

Resetting Power Structures in Rosemary E. Ekosso's *House of Falling Women*

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ABSTRACT: *The paper, entitled "Resetting Power Structures in Rosemary E. 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 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. 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.*

KEYWORDS: **Resetting, Power Structures, Identity, and Resistance**

INTRODUCTION

Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin 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).

Feminist ideologies began as early as the 17th 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). The concepts of Liberal Feminism, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's subaltern and the question of voice, Abdul R. JanMohamed's notion of 'alterity' that places the 'Other' in a less privileged position as opposed to the 'Self', will be used specifically in the analysis and interpretation of the text under study.

Rosemary E. Ekosso's *House of Falling Women* (2008) is set in Cameroon and the Netherlands, where the woman is portrayed as a construction of the male dominated society. Ekosso presents an assertive woman in the person of Martha, her protagonist, who does not only kick against unfavourable societal norms for herself, but stretches her hands further to redeem her peers by creating a house of all battered women in a bid to revive their spirits, create an awareness, and make them be their own women without depending on men.

Through the technique of dialogue and vivid description of the daily experiences of the young women in a male dominated community, Ekosso presents her characters in their daily struggles to find a soothing life style where they could enjoy their uniqueness as individuals and as a group. Martha, through the use of discourse, takes the lead in reshaping her life and even helps in creating awareness in her peers as she understands the importance of living a natural and fulfilled life as opposed to a prescribed and faceted life style.

When one looks closely at *House of Falling Women*, one cannot but notice an impending male supremacy that overshadows the welfare and freedom of the woman. This researcher holds as premise that 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).

In the same light, 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 seeks to dismantle such ascribed binaries based on differences in sex and race.

As regards discourses, Blurr V. defines it as “the processes of interactions such as what we write, what we say, and what we think. Discourses therefore help to construct meaning, and shape behavior” (qtd. in Afuape 25). The positive power in discourses leads to new comportment and an improved life style within its subject in the way of dressing, speaking, acting, and walking. For Michel Foucault, discourses constitute knowledge and power which is transmitted between subjects in the course of discussion and other social practices. Discourses, besides constituting ways of thinking and producing meaning and understanding, also have positive effects on the body, unconscious and conscious mind, as well as the emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern. Power is strongly enacted through discussions that create awareness in the lives of the battered women and the actions they undertake in carrying out petite businesses to empower themselves and carve out their own itineraries as desire.

In the issue of gender, the woman is doubly condemned; firstly, as a woman and secondly, as a Subaltern. The choice to stay in this condition or speak out and liberate herself is exclusive to her alone. 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.

Match making marriages is an old traditional form of marriage where parents decide on the spouses of their children based usually on friendship or economic gains with the latter being predominant. The aspect of love and affection is usually given the least importance. The boy, and notably the girl child in particular seems to have no real say in the marriage contracted. In the narrative under study, Martha is requested to marry Lawyer Etchu’s son, based on financial benefits and fame, in spite of the fact that he is too old for her. Being her own woman, Martha rejects the marriage based on the notion that she has not met him before and not also being sure if the proposed husband would love her. Mr and Mrs Elive are shocked beyond wits given that it was a normal practice for children to allude to the choices of their parents who supposedly could judge better for their children. Besides, Martha’s parents are happily married for twenty eight-years already after their marriage was contracted by her grand paternal uncle. Martha’s parents had succumbed to their marriage arrangement and they therefore see no reason why their own daughter should detest their

choice of husband for her. Being the norm at the time, other young girls like Alice Kimbong do not oppose their parents' choices for them as she is married off to Herbert at the age of fourteen.

The situation is even worse when Alice, after having been battered by Hubert, seeks refuge in her parents' home who send her back to her oppressed husband 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). The abnormal seems to have become the pattern of the day as Alice's mother finds nothing wrong in a man assaulting his wife. Some cultures even consider the beating of a wife as a sign of love, where the man presents gifts to his assaulted wife as a form of appeasement and a strengthening of the bond between them.

Alice's mother has been brought up to believing that almost everything is in favour of the man. Thus, she tells her daughter when she escapes to their home that marriage is for better or for worse, better for the man and worse for the woman. In addition, widows like Hannah are expected to marry their brothers -in -law after their husband's death, with no freedom to remarry from another family.

Martha refuses to be a victim of norms dominated by the 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. In her new vision Martha, unlike the yardman she employs, finds nothing wrong in a rich young woman of thirty to be without a husband or child. The yardman is baffled to imagine she neither depends on any man for sustenance nor does the traditional household chore, while the man does something better.

Martha in turn questions why men who go about sleeping with girls at will go free and are still respected, while girls who sleep with men at will are considered bad and prostitutes. She does not also understand 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).

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 give 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. Martha is different in her perception of life; and marriage for her is first of all for love and not solely for procreation.

Another issue of unfulfilled relationships is portrayed when Nora does all she can to get attached 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. 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 do not 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).

As concerns Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, she handles the question of an effective self-expression by the subalterns who belong to the lowest rung of the ladder in society and thus, often despised and misrepresented by the superior ‘Other.’ According to Spivak, when the subaltern is not given a chance to express himself, the “elaborations of insurgency stand in the place of ‘the utterance’” (28). This revolt or insurrection usually brings about a change in the society. She further reiterates that the relationship between woman and silence can be plotted by women themselves, as race and

class differences are subsumed under that change. The women in the house decide to live together in order to recreate another life for themselves by speaking out and effecting changes where necessary. Spivak concludes that “if, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more in shadow . . .” (28). Martha projects her voice against some malpractices in her family and in the house she constructs in an effort to bring about a change.

The subalterns in essence should be allowed to speak for themselves and not the other for the self. Spivak explains that even radical intellectuals, who would speak on behalf of the oppressed, effectively romanticized and essentialize the other: and is therefore “complicit in the persistent constitution of the Other as the Self’s shadow” (Habib 748-49). The temptation for her is great, simply to view the other as a projection or shadow of oneself. Only the individual can best represent the self, because an attempt to represent the others recreates a situation where the other talks more in his/her interest rather than that of the self. Spivak’s approach, therefore, is useful to this study as it seeks to explain the root cause of marginality as based on a difference in perception of the ‘Other’ as ‘inferior’. It also questions the act of misrepresentation of the ‘Other’ by the ‘Self’ and the need for the ‘Self’ to represent itself in a proper manner. The reactions that abound in the narrative under study tie with Spivak’s tenets.

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. Berty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) calls for a drastic reshaping of the cultural image of femininity that will permit women to reach maturity, identity, and completeness of self.

Martha is not in favour of some cultural and ideological malpractices in the past which were considered right before they were being questioned and corrected or abandoned. Reference is made to the burying of some chiefs in the past with their households: wives, slaves, livestock as a form of honour to them so that their status and dignity is extended probably to the next world. Logically, all these practices to her were as erroneous as the belief of the Catholic Church that the world was flat until it was proven otherwise. In the same vein, what the society holds about women has to change for good too and it takes someone like Martha to question and reset the statuesque.

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.

Ekosso's heroine advocates for equality and justice in the treatment of others and their freedom to make choices without any stereotypes. Economic independence and solidarity is considered an essential tool for the battered women who retell their stories in the house constructed by Martha with the aim of reshaping their lives for the better. The deconstruction process does not occur by chance, but as an opposition to some norms and practices that relegate the woman in society. Discourse is examined as an important tool in the deconstruction of stereotypes. Structures like Colonialism, Neocolonialism, Dictatorship, and Patriarchy are presented as systems that foster the marginalization of the other with a double effect on the woman. 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. Martha is outstanding in her perception of life and the choices she makes irrespective of what the society prescribes for her. She therefore unsets and resets the power structures in her effort to maintain balance and equilibrium in the society.

However, one still wonders why some of the women of the house after having been assaulted by their spouses still long to return to their bossy husbands and why ladies like Martha and Ophelia who are economically viable still dreads the thoughts of being under a man when they could quit at any moment if threats of a control are exhibited. After an encounter with Charles the Councillor, Martha openly confesses that she is not interested in marriage, but in someone with whom she can make love with. She is not interested in any legal form of subjugation to any individual, but needs the company of a man.

In Postcolonial theory, the 'Other' is a term used to describe the way the colonizer perceives the colonized in relation to itself. The 'Other' is inferior to the 'Self' and in binary oppositions the centre/margin, self/other, for example, refer to the colonized 'Other' who are marginalized by the imperial discourse identified by their difference from the centre. 'Generally the 'Other' is anyone who is separate from one's self. For Ashcroft et al. in *The Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, the existence of Other is crucial in defining what is 'normal' and in locating one's own place in the world. The notion of the Self/Other is so complex amongst the colonizers that their perception of the 'Other' is based more on a biased mind, than on a real difference. JanMohamed concludes, that "Genuine and thorough comprehension of Otherness is possible only if the Self can somehow negate or at least severely bracket the values, assumptions, and ideology of his culture" (18). Ekosso's main character seems to question all the negative values of her society.

On the other hand, Gladys who is in the States still longs to return to her husband even after having been threatened with a gun. Everyone therefore has a vision which could be totally different from the other in terms of values and priorities.

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