Gender and Canon Formation: Women, Men and Literary Art in Africa.

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Introduction

Religion had a strong influence on education in Africa in the 19th century. Together with the colonial state, religious organizations, particularly missions influenced the form, content and the processes of canon formation in African artistic and intellectual endeavours. Through formal, westernized education, pioneered by the church and subsidised by the state, women in many parts of Africa experienced a separation between religion, politics and the economy, disempowering them substantially and domesticating them in the process of restructuring labour and its distribution in colonial economies. Unlike men, women’s western education was focused on domesticity, divorcing women from the political, public and lucrative spheres of colonial economies. In the process, many groups and classes of African women became formally dependent on men in many colonial economies, lost their political and religious powers, placing them in weak leadership positions socially and politically. This disempowerment persists to date and has very negative consequences for the inclusion of women in the canon in different areas of life in Africa.

On the other hand, African men’s experiences with western education and the formation of the canon in the arts and intellectual arena took a decidedly different path. Men of different classes were the first to access western education and to participate in shaping the canon in specific areas of intellectual and artistic endeavour such as literature. The processes of colonisation, state formation and modernisation separated religious from artistic, political and economic spheres, advantaging those African men who were at the centre of colonial and post-colonial education, state, political and economic enterprise. These men occupy the centre of the canon in many areas of enterprise and shape the development of the canons in the artistic and intellectual arenas.

This paper will focus on the experiences of African men and women in colonial education, arguing that the headstart of men in different areas of African life shaped by western influences such as colonisation has placed them at the centre of canon formation. It was only later that women from the emerging privileged classes were able to join these men and influence the processes of canon formation. The paper will examine the area of literature to illustrate and interrogate the processes of canon formation and maintenance.
\textbf{Gender and the missions}

Hastings (1993) and Labode (1993) assert that women missionaries comprised the majority of mission workers in Africa. Since the women missionaries were themselves subordinated to their sending religious hierarchies, the women missionaries were unable to present much of a revolutionary force for African women whom they tried to evangelise and ‘civilise’. Labode (1993) points out that missionaries, many of them single women, performed most of the Anglican mission work in South Africa. Most of their work comprised what is termed ‘welfare’ work in contemporary parlance. This work included teaching, nursing, visiting people at homes, training women in homemaking and mothering skills, running orphanages and rehabilitating women who had gone into prostitution or had borne children outside wedlock. This was women’s work then as it is now. African women were, at that time, involved in agriculture, trade and other types of work outside the home in their peasant and pastoralist societies. Domestic labour, shared with children, was not women’s sole or primary focus in most parts of Africa that are dominated by female farming systems. (Boserup 1970)

However, missionaries sought to reconstruct the gender divisions of labour that they observed in Africa. As Comarroff and Comaroff (1992: 48) observe of the Livingstones in Central Africa,

“...the accomplishment of a missionary in Central Africa, namely, the husband to be a jack-of-all-trades without doors and the wife to be a maid-of-all-work within.”

In effect, the confinement of women within the newly constructed private domestic and the men in the public domains, was an important aspect of Christian evangelism. This thrust shaped subsequent events in the evolution of rules, rights, obligations and accomplishments by gender in colonial and post-colonial societies.

It must be noted that the majorities of missionaries in Africa in the early nineteenth century, originated from European countries, which were patriarchal. In the case of the United Kingdom, many missionaries had Victorian backgrounds and the subordination of women to men was taken for granted in these European societies of the nineteenth century. Thus, missionaries were nurtured in the context of ideologies of female subordination, which made them less open to other possibilities for gender organization, education and women’s participation in public life in any society. The blatant racism and white superiority of colonial societies confounded the issue, placing missionary women in a superior position to African women and destroying many possibilities for mutual education on many issues that could have benefited both missionary and colonized African women.

However, Hastings (1993) does observe that the very marginality of missionary women in Africa gave them scope for self expression and freedom to improvise, to experiment, to muddle through and to push the boundaries in ways that would not have been possible in their home countries. With the exception of the Salvation Army which had leadership roles for women as converts as well as wives and mothers, Christian churches foisted the domestication model based on the new bourgeoisie in Europe, on peasant African
women, with negative consequences. It was therefore not accidental that the first converts of the missionaries were women, marginal men such as those who were enslaved and the vulnerable such as deviant children in some households. Samual Ajayi Crowther, an enslaved boy liberated by the British navy is a towering figure of West African Christianity. In South Africa, Sales, (1975) notes that at Bethelsdorp, the first Christian community, by 1806, the total baptized population comprised 43 women, 18 men and 62 children. As the first converts in many African societies, African women were central to the early church before western education became critical for social mobility in colonial society. This early phase characterised by the centrality of African women to the Christian church, presented opportunities for the church to play a pioneering role in women’s education. These opportunities were lost as the church and state negotiated and compromised the interests of African women for the sake of the empire and the approval of male power holders and wielders in different African societies. As the influence of religion and its education grew, women became more marginalized in the church, occupying marginal roles both as missionaries and as converts.

The Christian curriculum for African women
In general, the Christian curriculum for African women focused not on the interests of African women as expressed by them, but on the interests of their fathers, husbands, brothers, the colonial state and the male-dominated church. While the early Christian churches, Anglican, Catholic and Methodist in Africa, allied themselves with women over issues such as the killing of twins, forced marriages, bridewealth payment and witchcraft accusations, they also allied with colonial and native men in subordinating African women through male-centred education which replaced variants of African education and socialization with a variety of European-derived patriarchal values embodied in formalised western education. The paper illustrates the curriculum of different Christian denominations and indicates their impacts on the statuses and power of African women in their societies.

Labode (1993) argues that Anglican mission education for African women differed from that for African men. Primarily, the education of African women in South Africa focused on moulding wives and helpmeets for colonized Christian men so that Christianity could grow in Africa. The dominant assumptions about African women were that, unlike African men, African women had little contact with colonialism through the labour market and were thus steeped in their heathen and unChristian customs. It was also felt that African women were victims of African traditional customs such as polygyny, bridewealth and forced marriages. Thus, African women were objects of missionary women’s pity and needed to be raised in different environments from those prevailing in their homes. These assumptions led to the institutionalization of African girls in boarding schools, homes and similar environments.

According to a variety of scholars, domesticity was the cornerstone of missionary education for women in South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya. Labode (1993) describes the strong non-academic bias to education for African women in colonial South Africa. Kanogo (1993) does the same for Kenya and Isichei (1993) for Nigeria. While native boys were trained to assume leadership and public roles in their societies, native girls
were trained to become wives who had to run the homes and bear the children of these leaders. Anglicans ran such schools as St Margaret’s for younger girls and St Agnes’s for girls and women working as domestics in Natal, South Africa. The most famous academic school for boys and girls established by the Free Church of Scotland, Lovedale, was closed down when Bantu Education was established in South Africa in 1953. In Britain, young working class women were educated for domesticity. Despite the demands for academic education by African girls at St Agnes’s school, the missionary in charge of the school thought that academic education ‘spoiled’ women. Kanogo argues that in Kenya, the missionary stance on women’s education slowed the pace at which women entered professional occupations. In Kenya, according to Kanogo, as a group of career women who sought to combine domesticity with paid work within and outside marriage emerged, the missionaries were nonplussed and sought to control where the women went to work.

Thus, missionaries who felt that lives of servitude, badly paid, with little social status and recognition, were appropriate for women, forced girls into domesticity. This observation is still true in contemporary Africa! Nevertheless, the minority of African women who had personal and parental ambitions for higher paid occupations, were able to glean some academic and domestic education and were able to work as teachers, nurses, orderlies and could occupy positions of authority in Mothers’ Guilds and Unions. Missions imbued women with a view of alternative lifestyles and locales, enabling them to break away from their natal families and to build up limited power bases in colonial societies.

In one instance, girls at Bloemfontein Training School, an Anglican institution, revolted against their domestic curriculum in 1877. This curriculum stressed housewifery, sewing, and religious education with a bit of the reading, writing and arithmetic thrown in. Thus, the mainstream Catholic, Anglican and Methodist conceptions of African Christian women were those of women who were content to take a back seat to their husbands, to keep homes for them, bear their children and enable them to serve the church and state. The articulated educational needs of African girls and women were not prioritised.

Ranger (1995), in his account of the Methodist family of the Samkanges of Zimbabwe, paints a very different picture of the elder Samkanges, Thompson and Grace, both of whom desired equal and higher education for all their children, male and female. Denzer (1992) also indicates that in Yorubaland, by the second trimester of the twentieth century, some Yoruba parents desired more than a domestic education for their daughters. The Samkanges and other Christianised colonised families do indicate the differences that sometimes existed between the African missionaries and their European counterparts, in their understanding of the purposes of education for men and women. Needless to say, the dominant missionary view of women as wives and mothers skewed women’s education towards domesticity, delaying African women’s entry into secondary and higher education. Since indirect rule in Anglophone Africa tended to comprise state subsidy to mission schools, schooling remained male-defined and dominated and women had to go against the tide to secure any western education beyond the primary level. It is therefore those women from families such as the Samkanges throughout Africa, who accessed western education and were able to participate in canon formation in various
The Christian curriculum for African men
While African women were availed limited education for domesticity, African men were also offered education for subordination, albeit broader and less vocational. In Southern Africa, social work, carpentry, agriculture, teaching, pastoral work and the armed forces were the provinces of men. These men were the colonial functionaries who taught in the African schools, became the lay preachers, worked as orderlies under the western nurses and doctors, acted as interpreters in the courts, performed the policing of the colonised and became the direct assistants of the colonial civil servants.

There was some reluctance to introduce higher education amongst the natives particularly in the areas of law, engineering and the sciences in general. In Central Africa, Makerere College drew on native populations from Southern and Central Africa. Fort Hare, an African institution in South Africa, drew its student population from Southern and Central Africa. These institutions were few and tended to recruit male Africans who had had a head start in education beyond primary school. It was only in the post-war period that colonial governments started planning broader education provision to support the colonial administrative efforts as natives demanded access to more and broader education for both men and women.

Changes in the bases for women’s participation in the canon in Africa.
Africa is a broad and diverse continent, embracing matrilineal and patrilineal peoples. However, what is important is that in many of these African systems of social organisation, women’s political and social power was based on their economic contributions, their reproductive and religious roles. As indicated by a diversity of scholars such as Amadiume (198 ) on Nnobi women in Nigeria, Mba on women in Nigeria, Gaidzanwa on Shona women in Zimbabwe (1985), some African women had access to religious, political and economic power on the basis of their skills and competence and this power was not based solely on child-bearing or servicing husbands’ needs. These structurally powerful positions were available to distinguished, often older but not exclusively, women who became mediums of spirits, title holders on the basis of their wealth or skills which could be parlayed into social and economic power. The unity between the religious, the social and economic realms in many African societies, ensured that women were not marginalised in their societies. In these pre-literate societies, oral skills were important in passing on information and wisdom and constructing a canon of social, political and religious knowledge. Women participated with men in orature. They were not as empowered as men especially in patrilineal societies but in matrilineal societies such as those of the Tonga, Akan and others, women’s access to land and other immovable resources was direct and unmediated by marriage and men.

With westernised formal education, it could be expected that the new female converts would also take a pioneering role in women’s education, creating new bases for empowerment for previously marginalised women. This did not happen. While in the pre-colonial systems, royal and ruling class women were certainly privileged in comparison to commoners, for enslaved women, captives or orphaned women, the new religions were
attractive to these marginal women who went to mission stations for refuge. At the
mission stations, African women often performed unpaid domestic and agricultural
labour under the guise of ‘training’, thereby bolstering the economic viability of many
missions. These women were not therefore in a position to establish new traditions and
have any impacts on the emerging canons in the emerging African polities and economies
given their limited education, leisure time and experience with the broader colonial world
beyond the missions.

As has been noted by Achebe and Kane in their fiction, amongst the natives, it was
usually the non-inheriting children of junior wives, the marginal sons with little skill for
accessing, inheriting and wielding power through traditional office, who were sent to the
missions for western exposure. This was a ‘hedging’ strategy to give these chiefs and
prominent families some presence in the new system while retaining their supremacy and
hold in the traditional authority structures and systems. Sending the children with fewer
prospects for ruling was also a strategy of accommodation to placate the missionaries and
state functionaries who wanted African children educated in the western and ‘civilised’
manner of colonialism. It was from among some of these African children of chiefs and
commoners that the first generations of predominantly male scholars in literature, politics
and other areas, emerged.

While the mission stations, religions and colonial jobs offered higher status and pay to
male, previously marginal males, in most cases, the women they married became more
subordinated and dependent on their husbands than women who were not converted and
remained outside the towns, the centres of the colonial systems. Anthropologists such as
Oppong (1981), Cheater (1984), Hafkin and Bay (1976) and Schmidt (1992) Krige and
Comaroff (1981), Little (1973), Lloyd (1966), Schuster (1979) and Hansen (1992) have
documented the ‘untraditional’ dependence of middle class women, farmers’ wives,
secretaries and clerical workers, teachers and nurses in middle class African marriages.
Despite their primacy in driving the Christian church in Africa, African women’s
growing dependence on men as husbands, employers, church and colonial authorities, is
unprecedented in historical terms. The glaring picture of a predominantly female church
with a male leadership, raises questions about the efficacy of the church in education for
women’s participation in the shaping the form and content of the canon in various areas
in Africa.

This is particularly so because in Africa, higher education has been instrumental in the
nurture and development of black nationalism and leadership in Africa. Kenyatta,
Mugabe, Mandela, Tambo, Kaunda, Nkomo, Nyerere, Khama, Neto and Nkrumah, the
pantheon of African founding fathers, were products of missionary dominated or
influenced higher education, which did not have the same impact on African women
precisely because of the gendering of that education. Some of these men such as Mugabe,
Kaunda and Nkomo were the children of Africans converted to Christianity. Kenyatta
gave on to contribute to the canon in anthropology in his work Facing Mount Kenya, in
which he defended the culture of the Kikuyu peoples, in the process justifying female
genital mutilation. It is worth noting that private religious universities are venturing into
higher education in unprecedented numbers in African countries such as Zimbabwe,
Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. For men, the missionary education opened doors to politics, economics, intellectual achievement and social influence whereas for women, its impact has been muted at best or tranquilizing at worst. Will these universities replicate the pattern of missionary education in which women are continuously marginalised?

If anything, as Mate, in personal communication, has argued and as implied by Hastings (1993) regarding African women, women’s leadership has manifested itself amongst those women who have departed from missionary-dominated education and interpretations of women’s roles in the Christian religion. Hastings mentions some of these women and prophetesses such as the Alices, Lakwena and Lenshina, Amai Chaza, Mrs Paul, Mariam Ragot, Ma Nku, Ma Mbele and others. These women are better known in Africa than any African female scholars, doctors, lawyers, professors, Presidents and Prime Ministers or missionaries! This in itself, raises very pointed questions about the present structure, content and thrust of education that African women are acquiring. Be that as it may, it is true that African women’s contributions to the canon in the arts and humanities has mainly been through objectification through the writings of the first male generations of African scholars trained in the western education systems.

African Women and Men in the Literary Arts
While it is relatively easy to name African men who have contributed to the canon and have influenced it significantly according to the standards of western scholarship, it is less easy to do this for African women until the sixties and seventies in the twentieth century. Davies argues that African as writers such as Chinua Achebe, have consistently taken over the role of idealising motherhood and wifehood. This is not only true for Achebe but for many other male writers such as Leopold Senghor of Negritude fame, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi wa Thiongo, Chenjerayi Hove, Charles Mungoshi and others. These depictions of African women have inadvertently contributed to attempts to lock African women into restricted domestic roles in colonial and post-colonial Africa. This specific construction of African women attempts to lock them into domesticity as if this is an uncomplicated, liberating and problem-free construction of African womanhood. The canonisation of motherhood and wifehood pervades literature, the arts, social policy and practice and creates many problems for African women because of the one-dimensional construction of African womanhood.

The one-dimensional construction of African womanhood which is collapsed into wifehood and motherhood, preferably in that order, has been occasioned by the resistance to colonialism and the desire to control and locate African women in places and postures that reflect well on African men. It is not accidental that the plethora of African men that are western educated and exposed to western literature also sought to construct African women as non-parasitical, disciplined, empathetic and responsible wives and mothers in contrast to the colonial women in Africa. This was so especially in the cases of the writers and scholars writing in English for non-African audience who constituted the critics, the reference points and reference groups for these African scholars. Thus, there was rapturous reception of the writings of Achebe, Soyinka, wa Thiongo and the works of Jomo Kenyatta, Agustinho Neto and others who advocated the cultures and viewpoints of the colonised Africans, predominantly male.
Male Africans’ descriptions of African-ness have held sway for nearly a century after colonisation precisely because of the struggles against colonialism that resulted in defensiveness about things defined as African by male scholars. In the face of the epic struggles against colonialism, the muting of the African women’s voices was pronounced. Self policing also occurred amongst Africans with African women showing some reluctance to break ranks and risk accusations of dividing the colonised by contesting the experiences of African-ness purveyed by African men whose voices contributed to the canon. Thus, Makward (1986) argues that writers such as Mariama Ba could mute their feelings about Islam and its discrimination against women while expounding on the evils of polygyny through her fictional works.

The processes of questioning the primacy of the motherhood/wifehood construction of women opens up a variety of possibilities for achieving more liberating African womanhood(s), have been long and arduous, involving many women and a few men in Africa and beyond. Davies (1986) points out that the artistic works of important Igbo writers, Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta, directly contradict the gendered meanings assigned to motherhood by Igbo male writers and others from outside Igboland. Nwapa and Emecheta contest the assumption that having children does not necessarily guarantee women’s happiness and success by constructing fictional works in which mothers and wives who are dominated, unfulfilled and not in control of their lives live significantly unhappy lives. These two Igbo women depict different types of women, mothers and wives, indicating that there are many ways of being women, wives, mothers and that choices exist for women to fashion the kinds of existences and lives they would desire. Thus, while in many male writers’ creations and in the appreciation they derive from scholarly critics, the struggles of black men are prioritised to the detriment of those of African women who comprise the other half of colonised societies. Nwapa and Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Bessie Head, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Neshani Andreas, Lilia Momple and Yvonne Vera, foreground women’s experiences of colonial and postcolonial realities through their fiction. In this endeavour, they shape and re-shape the canons of African literature in ways that advance the struggle for more humane existences for all Africans. These writers, writing from the perspectives of African women, help to lay bare the differences between African women and men’s realities in colonial and post-colonial Africa.

Coupled with writing fiction is the process of critical attention. In the field of African literature, the works of African men have comprised the corpus of writing through which the African experience is understood. As Davies and Adams (1986) have argued, the experiences of all Africans have been evaluated through the African men’s writings, creating a canon, which excluded African women. It is only through the works of critics such as Graves and Davies (1986), Gaidzanwa (1985), Busia (1986) and d’Almeida (1986) that there is a critical attention given to the writings of African women as writers and as characters in African fiction. Together, these works have gone some way towards building up a true canon of African literature, which takes into account the experiences of diverse Africans in their full humanity.
Divisions and exclusions in contemporary canon formation

While it can be argued that the canon is opening up in the literary arena, there are barriers that divide the African experience and contribution to the canon by language, class, gender and medium. The colonial languages of French, English and Portuguese are still dominant in writings that form the canon, creating a schism between the people who can contribute to the canon and those who cannot. Given the exclusion of poor and female people from the majority of sub-Saharan Africa from formal education, participation in canon formation still remains the privilege of those who can access higher education, are male and can excel in literary and related pursuits. The solitary nature of literary creation demands that participants be people with “rooms of their own” and a certain amount of money to sustain them while writing. Immediately, this creates class barriers against those people who cannot mobilise rooms, money, a western language and contacts through which their works could be publicised, sold and read.

It is therefore not accidental that the women and men who have excelled in literary creation in Africa tend to be from the privileged classes with parents who believed in western education. This is true of Ama Ata Aidoo, Tsitsi Dangarembga, Yvonne Vera, Flora Nwapa and other women whose works comprise part of an emerging canon in African literature. It is also true of male writers such as Achebe, Soyinka, wa Thiongo, Mphahlele, Hove and others. The most glaring exception is Ousmane Sembene, a self-taught man whose literature is gender sensitive and exalts the humanity of both men and women as Africans. It is only in the other arts other than literature that less schooled men and women have been able to excel and gain worldwide recognition as Africans. This aspect of canon formation continues to pose a problem in the creation and transmission of canons in literature.

On the critical front, the westernised nature of literary celebration and recognition also impinges on critics as people necessarily educated in the same traditions as the literary creators. Peers, scholars and critics, create canons through recognition, mention, analysis, celebration and endorsement of works by literary creators. This process necessitates partaking in traditions of scholarship that are internationally recognised, predominantly western and not open to participation by the general populaces of Africa from whom these writers originate and work.

This problem is partly resolved through translation of the canonical works into local languages. However, there is not nearly enough of these works that have been translated for local use due to the costs involved and the inability of local African readers to pay market or subsidised prices for literary works. The instrumental approach to literature, partly due to extreme poverty also makes reading a luxury in comparison to food, shelter, clothing and other necessities. Thus, the participation in producing canonical works and their consumption is a profoundly class-bound phenomenon, making innovations in the production of the canon only accessible to western audiences for whom most of the translations are done. Thus, the canonical works tend to be produced by non-poor people, for the consumption of a small class of schooled or school-going peoples as well as westerners who can afford to pay market prices for African literature in translation from English, French or Portuguese.
Conclusion
In examining the historical background to the production and reproduction of the canon in literary arts in Africa, the colonial processes had a significant impact in structuring participation by gender, class, age and language. The languages of colonisation have tended to become the languages of creation, reproduction and participation in contesting, refining and confirming the canon in African literature. While African women have entered the terrain of canon creation later than African men, the class bases of this participation cuts across gender lines, aligning men and women of the western educated classes together in the processes of canon formation. This has necessarily resulted in the marginalisation of those people who cannot achieve the quality and facility of command of these languages because of their class, gender and languages of daily interaction and existence in Africa. These challenges pose a great hindrance to the democratisation of the canon in African literature internationally because literature in the local languages does not comprise the canon of literary creation in most African countries. Thus, it has proved easier to facilitate access to the canon for specific classes than for the generality of Africans on the continent. The challenge therefore, is to re-fashion the canon in literary creation in such a way that the majority of Africans can participate in it at the levels of creation and reproduction as writers, readers and critics.

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