

## **(Re) connecting with Negritude ideology: Gender issue and image of women in the writings of Henri Lopes.**

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**Abstract:** Whether spoken or written, non fictional or imaginary entity, literature is an account of history. It mirrors the past and the present as well as prophesizes the future. Literature creates room for resumption, reconnection and/or revalidation of dialogues or debates. It builds bridges between the past and the present events so as to foster future advancement of the human society. As personal or collective experiences, feelings or totality of human life, literature has aesthetic values, didactic values, linguistic values and therapeutic values among other things. Our concern in this paper is to present literature as a means of establishing and propagating peaceful co-existence in various human societies between male and their female counterparts, who are the major co-tenants on the surface of the earth. We attempt to study gender issue and women representation in the writings of Henri Lopes with a view to creating the much needed awareness on why women's emancipation and empowerment should be an issue of prime concern for all and sundry. Framed on feminism critical literary theory, the paper concludes that human societies in the world over will be geared towards development, advancement and peaceful co-habitation if those crude and cruel cultural practices against women are dropped.

**Keywords:** Culture, protest, women's emancipation, empowerment, literature, development

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In his artistic creations, Henri Lopes has intensively and effectively employed satire, which is achieved through dark humor and witty expressions. The practice of making fun of a human action with the primary aim of correcting the character's excessiveness or weakness is known as satire. "Satire is pleasurable mechanism evolved by the society through which it copes with deviation from accepted codes of behavior"[1]. Hence, satire is an attack on folly or vice demonstrated by an individual, a group of people or a given society with the intention to correct such dirty or unacceptable behavior. From listeners, viewers and, or readers, satire is used to achieve a reaction of contempt.

Fictional entities are "principally those entities originating in and defined by myths, legends, fairy tales, novels, dramas and other works of fiction" [2]. He holds that philosophical interest in fictional entities thus covers a surprisingly wide range of the subject such as ontology and metaphysics, epistemology, logic, philosophy of language and aesthetics.

"A selection of events on the basis of chronological sequence, casually and the value of judgments has always been necessary; that is to say information about reality has been presented to and by the human species in the forms of narrative fiction known to us as History, and the statements of politicians and journalists" [3]. From Rockwell

argument, it can be deduced that everything is fiction on one hand and on the other hand, fiction is reality.

"Works of literary non-fiction may be defined as those that aspire to be factual and true. These two values, however, are not the same thing. Works of fiction are not factual, but they can be true in that they represent a state of affairs that we recognize as potentially, perhaps profoundly, true. On the other hand, work of fact can distort the truth... By itself, a list of facts may be accurate, but such a list lacks the kind of truth that may be found in works of history, or biography or documentary. When a work reflects an aspiration to be both factual and true, it satisfies a necessary condition for literary non-fiction" [4].

As a matter of fact, it is strongly difficult to separate fiction from non-fiction because the two are essentially co-extensive. They have interlocking relationships which cannot be automatically deconstructed. The elements of fiction can be found in non-fiction. Hence, no work of narration; drama, poetry or prose is totally fictional/imaginative or non-fictional/true. "... literature itself has its own purpose and determinants... never wholly autonomous it draws its prime motives from deep within the common culture, the life experience of its producers in their time... but it never speaks for the totality of that culture" [5]. Hence, literature or any work of art generally is not closed, independent or self-sufficient on

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its own. There is a connection between literature and the milieu/environment where it is produced.

Again, “The writer has no means of escape, we want him to embrace his time closely, and it is his lot: it is made for him and he is made for it” [6]. Society means an association of people, which comprises people that have rules of behavior such as beliefs, customs, traditions, conventions, social values and norms by which the society can change and protect the trade unions of a given society.

Society is “a particular community of people who share the same customs, laws, etc” while development stands for “the gradual growth of something so that it becomes more advanced, stronger, etc” [7].

The term gender is used to mean the social condition of being a woman or a man. Gender in this context is not the same as sex, meaning biologically femaleness or maleness. Sex is strongly linked to areas of linguistics inquiry where biological mechanisms are at issue but in most study on language what is relevant is the social differentiation of men and women in particular societies or communities. Broadly, gender linked patterns of language-use arise not because men and women are naturally different, but because of the way that difference is made significant in the organization of social life and social relations. The forms and precise social significance of gender can vary considerably across cultures and through time.

The social fact of gender differentiation is consequential for processes of general interest to social linguistics, such as language variation, change and shift. Hence, gender must be considered in any satisfactory account of those linguistic processes. However, the influence does not run in one direction just as gender affects the workings of certain linguistic process, so language using forms part of the process whereby gender is produced and reproduced as an essential feature of the social landscape.

Culture is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habitats acquired by man as a member of society” [8]. It is also seen as “the totality of people’s way of life, its way of organizing its affairs, of viewing the natural and the man-made world, of meeting universal human needs; its hierarchy of values or criteria that determines its behavior and thought in brief, a people’s view of the world, its social heritage” [9].

If not all, most of the concepts discussed above interplay in the creation of many literary works, so they are seen as essential indices in the presentation of our subject-matter, (Re) connecting with Negritude ideology: Gender issue and image of women in the

writings of Henri Lopes, as a socio-cultural satire, which frowns at negative representations of women. “The general resemblance to reality is what makes art recognizable to the rest of us. But what makes art artful is the fact that the artist imposes his own matter upon these forms in a way that gives them another responsiveness to another inevitability, a new necessity and probability” [10].

Literature has turned out to be “a medium of discussing and explaining contemporary or conventional realities through the exposition of the socio-cultural and political experiences of a given society; since it (literature) is a product of a particular human society. It is far from being ambiguous that literature buys into the expressive function of a given language. And, the understanding of culture and the society, which are potential ingredients on which literature is premised, paves the way for an effective development” [11].

We can broadly classify the evolution and development of African literature into three stages. The first stage is the awareness period (la prise de conscience), which is marked by the Negritude. Léopold Sédar Senghor, Léon Damas and Aimé Césaire use literature for self-consciousness of who they are and for the glorification of Black culture and history as forerunners of the Negritude. The second stage is the colonial era, when African writers become more conscious and committed as protest penchants.

There is a shift from mere identifying themselves as Blacks and celebrating of their tradition, norms and values to criticizing and condemning the imperialism of the west; that is, the colonial lords, who have scrambled and successfully partitioned Africa to suit their taste. Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, Mongo Beti’s *Ville Cruelle* and Ferdinand Oyono’s *Une vie de Boy* are typical examples of literary works which condemn in strong terms the colonial invasion of the Black continent.

The third stage is the post-independence period; that is, 1960 to date. The major pre-occupations of writers during this period include neo-colonialism, poverty, corruption, egoism, unemployment, prostitution, diseases, civil unrest, drug trafficking, child abuse, favoritism, nepotism and women oppression just to mention a few. For example, Wole Soyinka’s *A play of Giants*, Festus Iyayi’s *Violence*, Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood*, Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s *Weep not, child*, Sembène Ousmane’s *Guelwaar*, Jean Pliya’s *La Secrétaire Particulière* and Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Allah n’est pas obligé* stand out as artistic productions of the post-independence African literature.

The Negritude writers, particularly L. S. Senghor and Camara Laye present African women as

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gold, valuable item to be hold. A reading of Léopold Sédar Senghor's "Femme Noir" (African woman) consolidates this fact. Again, the dedication of his work, *L'Enfant Noir (The African Child)* to his mother by Camara Laye is the confirmation that African women are essential participants in the systemic scheme of things in Africa, even in the face of killing traditions against women. However, this recognition given to women suffers a set back during the colonial era; perhaps because the writers were so carried away by the operations of the colonial lords or extremely addicted to the man chauvinism since majority of the pen pushers were men. After years of disconnecting,

Writers such as Mariama Bâ, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Sembène Ousmane, Mongo Beti, Ahmadou Kourouma and Henri Lopes re-connect with the Negritude ideology of glorifying what is Africa/African but with some personal modifications here and there.

### Theoretical Framework

This paper is anchored on Feminism critical literary theory. The word feminism is derived from the Latin word "femina", which implies "pertaining to women", "a synthesis of women's experiences", that is an amalgamation or fusion of women's experiences[12]. The movement wears a militant face and its root is in the West. Feminism has been established as a belief in the right of women to have political, social and economic equality with men. The concept involves various movements, theories and philosophies that are concerned with the issue of gender difference. It advocates equality for women and campaign for women's rights and interests.

Through protest writing, militant but reasonable African creative writers condemn the follies and the vices in their societies. They frown at corruption, bad governance, repressive policies, woman oppression, moral decadence and societal disturbances such as religious intolerant, with a view to making positive changes, which might accelerate human and material developments in Africa and the world at large. The primary aim of these committed African writers is the genuine struggle for cultural and socio-political revolution using literary activities as a platform. The different peoples of the world are made to understand the African world view through writing both now and before independence. Feminism has turned out to be a veritable critical theory, which provides a safe landing ground for writers and theorists who have chosen to protest against women oppression, marginalization and/or any form of maltreatment against womenfolk for socio-cultural, political and economic reasons.

### DISCUSSION

Knowledge is the cornerstone of any creative or artistic invention. It is a topmost, transcendental gift from God, our creator. "When I speak of knowledge, I

mean something intellectual, something which grasps what it perceives through the senses, something which takes a view of things, which sees more than the senses convey; which reasons upon what it sees, and while it sees, which invests it with an idea" [13]. This indeed has been rationalized by our novelist, Henri Lopes in his literary creativity over the years.

To Henri Lopes, as demonstrated in his literary creations, women represent the image of hope for Africa even though, they had since been reduced to just mere domestic items by culture, religion and colonial imperialism among other things. In *Tribaliques* written in 1972, Henri Lopes exposes a kind of sexual scandal in which top government officials are involved. The fact that women are not the major focus in the story; they are however, role-players in boy-girl relationship which dominate the narration. With *La nouvelle romance* (1976), one notes that Henri Lopes has a soft spot for women as he frees them from the traditional and, or religious shackles. He sees women through the lens of practical realism of the society, where they find themselves. The women prove themselves useful and relevant in their society. They are not ordinary objects for domestic duties or home routines. "In the fields, the women of the village had their waist bent over all day long. Digging, clearing, they watered the red soil, from where comes what they needed for cooking, all alone, before preparing it into a meal. . . But it was Adam who had been told to earn his bread through the sweat of his forehead. . . In the village, the men waited, in a shed of low roof, calabashes of palm-wine at their feet" [14].

This dark humor articulates the inversion of role. A disgusting scenario, which portrays men as irresponsible lazy and good for nothing bones. While women honestly struggle it out in the farm all alone for the survival of their family members, men engage in idle talks at drinking spots where they often drink themselves to a point of forgetfulness.

Indeed, it is evident that; "Art and society are necessarily connected. No art has been unaffected by social influences and no art (literature) has failed in turn to influence the society" [15]. The image of women painted in Henri Lopes' *La nouvelle romance* reminds one of the marchers, the women of Thiès, who marched to Dakar to protest against the colonial insensitivity and brutality which the railway company symbolized in the 1940s. The women dared the soldiers, the militiamen, the police and their guns and pressed on with their demands. This is a reconnection of idea and thinking about African women. Camara Laye and L. S. Senghor are exponents in this venture of celebrating womenfolk unlike the majority of Achebe's works which underscore the barbaric representations of women based on cruel traditional perspective. "The African society in particular has, more than any other, relegated the woman to a mere slave and an object of domestic value in the home" [16].

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In 1982, Henri Lopes wrote *Le Pleurer-rire* to crown the womenfolk. Ma Mireille, the heroine really takes over power and wields it to her taste. From being a mistress to Marshal Hannibal-Ideloy Bwakamabe Na Sakkade, the military Head of State, she has a say in the appointment of Ministers as well as other sensitive and important posts. Even though, Ma Mireille can be found wanting morally just like Penda, a whore, who led the marchers in Sembène Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood*; She has proved a point that women are not just mere toys. Ma Mireille's position as Chief of Protocol demonstrates a sort of equilibrium as regards gender role and occupational placement. It is therefore strongly believed that when women are empowered socially, politically and economically, there will be peace at home which will translate to societal development and transformation, which will pave the way for better human living conditions. One of the leading advocates of gender equality in Africa advises both the male and female genders that each party should move sincerely towards the other; accept the others' successes and weaknesses; appreciate each other's qualities, abilities among other things. She writes: "The success of the family is born of a couple's harmony, as the harmony of multiple instruments creates a pleasant symphony...The success of a nation therefore depends inevitably on the family" [17].

Sentiments, imaginations, thoughts, music and style are the basic elements which make-up any good literary work. Literature has the potential to outlast the moral and political issues, which it desires to direct. Just like a perfect glass, the transparent medium of literature shares the beauty of its content. "Literature provides social stimulation as well as curiosity about life. Its psychological roots are the connections it enjoys with life generally. It gives both mental and emotional satisfaction"[18].

*Sur l'autre rive* (1992) discusses Henri Lopes' intention, determination or resolution to acknowledge and to identify with the social position of women in Africa. At this point, Lopes has moved away from mere sympathizing with the black women perhaps as a result of his own background and, or personal experiences. "There can be no doubt that the relationship between literature and society is as close as to be virtually symbiotic" [19].

In a nut-shell, Henri Lopes' women representations have made people to think and possibly to act in an atmosphere of gloom, socio-psychological trauma or cultural pains as well as that of entertainment, excitement or pleasure. Through comic situations, which are laced with striking irony, taboos and secrecy are thrown open for the benefits of all and sundry and the society in general. Lopes has a thorough knowledge of his society, he acknowledges the social challenges, which confront a section of the system and eventually identifies with that seemingly deprived people in the

society. Our novelist has justified that "Only a person who has knowledge of a society from other sources than purely literary ones is able to find out if, and how far, certain social types and their behavior are reproduced in the novel. What is pure fancy, what realistic observation, and what only an expression of the desires of the author must be separated in each case in a subtle manner" [20].

As a feminist, Lopes is interested in changing the old and barbaric social order in order to inject fresh and friendly one. He wants to end the era which portrays women as ornaments; decorative accessories, objects to be moved about, mere companions to be flattered, brainwashed or blindfolded and crowned up with empty promises. He strongly advocates for women empowerment. He believes that women emancipation is an incomplete exercise without an empowerment mechanism. The economic empowerment for example will make women comfortable; free from unlimited reliance on men for all their daily needs and this purchasing capacity will make women more relevant at home and in the society at large. Hence, women should be given a role to play in an effort to build and develop any nation. This has, in fact been demonstrated in the literary works of Lopes.

## CONCLUSION

We have attempted to demonstrate that Henri Lopes discovers the issue of feminism: sexuality, sex life and other facets of women's life as the sources of his literary creations. The jokes and humor, which give his readers the desired excitement, are connected to the world of women and sexuality. However, apart from the aesthetic value, the writings of Henri Lopes validate the consciousness that men and women need to accommodate each other in the collective mandate of moving the society forward. Water washes everything clean but spirit washes water too. "A radical who writes literature and seeks the establishment of a new way of life adopts a method which consists of criticism; designed to x-ray the misery caused by existing laws and institutions as well as constructions which in other words, is the disclosure of a new and more acceptable system" [21]. This statement is well illustrated in those selected works of Lopes, an African writer from Congo (Brazzaville).

It is also obvious from our reading that there is a resumption of a particular discourse or pattern of dialogue, which African literature is known for at its inception but which is quite interrupted as a result of colonial imperialism when canon literature takes the central stage as a means of protest against the colonialism. In sum, we perceive literature as a creative art, a man-invented platform, expressed in any given language either in spoken words or in written form; to reflect on happenings in human societies by capturing human actions and events in a rather modified manner. Literature deals with the expression of man's

imaginings, experiences, feelings, observations, findings and predictions among other things. It could be fictional or non-fictional. Besides being an object of entertainment; it is a medium of communication and information as well as a means of inculcating morality and upholding cultural identity. It heals minds and improves our vocabulary horizon.

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