

## Juvenile Delinquency: Motherhood to the Rescue

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### Abstract

African mothers, in spite of the many challenges they face in a largely patriarchal society, play vital roles in contributing to the sanity and peace in society. They act as moulders of children's character and check on excesses of youth as they grow up. This paper foregrounded on the motherist theory of African feminism, analyses Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* and Emmanuel Esemefafe's *The Schooldays of Edore* and, from both texts, avers that motherhood makes significant contributions in curbing juvenile delinquency, youth restiveness and other social vices, and therefore, by extension, preserves the peace of society.

### Keywords:

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### **Background to the Study**

Feminism, as practiced in the West, does not take into consideration the cultural sensibilities of the black woman, and has thus been perceived as a tool of cultural imperialism. Mobolanle (1998) observes that because feminism as a movement originated in Europe and America and was first organised by middle-class white women, "it tended to be focused on the concerns of this group of women to the exclusion of other groups". This, consequently, has led to the domestication of feminism by different cultures and classes. There are certain issues central to feminism that underscore the question of cultural relevance. The role of patriarchy in undermining women's sexuality is dominant in radical feminist discourse, for example. Proponents of radical feminism have therefore proposed very overt demonstration of sexuality and sexual freedom with calls for lesbianism and have further advocated a total overrun of patriarchy and patriarchal symbols. It is this failure of feminism to foreground cultural issues and differences that have led to its rejection by many African and other Third World Women. And this has in turn birthed the quest by African women to propose other terms of self-expression.

The African woman is a product of multiple subjugations which all combine to act against her self identity, knowledge and definition (Akorede, 2011). In trying, therefore, to coin terms that capture vividly the condition of the African woman, women writers and scholars have taken due cognizance of the social-cultural milieu in which the African woman finds herself and have consequently sought to enact this peculiarity in their representations. Feminism in Africa has different strands. Feminist writers like Catherine Acholonu hold the view that women should not be seen as objects to decorate the home. They believe that women should be regarded as major contributors to the destiny of the nation. While contributing to nation-building, their roles as mothers and wives at home must not be tampered with. In her article "Buchi Emecheta" (1988), Acholonu asserts that:

Women should no longer be decorative accessories, objects to be flattered or claimed with promises. They should see themselves as nation's primary fundamental root, from which all else grows and blossoms, women must be encouraged to take a keen interest in the destiny of the country.

Achonolu's position shows her as a proponent of the motherist theory that admonishes women to actualise themselves without endangering their homes and family life. This theory extols the value of motherhood without jettisoning the essence of manhood as well as their matrimonial roles in their attempt to empower the female. In her book *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* (1995), Acholonu sees the mother as the "living personification of the earth and all her rich blessings of love, patience, knowledge, strength, abundance, life and spirituality". Her theory also foregrounds a complementarity between the male and the female for the overall good of society.

Another variety of African feminism is womanism, and Modupe Kolawole is a notable proponent of this theory. In her paper "Southern African Women's Autobiography and Self-Recreation" (1998), she asserts that:

Womanism is not a solipsistic theory but one that recognises and responds to the yearnings of many women who have problems with appreciating feminism in spite of the diversities. It increases black women's options of self-conceptualisation.

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie has also coined her nomenclature for the African brand of feminism, which she calls "Stiwanism". Shedding light on her position, she explains, in 'Recreating Ourselves: African Women & Critical Transformation', that:

I have since advocated the word "Stiwanism" instead of feminism, to bypass these concerns and to bypass the combative discourse that ensues whenever one raises the issue of feminism in Africa... 'Stiwa' is my acronym for Social Transformation Including Women in Africa.

Clenora Hudson-Weems in her book *African Womanism* asserts that "the African woman, in realizing and properly assessing herself and her movement, must properly name herself and her movement - Africana womanist and Africana womanism". Her nomenclature is intended as an ideology applicable to all women of African descent. It is grounded in African culture and Africentrism and focuses on the experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women of the African diaspora. In spite of the different theories of feminism in Africa, there is a unifying belief among the different varieties in the principle of gender relations that includes political engagement with man rather than a policy of absolute separatism. Kolawole, (cited in Joseph, 1983) asserts that womanist theorists including Alice Walker, Chikweriye Okonjo-Ogunyemi and Clenora Hudson-Weems "emphasise the centrality of the African family, communal bond, cultural contextualization and the fact that women and men need to jointly fight against gender injustice and non-gender levels of oppression".

Kolawole, in *Womanism and African Consciousness*, argues that womanism does not require compartmentalization and one does not need to identify radical, liberal, psycho-analytic and other categories of womanism. Any African woman who has the consciousness to situate the struggle within African cultural realities by working for a total and robust self-retrieval of the African woman is an African or African womanist. The foregoing theoretical explications provide the backdrop against which this paper narrates Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* and Emmanuel Esemefade's *The Schooldays of Edore*. Although most reviews of *So Long a Letter* have generally described this epistolary novel in terms of the condition of women in African societies, this semi-autobiographical narrative supports reading in the role of the mother in juvenile restraint and checks. Ramatoulaye's husband has abandoned her to marry Binetou, and Ramatoulaye's daughter is upset and advises her mother to leave her father. She says: "Break with him, mother! Send this man away. He has respected neither you nor me. Do what Auntie Aissatou did; break with him. Tell me you'll break with him. I can't see you fighting over a man with a girl my age (39). But her mother does not believe in divorce; in spite of the

betrayal and loneliness, she holds on to the marriage. In her letter, she says, "And to my family's great surprise, unanimously disapproved of by my children, who were under Daba's influence, I chose to remain" (45).

Daba becomes rebellious to her father because of the way he treats her mother and sometimes she would "go to the nightclubs. Dressed simply, she would appear, on her fiancée's arm; she would arrive late on purpose so as to sit in full view of her father. It was a grotesque confrontation: On one side, an ill-sorted couple, on the other two well-matched people" (50). Yet her mother never approves of her behaviour and tries to check on her. And when this same Daba, out of youthful exuberance, is ready to tell her teacher off because of disagreements over grading, her mother restrains her and calms her down because "life is an eternal compromise. What is important is the examination paper" (72). The African mother is both an adviser and a tutor. Ramatoulaye recalls:

I always tell my children; you are students maintained by your parents. Work hard so as to merit their sacrifices. Cultivate yourselves instead of protesting. When you are adults, if your opinions are to carry weight, they must be based on knowledge backed by diplomas. A diploma is not a myth. It is not everything, true. But it crowns knowledge, work. Tomorrow, you will be able to elect to power anyone of your choice, anyone you find suitable. It is your choice, and not ours, that will direct the country (72/73).

The African mother is also a home keeper who must watch over her children and keep them from social vices. Ramatoulaye once stumbles into her daughters Dieynaba, Arame and Yacine smoking in their room and she reports that "from then on, relentlessly, I was on the lookout for its odour.... But it no longer dared to expose itself openly, with jaunty shamelessness" (77). And when her sons Alioune and Malick are knocked down by motorcyclists, she does not punish the cyclist to the disappointment of her sons and their friends: "The little boys of the area disapprove of my reaction. They want the man 'at fault' to be punished; I give them a ticking-off. Ah, children! They cause an accident and, in addition, they want to punish" (79). From a young age, she teaches them fairness and justice.

*The Schooldays of Edore* is a bildungsroman that chronologically follows the physical, mental and academic development of the protagonist Edore. It makes interesting and instructive reading in the role that a mother plays in child development. The first page of the novel gives an insight into what might be expected throughout the narrative. As Edore moves to go out of the room to watch the akara school teacher and her pupils, his mother asks him "Where are you going?" His excitement is checked, and he has to explain where he was going. The narrative says thereafter that he would "quietly walk out of the room, restraining his own excitement". His own restraint, no matter how temporary, is the result of his own mother's check and restraint on him. It is thus a foreshadow of the discipline,

check, correction, and watch that his mother brings to bear on him. The African mother is a nurse, a disciplinarian, a teacher, an instructor, a watchman and a gatekeeper, and these many roles of the African motherhood are vividly enacted in Esemedafe's.

*The Schooldays of Edore.* Edore's mother, though a single parent, takes on the role of a teacher and instructor. On many occasions we find her dishing out rules, advice and instructions to make him a good boy. She teaches him hygiene. When he returns from Akara school and tells his mother that he cleaned his slate using spittle, she instructs him: "never use spittle to clean your slate again" (18). She does not only instruct him on cleanliness, she practically teaches him before he begins school. Although it is his first day at the Akara school, he can read the alphabet and numbers to Grandma who is both surprised and impressed. And when Grandma expresses her surprise, Erhumu says, "I have been teaching him before now". The African mother is the child's first teacher. On his first day at Akara school, as he waits for the teacher to come and take him, his mother admonishes him: "Make sure you listen to your teacher. Is that clear?" (16). On his first day in primary school, she repeats the same advice and says "Make sure you listen attentively to your teacher. Is that clear?" (27) Even in earlier times where there was no formal education, mothers have played the role of first teachers and instructors by telling folktales to their children. Erhumu also teaches Edore acceptable social behaviour and warns him not to be greedy over other people's food. He must be contented with what she provides. So he gets into a state of internal turbulence when he flouts this instruction out of greed. His closest friend in class Okpomo steals from his father and buys food during break time for Edore and himself. And on one of the occasions as they ate, Esemedafe recounts that:

Whenever they were together like this, there was always some battle on his mind between his mother's instruction and his desire. A voice would remind him of her instruction that he should not eat other people's food, telling him that if she knew, she would not take it lightly. Edore himself then would visualise his mother showing her disapproval by starring sternly at him (35).

And truly she eventually gets to know and the following conversation ensues between them:

'Did I not say you should not eat other people's food?'

He was silent; guilt writ large over his face.

'Answer me before I flog you!'

'Yes, you did.'

'Now, have you been obedient or disobedient?' He was silent and afraid.

'Answer me before I flog you now!'

'I have been disobedient,' he said. She took his palm and gave him six strokes of the cane. He cried for a while and later fell asleep

Much of the social vices, truancy, and juvenile delinquency that dog society has been largely due to failure in parental discipline and control. If parents watch over their children and pay sufficient attention to them, the issues of teenage pregnancy, youthful violence and other social misdemeanor would be greatly reduced. This is one of the themes in the novel. When Edore is harassed by unguided pupils in school and has to fight, his mother tells him: "If anyone calls you names, don't fight him; don't even answer him" (60). From this earlier age, she begins to teach him a non-violent response to provocations. She is to express her disapproval again against violent approach to provocations later on in the novel when students of Beme Boys College, Edore's school, rioted.

Although she knows that Edore did not participate in riot, she nevertheless says:

'I know they will close your school for some time and you will pay for everything you destroyed. So better think of what you will do this period to gather money and pay for what you people destroyed. I don't have money to pay for that kind of thing' (137).

Two of the most outstanding illustrations of the importance of motherhood in the novel can be located in the budding relationship between Edore and Princess, and how Okpomo ended up. A seemingly platonic relationship buds between Edore and Princess, a girl he met at Rocky Foundation. The relationship has been on for more than two months without the knowledge of his mother, and Princess has been asking him to visit her in her home. Indeed, he truly wants to, but his problem is "how to wriggle himself out of the hand of his *policemother*" (156). The opportunity comes and he visits her. The bubble bursts on the day she visits him to reciprocate. Princess is embarrassed as Erhumu tells her "I don't entertain this kind of visit" (159). The budding relationship between them is nipped in the bud, and Edore, who protests his mother's treatment of Princess, is eventually heartbroken as their friendship comes to an abrupt end. The Sunday school teacher who hears about the event visits Edore and admonishes him, saying that "his mother was trying to protect him from trouble that some cases of teenage pregnancy began as innocent platonic friendship" (160).

The contrast between Okpomo's background and Edore's own account for the difference in the way they end up. While Edore is raised by a single mother devoted to his proper upbringing, Okpomo is raised by a cruel father who often beats his wife. When Edore asks Okpomo about his mother, Okpomo replies that his mother no longer lives with them. And when Edore further enquires why, Okpomo narrates:

'Every day by day my father used to beat my mother. My mother now pack commot from the house. They now go and beg her. Then she now pack come back. After some time, they now fight again. My mother now curse my father well well. My father now blow her mouth. Blood now come and be rushing. My mother now carry the television to stone ground and the television now break. She now rush outside and carry stone



and scatter all the glass in the windows. My father now beat her more more. Her face now swell up. The people in the compound now separate them. My mother now come and pack commot from the house again. She did not come back again. She now come and marry another man. She now born for the man" (36).

This is the kind of example that Okpomo sees, a home of violence, devoid of love and parental care and attention. There is therefore little wonder that he steals from his father, is eventually caught and is disgraced in the school assembly. He leaves school and ends up in the garage. Several years later, Edore stumbles into Okpomo in the garage and asks him what he was doing there. Okpomo replies "Bobus, na here I for dey hustle" (162). This encounter and the contrast between both boys underscore the importance of the roles of motherhood in proper child upbringing, that the way children eventually end up and their roles in society is greatly determined by the roles mothers play or fail to play in their upbringing.

Both novels are thus good exemplification and enactment of the concept of African motherhood. African mothers face challenges ranging from spousal abandonment and single motherhood and are thus alone to nurture their children, but they believe in the family unit, in contrast to radical feminism of the West. This is why they pay much attention to their children's proper upbringing. In doing this, they not only curb juvenile delinquency, they, by extension, preserve order and sanity in society.

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