

The six mountains on african literature



Chinese revolutionary Mao Zedong is quoted as having said that a Chinese man has three mountains on his back. The first is colonial oppression, the second is the oppression of tradition, and the third is his own backwardness. A woman, however, has a fourth mountain on her back: men. Nigerian feminist critic Molara Ogundipe argues in her essay “ African Women, Culture and Another Development” that an African woman has two further mountains burdening her back: her color, and herself. An examination of post-colonial and anti-colonial African literature can illuminate the way these six mountains interact to oppress African women. The novels *Nervous Conditions* by Zimbabwean author Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Xala* by Senegalese author Sembène Ousmane, and *The Madonna of Excelsior* by South African author Zakes Mda each portray the struggles of African women facing these six forms of oppression. The novels give examples of how African women are negatively affected by indigenous traditions and colonial laws in ways that African men are able to escape, which can explain some of the problems with the creation of a national culture discussed by Frantz Fanon in his theoretical work *The Wretched of the Earth*. The novels suggest that both black and white men not only directly oppresses black women with law and tradition, but make women feel as if they are a burden upon men as well. The texts also show that the sixth mountain, “ herself,” is formed from the combined weight of the other five mountains, particularly as women come to consider themselves not only inferior to men but as burdens upon them.

Sembène Ousmane’s novel *Xala* takes place in Senegal shortly after it wins independence and focuses on El Hadji, a prominent politician and businessman, and the families of his multiple wives. The novel shows the

double standards in the way tradition affects men and women: men frequently choose to follow the traditions they find beneficial while ignoring the ones they see as inconvenient, whereas women are significantly more burdened by tradition. This is most clear in the issue of polygamy. El Hadji invokes his African tradition in defense of having multiple wives and being in control over them. “ His honour as an African in the old tradition was being called in question... Had the country lost its men of yesterday? Those brave men whose blood flowed in his veins?” Ousmane writes when El Hadji feels that his masculinity is being threatened by the suggestion that he has to consult his first two wives before taking a third (Ousmane 7-9). His wives are not completely without power, as they are able to choose a divorce.

However, the women recognize that their value in society is largely based on having a husband. As El Hadji’s first wife Adja Awa Astou says to their oldest daughter Rama, “ You think I should get a divorce? Where would I go at my age? Where would I find another husband?” (12). The only alternative she puts forth is to be remarried, suggesting that in Senegalese society there are few options for women, so even with the legal freedoms such as divorce that they have, it is often more beneficial for them to go along with traditional power structures. His second wife Oumi N’Doye is told by her mother “ But why divorce him? Without a man’s help a woman has to fall back on prostitution to live and bring up her children,” further emphasizing the idea that for Senegalese women, the freedom of divorce is a hollow one (34).

However, despite El Hadji defending his freedom to take multiple wives by invoking a sense of African tradition, he ignores other traditions with which he disagrees. When Yay Bineta, a relative of his new third, wife suggests that

he participate in a fertility ritual before consummating his marriage, he refuses, saying he will not “ make a fool of [himself] with this hocus-pocus,” showing that he does not believe in the efficacy or importance of this tradition (18). “ He was sufficiently Westernized not to have any faith at all in this superstition,” Ousmane writes, showing El Hadji to be a hypocrite; he may be “ Westernized” enough not to believe in a fertility ritual, but he is not too westernized to stop believing in his entitlement to polygamy (18). This suggests that El Hadji does not care as deeply about following African traditions as he claims, but instead invokes them as an excuse to continue following the traditions he wants to, such as polygamy. Effectively, El Hadji agrees with African traditions to the extent that they allow him to maintain his power, particularly his power over women.

Xala’s women, unfortunately, are not able to shrug off the mountain of tradition as easily as the men can. Yay Bineta, his third wife’s relative, for example, is trapped by another “ superstition,” while El Hadj can afford to ignore things he considers as superstitious. “ Yay Bineta had always been hounded by bad luck,” Ousmane writes. “ She had had two husbands, both now in their graves. The traditionalists held that she must have her fill of deaths: a third victim. So no man would marry her for fear of being this victim,” which is problematic for her in a society where women seem to have few options besides marriage (30). This suggests that Senegalese society as a whole is not “ sufficiently Westernized” to forget certain traditions that burden women, only those that burden men. Ousmane says Yay Bineta lives in “ a society in which very few women overcome this kind of reputation” (30). Even here, rather than saying “ in which few people overcome this kind

of reputation,” he chooses to emphasize women’s inability to escape tradition, implying that men, even less “Westernized” ones, are not quite so trapped by traditions and superstition. This suggests that El Hadji is not a special case because of his status as a wealthy intellectual politician and businessman, but that he is the rule.

The men in Tsitsi Dangarembga’s novel *Nervous Conditions* have similar views on traditional gender roles, particularly the narrator Tambu’s older brother Nhamo and her uncle Babamukuru. Nhamo is able to go to school while Tambu mostly has to stay at home with her family. When Nhamo returns from school, he makes his sisters go to the bus station to carry his remaining luggage, even though he is capable of carrying it all himself. “He did not need help,” the narrator says, “he only wanted to demonstrate to us and himself that he had the power, the authority to make us do things for him” (Dangarembga 10). This attitude informs Nhamo’s interaction with Tambu; he only uses traditional roles as an excuse to support this attitude, but does not really care about tradition. For instance, when he makes Tambu fetch his luggage and she asks him to look after their younger sister while she is away, he says that “minding children [is] not a man’s duty,” implying to Tambu that this is instead a woman’s duty, therefore her responsibility, and that as a woman’s duty it would be improper for him to do (9). However, Nhamo shows that cares very little about what his traditional duties as a man are supposed to be. As Tambu says, “helping in the fields or with the livestock or the firewood, any of the tasks he used to do willingly before he went to the mission, became a bad joke” (7). After spending time away at school, he is no longer willing to help his family do farm-work, showing that

he does not really care about fulfilling his “ man’s duty.” Just as El Hadji ignores traditions he does not like in favor of ones that give him power over women, Nhamo enforces the idea of women’s duties versus men’s duties as an excuse to make his sisters do more work while he does less, making himself feel powerful even while ignoring his duties as a man.

Tambu’s uncle Babamukuru in fact seems to have relinquished most of his African culture except, of course, for his patriarchal position of power over his family and over women. He, his wife Maiguru and their children have spent five years studying in England, and when they return the children hardly remember how to speak Shona, their native language. Babamukuru and Maiguru seem to encourage their children to emulate English culture and leave their Zimbabwean heritage behind. However, even though Maiguru is as highly educated as her husband, she is still relegated to a position of inferiority to her Babamukuru and still has to serve him. This in fact seems to be indicative of the novel’s characters’ general perception of educated women. Tambu’s father asks the narrator “ Can you cook books and feed them to your husband?” when she expresses a desire to further her education. “ Stay at home with your mother,” he says. “ Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables” (15). This is what their society sees as a woman’s role. Even though the roles are expanding for both men and women to allow new things such as higher education, the same basic gender roles remain; the man being the dominant head of the family and the woman remaining subservient. This is also a source of women’s third mountain, “ backwardness.” It is cultivated by society by denying women the same educational opportunities as men. Even when refuting her father’s argument

to herself, saying “ Maiguru was educated, and did she serve Babamukuru books for dinner?” Tambu still emphasizes Maiguru’s ability to serve her husband, since the idea that the wife must serve her husband is so ingrained in her society (16).

Babamukuru more directly exerts patriarchal control over his daughter Nyasha, which allows Tambu to realize how females are being victimized unfairly in her society. When both Nyasha and her brother Chido come home late, Babamukuru turns all his rage against Nyasha, telling her “ no decent girl” would act as she is, saying she is behaving “ like a whore,” whereas before this he only tells Chido “ you children are up to no good,” which he says “ cordially,” showing the different gendered standards he holds his children to (114-6). Babamukuru begins to beat Nyasha, and in self-defense she hits him back. His response to her action is telling of his opinion on gender roles in their society; “ Babamukuru bellowed and snorted that if Nyasha was going to behave like a man, then... he would fight her like one” (117). By equating Nyasha’s actions to “ behaving like a man,” Babamukuru equates manhood to violence. Furthermore, he equates manhood to the ability to resist, denying that this is a possible or permissible trait in women. He tells her “ Not even your brother there dares to challenge my authority,” but this is largely because Chido has no reason to challenge his father’s authority; it is not unfairly used against him as it is against Nyasha. Tambu interprets this as Babamukuru making Nyasha “ a victim of her femaleness, just as [she] had felt victimised at home... The victimisation,” she says, “ was universal. It didn’t depend on poverty, or lack of education, or tradition... Men took it everywhere with them” (118). Tambu recognizes appeals to “

tradition” for what they are; not legitimate devotion to African tradition but excuses for powerful men to stay powerful.

The tendency among these novels’ male characters to ignore certain African traditions except for those that allow them to maintain their power over women highlights a connection between Molara Ogundipe’s essay and Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, which offers a possible explanation for why men can ignore traditions while continuing to enforce such traditions over women. Ogundipe argues that colonialism “has brought out the basic sexist tendencies in pre-capitalist Africa” by rearranging society in ways that effectively erased any existing sources of female empowerment (Ogundipe 109). Fanon, in his essay “On National Culture,” also writes about how colonial powers worked to restructure African societies and how this affected indigenous traditions and power structures. He argues that the goal of colonialists was to “hammer into the heads of the indigenous population that if the colonist were to leave they would regress into barbarism, degradation, and bestiality” (149). The result of this is that when colonial power is finally overthrown, even though the indigenous people feel the urge to embrace their old, suppressed culture, colonial manipulation still exists in their minds. Fanon says “the intellectual is terrified by the void, the mindlessness, and the savagery. Yet he feels he must escape this white culture” (157). In Ousmane’s words, the African people, particularly intellectuals such as El Hadji and Babamukuru, have become “sufficiently Westernized” by the colonists’ efforts to undermine indigenous culture, yet in rebellion against the ousted colonists they still feel the need to reject white culture. The novels suggest that this paradox is resolved through

cultural double standards; the men appeal to feelings of African culture, tradition and heritage to lift themselves up and to keep women down, and as a way to satisfy their need to reject white culture. Still affected by colonialism, however, they no longer seem to believe in many African traditions beyond those which are useful to them, allowing men to pick and choose which traditions they follow while women are bound much more closely to tradition. So in effect, African women are still oppressed by colonial manipulation of indigenous culture even after direct colonial rule is removed from individual countries.

These novels also display ways in which women are made to feel as if they are a burden upon men, another source contributing to their issues with self-image, or the sixth mountain, “ herself.” El Hadj constantly, if ironically on Ousmane’s part, complains about having to go back and forth between his three homes and families. The oppressive quality of these complaints is clearer in *Nervous Conditions*. When Tambu’s brother Nhamo dies, Babamukuru tells their father Jeremiah that “ it is unfortunate that there is no male child to take this duty, to take this job of raising the family from hunger and need,” implying that Tambu is burdensome simply because she is not a male, and therefore will not be able to contribute in any way they find meaningful (56). Her father responds saying that her “ sharpness with books is no use because in the end it will benefit strangers,” further implying that educating her would be another unnecessary burden since it would only benefit her future husband, not her family (56). Even while beating Nyasha for staying out too late, Babamukuru asks “ How can you go about disgracing me... I am respected at this mission. I cannot have a daughter who behaves

like a whore” (116). Everything women do in the novels is considered in terms of how it affects men, and anything that does not benefit men, even if it benefits the women, is considered a burden upon the men, even though they are clearly already in a dominant social position over the women.

This tendency is most obvious and most disturbing in Zakes Mda’s novel *The Madonna of Excelsior* because the perception of black women as burdens upon men comes not from other black men, but from the white Afrikaner colonizers, dominant not only over women but over all native Africans. The novel also shows how the colonial legal system directly oppressed black women in ways that did not affect black men. The novel frequently shows white South African men frequently coercing black women into sex, despite the country’s “Immorality Act” prohibiting such relations between black and white people. However, instead of convicting the men who not only initiated these relations but coerced the women into them, South Africa’s legal system instead upholds the men’s innocence while condemning the women. Reverend François Bornman, a respected church leader in the community and one of the white men being tried under the Immorality Act, states that “the devil had sent black women to tempt him” and that “the devil had always used the black female to tempt the Afrikaner” (Mda 85). Even though he says it is his own fault for not resisting this temptation, he still places the bulk of the blame on black women. This, much like the men’s appeals to tradition in the other novels, is an excuse adopted by men who refuse to admit that they have raped black women; another way to explain their superiority. In this way, even the white colonial oppressors claim to be burdened by black women, further deteriorating their self-image.

All of this oppression adds up to form the sixth mountain: “ herself.” Black women in these novels are constantly being portrayed as their own and each other’s enemies. El Hadji’s wives are constantly bickering and accusing each other of all sorts of immoral activities. They, as well as women in the other novels, frequently call each other “ whores,” harkening back to the Afrikaner’s vision of black women as demonic temptresses. The Madonna of Excelsior also deals directly with black women’s problems with body image. Niki, one of the novel’s central characters, tries to appear whiter by using skin lightening cream, even though it only harms her skin. The novels never mention men using such products, only women, implying that they did not face the same image issues.

Popi, Niki’s mixed race daughter fathered by one of the men tried under the Immorality Act, spend most of the novel insecure about her white features, hiding her light, straight hair in a head-wrap, but at the end of the novel she finally comes to accept her differences and see herself as beautiful; “ Lately Popi spent all her mornings looking at herself in the mirror, admiring her blue eyes and brushing her long golden-brown hair. She no longer hid it under huge turbans. She wondered why she had been ashamed of it all these years, why she had never noticed its beauty” (256). Mixed race women had their own unique problems in South African society, so it is undoubtedly positive that Mda portrays Popi reaching a place where she can accept herself for who she is. However, none of these novels show a fully black woman reaching a similar place; in this moment, Popi is accepting and loving the parts of her that are white, not black, which for her is positive and necessary. However, darker women are left behind in a place of self-loathing.

While Mda praises the beauty of black women throughout the novel, neither Niki nor any of the women who use skin lightening cream reach a moment like Popi's, at least explicitly, where they come to find the beauty of their blackness. Mda perhaps means to imply that one way to alleviate the burden of the sixth mountain is to work toward self-acceptance and the rejection of colonial standards of beauty. In *Xala*, Adja Awa Astou and Oumi N'Doye, El Hadji's first and second wives, occasionally reach moments of harmony and cooperation, but this does not last, as they eventually fall back into patterns of bickering and accusation. While Molara Ogundipe listed several ways to fight against the weight of the six mountains at the end of her essay, there is one she perhaps missed that these novels try to suggest: to alleviate the burden, African women should accept themselves as they are and work together with other women, instead of engaging in unnecessary conflict and holding themselves to unrealistic beauty standards, fighting against the chaos and hatred sown by colonialism instead of furthering it.

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