

## **Resetting Power structures in Rosemary Ekosso's *House of Falling Women***

**Mbi Nchia**

Department of English Modern Letters, Higher Teacher Training College, The University of Bamenda

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37745/gjahss.2013/vol11n119>

Published: 09th January 2023

---

**Citation:** Nchia M. (2023) Resetting Power structures in Rosemary Ekosso's House of Falling Women, *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol.11, No.1, pp.1-9

---

**ABSTRACT:** *The paper, entitled "Resetting Power Structures in Rosemary Ekosso's House of Falling Women" has as objective to analyse the objective presentation of the woman, her experiences and responses in an African and European setting. Life is meant to be enjoyed and celebrated in its wholeness, but this is not often the case because of some barriers and assumed ideologies set aside as fixed rules for the majority to follow. As such, some characters either follow the crowd, succumbing to the prescribed way of life whether they find it comfortable or not, while others categorically carve out their own unique path to follow based on their sense of self and individualism, while shunning all negative criticisms. This paper contends, that Rosemary Ekosso's heroine is a pathfinder for many caged women who live unfulfilled lives due to patriarchal norms which for the most part are not in their favour. The theories of Post colonialism and Deconstruction will be employed in the analysis and interpretation of the novel under study. The theories are chosen because they share a common ground on power relations and resistance to forms of oppression and binary oppositions based on historical facts.*

**KEYWORDS:** resetting, power structures, identity, resistance. Ashcroft

---

### **INTRODUCTION**

Firstly, both patriarchy and imperialism can be seen to exert analogous forms of domination over those they render subordinate. Hence, the experiences of women in patriarchy and those of colonized subjects can be paralleled in a number of respects, and both feminist and post-colonial politics oppose such dominance. Secondly, there have[sic] been vigorous debates in a number of colonized societies over whether gender or colonial oppression is the more important political factor in women's lives. (101-02)

Feminism, therefore, falls within the ambit of Postcolonial theory. The position of women is affected by the condition of colonial dominance within their societies. Feminism, like post colonialism, has often been concerned with the ways and extent to which representation and language are crucial to identity formation and to the construction of subjectivity. Language, for

both groups, has been a vehicle for subverting patriarchal and imperial power, and both discourses have invoked essentialist arguments in positing more authentic forms of language *against* those imposed on them (102).

As concerns representation and resistance, Edward Saïd in *The Introduction to the Post-Colonial Studies Reader* explains that “Feminism and its intersections with both colonialism and post-colonialism is necessarily about representation and resistance” (85). The theories are chosen because they share a common ground on power relations and resistance to forms of oppression based on historical fact. Feminism advocates equal rights for the woman, freedom for the woman to decide her own destiny, freedom from sex-determined roles, freedom from society’s oppressive restrictions and freedom to express her thoughts fully and to convert them freely into actions.

Feminist ideologies began as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century notably in England with strong opposition to the deliberate suppression and subjection of the woman. Karl Marx in *Women and Empowerment: Participation and Decision-Making* holds that Feminism is a struggle for the achievement of women’s equality, dignity, and freedom of choice to their lives and bodies within and outside the house. Amongst the different types of feminists are the Liberal Feminists who argue that inequality has its origin from past traditions, which placed barriers to the woman’s emancipation. They emphasize and foster the necessity for an increasing opportunity and equality for the woman. According to Diana Kendall in *Sociology in Our Times: The Essential*, Liberal Feminists advocate changes in the area of gender role socialization (288).

Makuchi Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi in *Gender in African Women’s Writing: Identity, Sexuality and Difference* states that the Radical Feminists believe women’s oppression and the disparity in gender relations is found in sexual asymmetry; the division of society into two distinct biological sexes and the universal male control of women’s sexual and procreative capacities (22). Patriarchy is considered the primary cause of women’s oppression. The Radical Feminists believe patriarchy needs to be abolished.

Susan Arndt in *African Women’s Literature: Orator and Intertextuality*, states Feminism is a worldview of a way of life of women and men who as individuals, groups and or organization actively oppose social structures responsible for the oppression of women on the basis of their biological and social gender. Feminists do not only recognize the mechanism of oppression, but aim at overcoming them (qtd. in Agbor 139) In the same manner, Bell Hooks in “Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism” says it is simply a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression as it seeks to redefine the existing unequal power structures between men and women in their spheres of interactions.

As regards the intersection between Post-Colonialism and Feminism, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* state women, like colonized subjects, in many different societies

[H]ave been relegated to the position of ‘Other’, ‘colonised’ by various forms of patriarchal domination. They thus share with colonised races and cultures an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression. It is not surprising therefore that the history and concerns of feminist theory have paralleled developments in post-colonial theory. Feminist and post-colonial discourses both seek to reinstate the marginalised in the face of the dominant. (219)

Ashcroft et al. equally state that “Feminism has highlighted a number of the unexamined assumptions which post-colonial discourse, just as post-colonialism’s interrogations of Western feminist scholarship have provided timely warnings and led to new directions” (219). The notion of ‘double colonisation’ where “women in formerly colonised societies were doubly colonised by both imperial and patriarchal ideologies--became a catch phrase of postcolonial and feminist discourses in the 1980s” (250). As Gayatri Spivak demonstrates, what is a radically liberating piece of writing or politics in one arena can act as a colonizing agent in another

Berty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) which has been seen as heralding Feminism’s second wave also calls for a drastic reshaping of the cultural image of femininity that will permit women to reach maturity, identity, and completeness of self. In her questionnaire conducted amongst educated American housewives in 1957, and their Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffinin in the *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, assert that Feminism is of crucial interest to postcolonial discourse for two major reasons:

Firstly, both patriarchy and imperialism can be seen to exert analogous forms of domination over those they render subordinate. Hence, the experiences of women in patriarchy and those of colonized subjects can be paralleled in a number of respects, and both feminist and post-colonial politics oppose such dominance. Secondly, there have[sic] been vigorous debates in a number of colonized societies over whether gender or colonial oppression is the more important political factor in women’s lives. (101-02)

Feminism, therefore, falls within the ambit of Postcolonial theory. The position of women is affected by the condition of colonial dominance within their societies. Feminism, like post colonialism, has often been concerned with the ways and extent to which representation and language are crucial to identity formation and to the construction of subjectivity. Language, for both groups, has been a vehicle for subverting patriarchal and imperial power, and both discourses have invoked essentialist arguments in positing more authentic forms of language *against* those imposed on them (102).

As concerns representation and resistance, Edward Saïd in *The Introduction to the Post-Colonial Studies Reader* explains that “Feminism and its intersections with both colonialism and post-colonialism is necessarily about representation and resistance” (85). The theories are chosen because they share a common ground on power relations and resistance to forms of oppression

based on historical fact. Feminism advocates equal rights for the woman, freedom for the woman to decide her own destiny, freedom from sex-determined roles, freedom from society's oppressive restrictions and freedom to express her thoughts fully and to convert them freely into actions.

Feminist ideologies began as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century notably in England with strong opposition to the deliberate suppression and subjection of the woman. Karl Marx in *Women and Empowerment: Participation and Decision-Making* holds that Feminism is a struggle for the achievement of women's equality, dignity, and freedom of choice to their lives and bodies within and outside the house. Amongst the different types of feminists are the Liberal Feminists who argue that inequality has its origin from past traditions, which placed barriers to the woman's emancipation. They emphasize and foster the necessity for an increasing opportunity and equality for the woman. According to Diana Kendall in *Sociology in Our Times: The Essential*, Liberal Feminists advocate changes in the area of gender role socialization (288).

Makuchi Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi in *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality and Difference* states that the Radical Feminists believe women's oppression and the disparity in gender relations is found in sexual asymmetry; the division of society into two distinct biological sexes and the universal male control of women's sexual and procreative capacities (22). Patriarchy is considered the primary cause of women's oppression. The Radical Feminists believe patriarchy needs to be abolished.

Susan Arndt in *African Women's Literature: Orator and Intertextuality*, states Feminism is a worldview of a way of life of women and men who as individuals, groups and or organization actively oppose social structures responsible for the oppression of women on the basis of their biological and social gender. Feminists do not only recognize the mechanism of oppression, but aim at overcoming them (qtd. in Agbor 139) In the same manner, Bell Hooks in "Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism" says it is simply a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression as it seeks to redefine the existing unequal power structures between men and women in their spheres of interactions.

As regards the intersection between Post-Colonialism and Feminism, Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* state women, like colonized subjects, in many different societies

[H]ave been relegated to the position of 'Other', 'colonised' by various forms of patriarchal domination. They thus share with colonised races and cultures an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression. It is not surprising therefore that the history and concerns of feminist theory have paralleled developments in post-colonial theory. Feminist and post-colonial discourses both seek to reinstate the marginalised in the face of the dominant. (219)

Ashcroft et al. equally state that “Feminism has highlighted a number of the unexamined assumptions which post-colonial discourse, just as post-colonialism’s interrogations of Western feminist scholarship have provided timely warnings and led to new directions” (219). The notion of ‘double colonisation’ where “women in formerly colonised societies were doubly colonised by both imperial and patriarchal ideologies--became a catch phrase of postcolonial and feminist discourses in the 1980s” (250). As Gayatri Spivak demonstrates, what is a radically liberating piece of writing or politics in one arena can act as a colonizing agent in another

Berty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) which has been seen as heralding Feminism’s second wave also calls for a drastic reshaping of the cultural image of femininity that will permit women to reach maturity, identity, and completeness of self. In her questionnaire conducted amongst educated American housewives in 1957, and their

Representation and Resistance is a common phenomenon in post-Colonial studies. Representation could be defined as the image someone gives of another, while identity is the image someone gives of himself. Most of the representation is done by the self to show the other what is better.

Homi Bhabha in his definition of Post colonialism states: “postcolonial criticism bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order. Postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of third world countries and the discourse of minorities within the geographical divisions of east and west, north and south” (qtd in Quayson 652).

Rosemary Ekosso’s *House of Falling Women* (2008) equally handles the question of representation and identity, but from a different perspective. In the issue of gender, the woman is doubly condemned; firstly, as a woman and secondly, as a Subaltern. She therefore decides to stay in this condition or speak out and liberate herself. Subalternity can be contextualized with regard to gender and politics. Talking on representation and resistance, Ashcroft and his colleagues posit that much about feminism and its intersection with both colonialism and post-colonialism is based necessarily on two aspects: representation and resistance. Once the subjugated person starts thinking of what he/she is, Post-Colonial theory sets in.

When one looks closely at *House of Falling Women* one notice how deeply-rooted male supremacy is. This researcher holds as premise that Rosemary Ekosso deconstructs the gender role stereotype set by the society, thereby creating a new society where the woman is in total control of her destiny and not dependent on the man.

Deconstruction, according to Jonathan Culler, can be simply defined as: a critique of the hierarchical oppositions that have structured Western thoughts: inside/outside, mind/body, literal/metaphorical, speech/writing, presence/absence, nature/culture, form/meaning. To deconstruct an opposition is to show it is not natural and inevitable but a construction, produced

by discourses that rely on it, and to show that it is a construction in a work of deconstruction, that seeks to dismantle it-that is, not destroy it but give it a different structure and functioning. (127)

Similarly, Florence Strathon posits that sexual allegory is at the basis of the organization of the structure of African colonial or post-colonial societies: “an allegory of male and female, good and evil, superiority and inferiority” (15). Ekosso’s piece is contrived as a treatise on women’s rights specifically. *House of Falling Woman* is set in Cameroon and the Netherlands where the woman is a construction of the male dominated society: The woman is trapped in societal norms and expectations and she is usually married off to an older person and has no say in her marriage. For example, when Mrs Elive urges Martha to marry lawyer Etchu’s son, Martha rejects the idea on the basis of not having seen him or being sure he would love him. The parents find this abnormal and Mr Elive tells her he had never seen her mother before getting married and he respected the arrangement made by his paternal uncle and they are twenty-eight- years married already. The same is true for Alice Kimbong who is married off to Herbert at fourteen. Widows like Hannah are expected to marry their brothers -in -law after their husband’s death. When Alice is beaten up by her husband, she escapes to her parents and is sent back to her husband’s home on the basis that they are not financially viable to take care of her with her brothers and sisters. Alice’s mother tells her “you act as if you never saw your father beating me” (131). Alice’s mother finds nothing wrong in a man assaulting his wife. This is just normal and should be condoned with. In some cultures, it is a sign of love and concern for a man to beat up his wife. Alice’s mother tells her marriage is for better or for worse, better for the man and worse for the woman.

Lauretta Ngcobo in “African Motherhood- Myth and Reality” states that “marriage amongst Africans is mainly an institution for the control of procreation” (533) where every woman is encouraged to marry and get children in order to express her womanhood to the full. She equally posits that “a dowry must be paid; not to buy the wife as missionaries have wrongly understood. The dowry not only gives exclusive sexual rights to the man, but essentially it is a means of social control over the children that the woman might bear in marriage” (533-34). This explains why most women feel they must be married and bear children to be considered fulfilled in a patriarchal society like the one in question. Nora does all she can to get hooked up to Brown Trail as a means of being happy even when she becomes depressed with Brown Trail impregnating the house help and dating other women like Ophelia whom she beats up.

Filomina Stead in *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* states “true feminism is an abnegation of male protection and a determination to be resourceful and reliant (qtd in Davies, 561). She further states that “the struggle for equal rights between the sexes is going to prove even more difficult than that of de-colonization because in essence, it is a struggle between husband and wife, brother and sister, father and mother” (562). Ogundipe-Leslie is of the view that “the most important challenge to the African woman is her own self-perceptions since it is she who has to define her own freedom” (Davies 562).

Martha refuses to be a victim of norms dominated by male and in favour of the man. She decides to carve out her path which she happily treads after having discovered her identity and mission in life. She sees no reason why men like the yardman she employs feels a rich woman like her with no husband or child at thirty must be depending on another rich man, why a woman must have children and do the household chores, while the man does something better. She also questions why girls who sleep with men at will are considered bad and prostitutes while the man goes free and is still respected, why men's authority should not be questioned, why men should feel as bosses when female students pose questions to them, wash their socks and bed sheets on weekends, why it is normal for an old man to date a young girl but scandalous for an old woman to date a young man, why the Bible written by man stipulates that man is the head and the woman a subordinate.

Post-colonialism, which advocates voices to the voiceless, takes its rise at the rupture point where colonialism starts. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, an Indian, in her influential and controversial essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1983), later expanded in her book *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (1999), addresses precisely the issue of whether people in Subordinate, colonized positions are able to achieve voice (Habib, 748).

In opposition to all the norms set by men and the society, Martha freely goes to bed with men such as Tom, Samuel, The king of Rats (Kingsley), Charles, Eyong and Cornelius while abroad. She knows how to please herself and requests for sex for the pleasure of it and not for financial or academic purposes like others did. In Martha's opinion, it was not designed that every woman must marry and bear children because others have a different way as "Every creature has a way to replicate itself and continue the race" (91). Marriage to her is a form of bondage to one man and she wants to be free to chart upon her own course. (93). Similarly, Ophelia Taboko declares she does not hate men, but the problem is that "men hurt and they occupy your life to the exclusion of most other things" (111). Men, though attracted to woman do not want to see them in control. Even though most patriarchal societies have specific norms patterned only for the girl child, these norms are sometimes violated by a few others such as Martha, who sees herself as unique and distinct from others: She defiles the representation of the woman by the society and seeks to please her own very self-first by alluding to what pleases her. She has the courage to map out her own path rather than follow the crowd which has no fixed destination.

One of Martha's strongest views is that power comes in when one has options to choose. It is against this background that she opens a Women's House situated at Bekoko Junction with the following objectives: To create awareness in women, endow them with skills and knowledge that will give them more openings in life, and thus placing them in a better position to choose for themselves without being forced into any situation, be aware of what men have done to them, what they have done to themselves, and what they don't know at all. Martha successfully trains about four hundred women improving their livelihood and making them independent of their husbands, living for themselves and not by people who dominate them. Financial viability is seen as a way of giving women control of their independence. Martha fights against aspects of

African cultures that cause any segment of a society to lose some privilege to the benefit of another segment. Such aspects in her opinion “should be scrapped” (125).

In the same vein, any religion that restricts one to an extent where one’s life is in danger should not be followed. After two years of training in the House of Women, Alice comes to the realization that “you become what you are by the choices you make” (189), and not probably on what society wants one to be. Other literary heroines who, like Martha, have fought against unfavourable norms in the African and African-American societies include; Margaret Afuh’s Abo, Buchi Emecheta’s Adah and Zora Neale Hurston’s Janie. These protagonists, based on their identities and misrepresentations, stood up against unjust traditional practices against the woman.

Martha used some common examples of culture or ideology in the past which were considered right before they were being questioned and corrected or abandoned. She makes use of the example of chiefs in some cultures who were buried with their households, wives, slaves and livestock, slave trade and the belief of the Catholic Church that the world was flat until it was proven otherwise. Logically, what the society holds about women has to change for good.

Frantz Fanon holds that “decolonization is always a violent phenomenon” (qtd in Katrak 256). Talking on the artistic dimension of a good literary piece, Shadrach A. Ambanasom in *The Cameroon Novel of English Expression: An Introduction* states that the most important concept to consider in a good novel, play or poem is the technique (26). Ekosso’s narrative technique is well structured where she reveals the characters and the central character (Martha) through a flash back technique amidst suspense and humour, with the opening of a Women’s House where she recreates the cadence of battered women communing together and sharing their story. Her bilingualism is reflected in her usage of the English and French languages. The novel is a fierce attack on patriarchy as she deconstructs gender hierarchy in favour of gender equality. Economic viability is considered an essential tool in the deconstruction process.

The question that arises from the text which could be given further consideration is why some of the women of the house still long to return to their domineering husbands and why ladies like Martha and Ophelia who are financially viable still dreads the thoughts of being under a man when they could quit at any moment if threats of a control are exhibited. Martha after her encounter with Charles the Councillor, confesses that she is not interested in marriage but needs someone to make love with “someone to overhaul the old juice ducts from time to time” (158). She needs someone who is completely hers, but to whom she is not subjected to. Gladys who is threatened with a gun from her husband while in the States still feels like returning to him. The question of representation and identity could therefore be considered more personal than general.



---

## References

- Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (eds) *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Buchi, Emecheta. *Second-Class Citizens*. 1974. Oxford: Heinemann, 1994.
- Culler, Jonathan. *Literary theory*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997.
- Davies, Boyce Carole. "Some Notes on African Feminism" in *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Eds. TejumolaOlaniyan and AtoQuayson. Malden: Blackwell, 2007.
- Ekosso, E. Rosemary. *House of Falling Women*. Bamenda: Langaa, 2008.
- Ngome, Epie Victor. *What God Has Put Asunder*. Yaounde: Pitcher, 1982.
- Fanon, Frantz. "National Culture" *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Habib, Rafey. "Postcolonial Criticism" *A History of Literary Criticism and Theory: From Plato to the Present*. Malden: Blackwell, 2005.
- Hurston, Neale Zora *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. 1937. New York: Harper, 2006.
- Katrak, H. Ketu. "Decolonising culture: Towards a Theory for Post-Colonial Women's Texts" in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*. Malden: Routledge, 1995.
- Kincaid, Jamaica. "A Small Place" *The Post Colonial Studies Reader*. Eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Nfah-Abbenyi, J. Makuchi (1997). *Gender in African Women's Writing: Identity, Sexuality and Difference*. Indiana: Indiana U.P.
- Ngcobo, Lauretta. "African Motherhood-Myth and Reality" in *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Eds. TejumolaOlaniyan and AtoQuayson. Malden: Blackwell, 2007.
- Ngome, Epie Victor. *What God Has Put Asunder*. Yaounde: Pitcher, 1982. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. New 7<sup>th</sup> Edition. Oxford: OUP, 1995.
- Stratton, Florence. *Contemporary Afrcan Literature and the Politics of Gender*. London: Routledge, 1994.
- Quayson, Ato. "Postcolonialism and Postmodernism" *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*. Malden: Blackwell, 2007.