture of the West, "The white man's head is not like my own. It is not divided into halves like mine." (p. 7). The white man does not have any problem when it comes to the use of the English language because it is his language; it is his culture; it is his mother tongue.

The language issue dominated critical discussion in African literature in the early 1960s. While writers like Ngugi wa Thiong'o took a radical position arguing that for any work to be considered an African text it should be written in one of the African indigenous languages. However, Chinua Achebe on the other hand argued that, African literature could be written in any of the imperial languages even if it meant Africanizing them. Achebe went further to distinguish between national and ethnic literatures. To him, the sum total of the two is what African literature is all about. This explains why Nyamndi starts off by abrogating, subverting, and interrogating the claims of the Centre, as the centre of culture and language. The narrator asks this devastating question: "Will I spend all my life struggling with another man's talk at the same time as my own sits there idle, with no one to talk it?" (p. 7). The novelist uses transliteration to enhance both his novelistic and cultural vision. There are signs of cultural crisis, tension and a growing awareness to cultural identity. Nyamndi's novel also, moves along with that of others since the 1960s. The novel highlights fragments as an expression of inner turmoil and unresolved emotions and ideas.

Finally, it could be said that the standpoint of the author has some bearing on his educational life given that he spent most of his time in Europe studying in the white man's language. He is seen as living

painfully: there are longings for the return to a now for ever lost time of love, comfort, innocence and belonging. Banda who is the author's mouthpiece bemoans:

Can you call a house without secret corners your house? A house you cannot even lock and keep the keys with you. Can you call such a house your house? When house owners are talking and showing their keys and saying if I don't open no one will enter, what will you without a key be saying? (p. 9)

The metaphor of the house is a monument of a society's history and culture. The house symbol reinforces the claims of the Centre whose language postcolonial Africa is grappling with. While others have homes/houses, go back to their homes, have stable families and know where they come from, the protagonist, Banda, sees himself as uprooted without anything to which he can return; he is without a "house". He needs to keep defining himself by subverting the language of the Imperial Centre. Thus, language for him, as for many postcolonial writers, has become the enemy, the tyrant that oppresses the colonized. The past is less a source of value and pride than simply a collection of the chaos of the present caused by the alien colonial culture. The African is not whole due to the negative effects of the white man's intrusion in Africa. Banda again laments:

This thing I am saying like this is very aching. I look at myself and it is just as if I have only one hand, not two; one leg, not two; one row of teeth, not two. I feel that I am only half where the white man is full. He talks his talk here; talks it there. When he enters your house he does not even ask you for your own talk. (p. 8)

Banda's lamentation in the excerpt above is an example of how continuity takes unexpected parodic forms through the petty transactions of life and the lack of both individual and collective fulfillments. Losing his bearing, his past, he is dizzy, terrified and frightened while the other part of him watches him coolly, an inversion of his desires. Literature and life consist of making such webs filled with holes. The use of the colonial/imperial language in Africa far from being an accident of history is a consequence of it. The philosophical reflections of Michael Dunton, Banda's Physics teacher in St. Ives, Cornwall are a summation of the complexity of the postcolonial reality:

Your life must be fired by a grand ideal. And there is no greater ideal than a world without artificial frontiers. You will not understand me sitting here. You need to travel out, to the places on earth where the semblance of difference threatens the truth of oneness. England gives you only part of the truth about the human race. The other part, and an even greater part lies in the continents beyond, in those places you hear about only when suffering is on the table. Suffering is part of the truth, but not all of it. There is also joy in those places, joy of the kind you experience when you play football on a muddy pitch and tumble on one another. (p. 182)

Dunton's philosophical reflections and existentialist statements are very telling as they reveal a vision which provides solutions to some of the artificial problems created by the imperial centre that gives a partial view of reality. These reflections sound like the author's ideological position. For a novelist like

Nyamndi who is concerned with the need for change, renewal and adaptability, his proclaimed differences of attitudes are usually more minor shifts of opinion and adjustment than radically new visions of the world. He begins by seeking wholeness of being, but sees this as impossibility because the blending of the two cultures is necessary. The narrator who is Nyamndi's mouthpiece attests to this in the first few pages of the novel when he metaphorically refers to this phenomenon as "kola nut head" (p. 7).

In the last part of this paper we will use one of the myths explored and exploited by Nyamndi to debunk the view that Nwemba which is an extended metaphor of Africa is the creation of Europeans. Thus, this creation myth has been effectively used.

13. Myth as Symbol

Myth is another symbolic artistic technique explored by Nyamndi to reinforce his thematic preoccupation. Myths are attempts to explain what cannot be explained scientifically. One of the myths explored and exploited by the novelist is that which attempts an explanation of the origin of Nwemba. Here, the novelist sets out to deconstruct that Nwemba is not the creation of the Europeans who came to Africa on their civilizing mission, but that this society had existed before the white man invaded it.

The novel moves from cultural sclerosis, restlessness, and feeling of alienation to self-consciousness and the quest for some meaning to life that is so much part of the modern mind. Nyamndi does this by using a myth to validate and authenticate the origin of Nwemba. The way to live to avoid emptiness and even extremes is the leit motif of this myth. The myth recounts the heroic and epic exploits of Nwembwana, the patriarch of Nwemba. He fought and captured so many neighboring villages. In the ancestral land of Bengeta, after so many months of trekking, an epic fight opposed Nwembwana and his half-brother, Ilembea. But in the end he is exiled from the village because the popular opinion at the time was that he allowed himself to be dragged into a senseless war. The narrator concludes that "real strength...did not lie in the careless show of brute force but rather in the calm ability to withstand provocation" (p. 158). Nyamndi uses a mythology to create a mask through which he can project his own observations. Though Nwembwana is hailed for bringing into existence Nwemba, his barbaric act of violence is condemned and denounced. Banda, the narrator feels the presence of both cultures in this mythological narrative.

Facing Meamba from the presentation of this myth is a metaphor of the growing self and not an adjunct to the self. Contrary to the stereotypical presentation of African characters in most postcolonial discourses by the Imperial Centre, Nyamndi insinuates in this myth that, that was an unfair assessment of Africans because they were morally conscious. Thus, a writer must draw inspiration from old customs, portray the mentality of the people, and present the exact photographic image of the people's passion, prejudices and virtues. That is why Nwembwana is hailed, yet denounced and exiled for his barbarism and brutality.

From this myth, we can conclude that the author uses myth to debunk Europeans' view that they are responsible for the creation of the African continent. Secondly, the author demonstrates that Africans were not as callous and brutal as painted in most western texts, and that, Africans also had/ have their own moral values and compassion for others. Myth becomes an artistic technique which the author uses to adumbrate and imbricate his novel.

14. Conclusion

14.1 Recapitulation of Salient Points

In conclusion, it is important to restate the argument of this article. It is the contention of this study that the exclusivity of the dominant tradition of patriarchy has raised questions about the social and cultural construction of women as hidden, submissive and silence. This is because across the centuries, the woman has been the subject of innumerable reconfigurations and with every reinscription comes the necessity of re-reading. In the context of *Facing Meamba*, Nyamndi has attempted to defend the defamed image of the woman with the most persuasive and compelling possibilities.

It has not been easy to talk about the universal in African literature and culture, but the passion in Nyamndi's insinuation raises the feelings of deep pains, loneliness and awareness of life if priority is not given to African cultural values. It could be said that, the past in the world of *Facing Meamba* is itself varied and has many branches. There is no way to go back to the virgin existence of the African cosmic so often sought in third world revivals of ethnic traditions and other claims to rediscover origins before the interruption by alien colonial culture personified by Harrington in the text. The past changes each time one learns or loses some fact about it; it is changed by one's perspective. That explains Lemea's uncompromising, assertive and rebellious stand in the novel. She personifies the new woman in all her ramifications.

The novelist uses setting, characters, incidents, events, language, gender and myth as symbolic ornaments to make his ideological and cultural postures known. The novelist intimates that, although writing might be a problem because it reawakens memories that would have been forgotten, it is also a socio-cultural therapy because it raises awareness of missed opportunities, wrong decisions, the wounding of women you love or who love you. By so doing, the study exposes the exclusivity of the dominant ideology of patriarchy and raises questions about the construction of an ideal objectified woman by the flawed misogynistic tradition as seen in the resistance put up by Lemea against patriarchy.

14.2 Revelations

In interpreting and evaluating G.D. Nyamndi's *Facing Meamba* against the backdrop of postcolonial theory, the following revelations were established:

- a) That if the masculinity project of men assumes a de-gendering and re-gendering perspective, the intimate relations between the two genders will be cordial; and this cordiality can lead to nation building and development.

- b) From the perspective of language, Nyamndi's manipulation of language makes him a word-magician and announcer, Africa's spokesman, sponsor and interpreter of Africa's cosmological, ontological, epistemological and philosophical systems. This is because we cannot form an articulate vision of our own moral, educational, cultural and political values without some knowledge of where those values come from, the struggles in which they were forged, and the historical and the cultural contexts which generated these struggles.
- c) Thirdly, that if gender difference is brought to its barest minimum, the domination of one gender by another will be checked.
- d) The ultimate submission of this work is that de-gendering and re-gendering is not meant to move the society towards androgyny, but rather creating a less hierarchical society.

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