
**DE-OBJECTIFICATION OF THE WOMAN IN LYNN MBUKO'S
CHAQUE CHOSE EN SON TEMPS AND JEAN PLIYA'S *LA
SECRÉTAIRE PARTICULIÈRE***

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Abstract: *African literature like other literature around the world has proved to be a major tool for the appreciation of the social functions of the Arts. This study, therefore, examines how Jean Pliya and Lynn Mbuko have carried out the social engagement of the African literature in their selected plays; namely, *Chaque chose en son temps* and *La secrétaire particulière* respectively. Mbuko is a female writer while Pliya is a male writer. It is appropriate to use their literary works because the playwrights have inclination towards fighting against social injustice such as objectification of the woman. Their literary compositions have become classics as a model for elucidating the way African literature, particularly play has performed other relevant functions besides its entertainment and aesthetic roles. Textual analysis is adopted as research methodology while feminist theory serves as the theoretical framework. Findings from the study reveal that different factors are responsible for the objectification of the woman. The study, however, concludes that it is possible to deal with the issue of objectification of women in Africa through formal education, training of the girls and adequate empowerment.*

Keywords: *De-objectification, Woman, African literature, Social Functions*

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INTRODUCTION

Literature remains a useful tool in understanding the very realities of a society at a given time in history. The social function of literature is essential to discuss and elucidate socioeconomic and political discourses of the contemporary society. The relationship between society and literary works demonstrates the way literature has constituted itself into a paradigm of analysis and synthesis of social engagement, as well as its effects on a particular society that produces it. Every society around the world has its own unique ways of life called culture since the creation of man. The people and their cultures are not separable even though culture is dynamic. According to (Achebe, 1973, p. 8), it is obvious that African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and beauty, that they had poetry and above all, they had dignity. It is this dignity that many African people all but lost during the colonial period and it is this that they must now regain. (Nazareth, 1972) is of the view that the more complex the forces making for an unsatisfactory ordering of society, the more complex the writer's commitment ought to be. In the same vein, (Melone, 1971, p. 2) has observed that an African creative writer who tries to avoid the big social and political issues of contemporary Africa will end up being completely irrelevant like that absurd man in the proverb who leaves his house burning to pursue a rat fleeing from the flame. Hence, it is important to engage and interrogate the happenings in the society through literature, particularly the productions of committed literary writers. For instance, Feminism is a revolutionary movement. It concerns female affairs in general and it agitates for a better treatment for women folks in various societies with regard to socioeconomic and political struggles. However, the concept of feminism, in real sense, has nothing serious to do with gender; that is, it is primarily a mind set. It is more of a concept that seeks equality and fair treatment for women who are generally overpowered in male dominated societies. There are male and female writers who actually denounce the man to man inhumanity in the treatment of the

woman. In African literary scene, we have male writers like Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Ngugi wa Thiong'O, Wole Soyinka, Ramonu Sanusi, Tunde Fatunde, Sembène Ousmane, Jean Pliya and female writers such as Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Aminata Sow-Fall, Mariama Bâ, Lynn Mbuko, Fatou Keïta, only to mention a few who are committed to the feminist ideology in their literary works. It is note worthy that major themes in feminist writing include; the issue of identity (what does it mean to be a woman?); the issue of challenging the power structure of a society to accommodate women to perform their socioeconomic and political roles in order to reduce male dominance and violence, and the question of giving voice to women as regards national debates on scheme of things.

Analysis and Discussion on De-objectification of the Woman in Lynn Mbuko's *Chaque chose en son temps* and Jean Pliya's *La secrétaire particulière*

In feminist theory, objectification is a major concept. It is perceived to be the treatment of a person, usually a woman or a girl-child, as an object. Feminism denounces the notion that women are mere sex objects; "a thingification of the woman purposely structured to fulfil men's desire." (Udumukwu, 2013; p. 79). According to (Nussbaum, 1995, p. 251), there are seven traits of objectification. However, three of these traits that are directly connected to our discussion in this study shall be referenced. They include:

- a) Instrumentality, this implies the treatment of a person as an instrument or a tool for the objectifier's purpose.
- b) Denial of autonomy, it means the treatment of a person as lacking in autonomy and self-determination through oppressive tendencies.
- c) Inertness, it involves the treatment of a person as lacking in agency and perhaps also in activity. Agency is used here to mean action, the process and ability to do things on one's own; that is, lack of competency, skills and technical know-how. The nature of objectification mentioned by Nussbaum acquires searing outlines when compared to Immanuel Kant's opinion about sexual objectification. Kant's view on the subject of objectification concerns the lowering of a person, a being with humanity to the status of an object. Therefore, "the overall effect of objectification is the denial of dignity and inner worth." (Udumukwu, 2013, p. 79). For example, in Tsitsi Dangaranba's *Nervous Conditions*, the heroine paints the African woman's challenges thus:

Twenty-four stomachs to fill three times a day. Twenty-four bodies to which water had to be fetched from Nyamorira daily. Twenty-four people's laundry to wash as often as possible... Now, this was woman's work (Dangaranba, 1988, p. 133).

The lamentation of Dangaranba sums up the sordid condition in which African women find themselves and this indeed puts in proper perspective the denial of an Africa girl-child her fundamental human rights to access formal education like her male counterpart. This denial could also be tagged as a form of objectification of the African woman that prevents her from socioeconomic and political opportunities, roles and benefits.

Chaque chose en son temps is a story of a young girl, Zénabou, in an African Muslim community. At age thirteen (13) she is married off to a rich El-hadj Oumar who is as old as her father. The El-hadj in question is of course her father's friend and already has three wives. The girl's family believes that training a girl-child in western school is a waste of resources and time. The primary four pupil protested but nobody comes to her aid. The first instance of objectification of the thirteen-year old



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Zénabou is the manner in which she is sent packing from her parent's house unprepared; physically, mentally and emotionally. She is forced to marry someone she has no feelings for. One of the reasons for her family to take that mad and selfish decision is that Zénabou's father is indebted to El-hadj Oumar and the former is unable to settle the financial commitments he has with El-hadj. And, the only “thing” he can lay his hands on in exchange for the money is her thirteen-year old primary four girl-child (*Chaque chose en son temps*, p. 44)

Days, weeks, and months after the shameless child-marriage, Zénabou is heavily pregnant for El-hadj Oumar. She is not loved by her three co-wives who are of her mother's age bracket. The co-wives treat Zénabou with a cold hand because they see her as a husband snatcher and a deadly rival. Zénabou, therefore, faces a lot of rejection, alienation and oppression. On the day of her delivery, the husband is nowhere to be found and the co-wives are not prepared to give her a helping hand in any way. She is, however, taken to a hospital much later by one of the El-hadj's domestic workers in a wheel-barrow (*Chaque chose en son temps*, p. 62). What a pity! A “woman” in labour in a wheel-barrow like a bag of rice or tubers of yam. This is another instance where Zénabou is objectified.

On her arrival at the hospital, Zénabou delivers a still-born as a result of complications that can be traced to her age, protracted labour and other ill-treatments she suffers. As if that was not enough, El-hadj Oumar announces that Zénabou should not return to his house from the hospital since she is unable to give him a new child alive. It is sufficed to say that the man has no empathy for the young girl who carries the pregnancy for nine months but eventually loses it on the day of delivery. This is the third instance when Zénabou is treated like a thing or an object that has no feelings.

Upon the husband's announcement, Zénabou returns to her parents explaining her plight. Unfortunately, with all that she explains she is rejected by her own family. She is told that she does not belong to the family any more because she is married already. She is instructed to go back to her husband's house.

Ahmadou: Qu'est-ce qui se passe ici ? Fatou, avec qui parlais-tu tout à l'heure ?

Fatou: Avec notre fille.

Ahmadou: Laquelle ?

Fatou: Zénabou, bien entendu. Elle vient de quitter El-hadj, son mari.

Ahmadou: Quoi ? Lahillaha illallah !

Zénabou : Bonsoir, Baba ! Je...

Ahmadou: Non..non..non...Je t'interdis d'en dire un mot. Tu dois rentrer chez lui et changer ton comportement.

Zénabou : Mais Baba...

Ahmadou: Ne m'oblige pas à te faire obéir ! Sommes-nous donc responsables de ton sort ? (*Chaque chose en son temps*, p. 76).

Ahmadou: What's going on here? Fatou, who were you talking to earlier?

Fatou: Our daughter.

Ahmadou: Which one?

Fatou: Zénabou, of course. She just left El-hadj, her husband.

Ahmadou: What? Lahillaha illallah!

Zénabou: Good evening, Baba! I...

Ahmadou: No... no... no... I forbid you to say a word about it. You must go back to his house and change your behaviour.

Zénabou: But Baba...

Ahmadou: Don't make me force you to obey! Are we responsible for your fate? **(Translation)**

With the rejection by her husband and parents, Zénabou embarks on a journey of adventure to the city where she has no home and no one in particular. In the city, luck smiles on Zénabou. She meets a woman medical doctor named Mariama who accepts and accommodates her.

Dr. Mariama : Tu as quel age, Zénabou ?

Zénabou : Quatorze ans, Docteur.

Dr. Mariama : Quatorze ans ? Tu es trop jeune pour te marier. Tu n'es pas assez mûre pour avoir un bébé.

Zénabou : On m'a fait épouser un El-hadj aussi vieux que mon père, il y a un an.

Dr. Mariama : Ta vie est très précieuse pour prendre le risque de gâcher ton avenir. Moi, je me suis mariée à l'âge de vingt-deux ans après mes études de médecine. Malgré la tradition, mon père m'a envoyée à l'école ou on nous a imposé une discipline très dure. Me voilà enfin médecin et je travaille dans cet hôpital (*Chaque chose en son temps*, p. 85).

Dr. Mariama: How old are you, Zénabou?

Zénabou: Fourteen, Doctor.

Dr. Mariama: Fourteen? You're too young to get married. You're not mature enough to have a baby.

Zénabou: I was made to marry an El-hadj as old as my father a year ago.

Dr. Mariama: Your life is too precious to risk ruining your future. I got married at the age of twenty-two after graduating from medical school. Despite tradition, my father sent me to school where we were subjected to very harsh discipline. Here I am, finally, a doctor, and I work in this hospital **(Translation)**

Dr. Mariama adopts her as a child, takes a good care of her health challenges and trains her to become a professional nurse. After her formal training, Zénabou is employed at the medical facility where doctor Mariama works (*Chaque chose en son temps*, pp. 94 - 95).

The extract of a letter Zénabou writes to her father reads thus:

Cher Baba,

Je profite de la tranquillité de cette nuit pour t'écrire et t'expliquer des choses que tu n'as pas comprises avant mon départ. Tu n'as pas voulu m'écouter parce que tu étais enragé. Baba, n'écoute



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pas ce qu'on raconte au village. Je me moque du qu'en-dira-t-on. Je ne te dirai rien que la vérité car mieux vaut tard que jamais.

Ce jour-la, il a plu a Allah de me faire rencontrer une dame, une vraie servante de Dieu qui m'a reçue à bras ouverts. Grâce à cette intervention divine, me voici enfin guérie. Dès lors, je demeure avec elle et s'il plaît à Dieu, je resterai chez elle pour longtemps. Ma bienfaitrice, Dr. Mariama, dans sa bonté, m'a envoyée à l'École des infirmières. Après des mois de formation, j'ai le plaisir de t'informer que je travaille aujourd'hui comme infirmière dans le même hôpital que Dr, Mariama (*Chaque chose en son temps*, pp. 93).



Dear Baba,

I'm taking advantage of the peace and quiet of this night to write to you and explain things you didn't understand before I left. You wouldn't listen to me because you were furious. Baba, don't listen to what people are saying in the village. I don't care what people will say. I will tell you nothing but the truth, because better late than never.

That day, it pleased Allah to introduce me to a woman, a true servant of God who welcomed me with open arms. Thanks to this divine intervention, I am finally healed. Since then, I have been living with her, and God willing, I will stay with her for a long time. My destine helper, Dr. Mariama, in her kindness, sent me to the School of Nursing. After months of training, I am pleased to inform you that I now work as a nurse in the same hospital as Dr. Mariama (**Translation**).

Looking at the extract of the letter, Zénabou proves to be an intelligent person and a cultured one at that. She does not insult anybody but speaks out her mind wisely condemning her objectification in the hands of her very own father.

In this play, *Chaque chose en son temps*, Mbuko is able to denounce the objectification of the woman and she is equally bringing it to readers that formal education and training should not be limited to the men and male-children. Women and girls are trainable, they are capable and can contribute meaningfully to the socioeconomic and political development of any given society. Women are not objects or things and should not be treated as such; not only by men like El-hadj Oumar but also by self-centred women such as the three co-wives of Zénabou in her ill-fated marriage. The major thing to strike is equal opportunities in all fronts for both male and female children in societies. In her own words, (Adebayo, 2020, p. 181) points out that lack of equal access to Western education the boy-child had deprived the African girl-child of the early opportunity for social, economic, political, and literary advancement for several decades in the precolonial and colonial times. In general, between the home, the farm, the brook, and the market-place, the woman had no time to go to the white man's school. As a matter of fact, this trend is improving now because we have more girls in schools, colleges and other tertiary institutions competing favourably with their male counterpart.

Jean Pliya's *La secrétaire particulière* is centred on one Mr. Chadas, a high profile civil servant. He is actually a director in a public Agency under the Ministry of Education in an African French speaking country. The man demonstrates a gross misconduct especially with regard to the question of morality. Mr Chadas is famous for abuse of power. He often takes advantage of female employees who work directly under him. He is indeed morally bankrupt. Apart from sexual issues, he is also guilty of corruption (p. 34). He employs young ladies in exchange for sexual escapes without following due process in employing them. For instance, Nathalie, a young girl without the required qualification is employed by Mr Chadas just because the lady is ready to offer him sex. After her engagement as a staff, Mr Chadas makes her his confidential secretary. He also makes several advances on another lady named Virginie but the latter is very intelligent and smart. It is practically difficult for Mr Chadas to brain-wash Virginie because she is a certificated secretary who knows her onion.

Virginie : C'est inutile, Monsieur.

M. Chadas : Ne vous meprenez pas. Un innocent baiser sur la joue. Très chastement, je vous jure.

Virginie : Je refuse. Excusez-moi.

Monsieur Chadas : Allons, venez ! Ne soyez pas pudibonde comme une fille élevée par les bonnes sœurs.

Virginie : Vous ne croyez pas si bien dire. J'ai été éduquée par les sœurs. Elles m'ont donné le respect de moi-même. Au revoir, monsieur (*La secrétaire particulière*, p. 43).

Virginie: It's useless, sir.

Mr. Chadas: Don't get me wrong. An innocent kiss on the cheek. Very chastely, I swear.

Virginie: I refuse. Excuse me.

Mr. Chadas: Come on! Don't be prudish like a girl raised by nuns.

Virginie: You couldn't be more right. I was educated by the nuns. They gave me self-respect. Goodbye, sir. (**Translation**)

During a staff re-evaluation assessment ordered by the government of the country, M. Mr. Chadas does all within his capacity to get his girl friend, Nathalie to scale through the test but she fails while Virginie performs excellently on her own (p. 83).

After Nathalie's woeful performance in the staff re-evaluation exercise, the lady informs her man friend, M. Chadas that she is carrying his baby. Mr. Chadas vehemently rejects the pregnancy asking her to go and abort it because he has three wives and many children to take care of.

Nathalie : Selon les gens, c'est heureux ou honteux. Mais il vaut mieux que tout le monde ne sache pas tôt.

Monsieur Chadas : (*Qui sort la boisson*). Il n'y a rien de caché sous le soleil. Que de mystère ! Parle vite et clairement. J'ai hate de te féliciter.

Nathalie : Dans ce cas, je suis heureuse de t'annoncer que j'attends un enfant.

Monsieur Chadas : Quoi ? Quoi ? Tu attends un enfant ! Quel enfant ? Mais je ne te savais pas mariée. As-tu au moins un fiancé ?

Nathalie : Tu devrais la savoir.

Monsieur Chadas : Me fais-tu des confidences à ce propos ? Assez de plaisanterie ! Qui est le père de cet enfant ?

Nathalie : Tu ne devrais pas me poser cette question : réjouis-toi d'avoir un enfant de plus.

Monsieur Chadas : (*Rit jaune*). Tu veux plaisanter, ma chère. J'ai déjà une quinzaine d'enfants. Avec trois femmes a la fois c'est vite arrivé. Mais cela suffit comme ça. (*Il repose la bouteille de whisky dans l'armoire et vient s'asseoir à son bureau, se lève, se rassied.*) Tu trouves cela drôle peut-être. Tu veux gâter la joie de ma promotion, mais je ne te crois pas. Rien n'assombrira l'éclat de ce beau jour (*La secrétaire particulière*, p. 86 - 87).

Nathalie: Depending on the person, it's either a blessing or a shame. But it's better if everyone doesn't know so early.

Mr. Chadas: (Taking out the drink). There's nothing hidden under the sun. So much mystery! Speak quickly and clearly. I can't wait to congratulate you.

Nathalie: In that case, I'm happy to announce that I'm expecting a child.

Mr. Chadas: What? What? You're expecting a child! What child? But I didn't know you were married. Do you even have a fiancé?

Nathalie: You should know.

Mr. Chadas: Are you confiding in me about this? Enough joking! Who is the father of this child?

Nathalie: You shouldn't ask me that question: be happy to have another child.

Mr. Chadas: (Laughs bitterly). You're joking, my dear. I already have about fifteen children. With three women at once, it happens quickly. But that's enough. (He puts the bottle of whisky back in the cupboard and comes to sit at his desk, gets up, sits down again.) You think it's funny perhaps. You want to spoil the joy of my promotion, but I don't believe you. Nothing will darken the brightness of this beautiful day (**Translation**).

Besides, Nathalie, several ladies and women visit M. Chadas randomly for unofficial purposes during working hours. From all of these, the behaviour, attitude and/or body language of M. Chadas reveals that he has no regard for a girl-child. And, it is evident that he has objectified Nathalie. He sees her as a thing, a non-living being that does not have feelings and cannot respond to stimuli around her. In the same vein, M. Chadas many advances to Virginie demonstrates his over-generalization that every girl does not have a mind of her own and could be treated like an object. However, Virginie proves him wrong. She is posted to the office of the President of the country after proving her worth in the national staff assessment exercise.

Virginie : Soit ! Je n'y trouve pas inconvenient. Nous sommes camarades de bureau et cela parait normal. Il y a autre chose. Je suis affectée à la Présidence de la République.

Jacques : Pour y faire quoi ?

Virginie : Travailler dans le cabinet du Président (*La secrétaire particulière*, p. 83)

Virginie: Fine! I don't mind. We're office mates, and that seems normal. There's something else. I'm assigned to the Office of the President of the Republic.

Jacques: To do what?

Virginie: Work in the President's office (**Translation**)

In the play, *La secrétaire particulière*. The playwright uses the character of Denise, a lady lawyer to establish that girls are also capable of becoming whatever they desired. Hence, girls are not inferior to boys in any way. As a professional lawyer, Denise seeks and gets justice for Nathalie in court.

As in other situations in postcolonial Africa, women continue to be in conditions of disadvantage. The outcome is that women are disparaged, excluded and all forms of anti-female sentiments are always used against them (Udumukwu, 2013, p. 78). Therefore, as writers whose authorial ideology is anchored on the feminist cum Marxist framework, the selected African writers are convinced that the plight of the women, with their objectification has to do with the exclusion of the ordinary people from the scheme of things whether in the community or the country where they find themselves.

CONCLUSION



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From the study, it is obvious that the selected playwrights are keenly out to de-objectify the woman and by extension, all the oppressed and excluded citizens who are deprived of contributing to the affairs of the State and its growth. The study demonstrates that despite different forms of betrayal and clear cases of objectification, the major female characters in the chosen plays overcome their challenges. The protest posture of some feminist writers is often amplified by the anger and the frustration that characterized literature of disillusionment. If the constituted authorities and leaders of various African nations turn a deaf ear to the women emancipation and adequate empowerment socioeconomically, politically and educationally; they, therefore, present themselves as insensitive and grossly irresponsible.

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