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African Literature

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*The Female Prerogative: An Investigation into African Culture and the Sexual Rights of Women*

The female position in other countries has always held my interest. For all of my life, I’ve considered myself to be a feminist and an activist for women’s rights, and when I began to learn about the role of women in Africa, I was immediately taken in by the subject. While reading books like “Monique and the Mango Rains” and “Things Fall Apart,” I became more interested in the way they portrayed women and the lifestyles of women that I found in the book. While the books didn’t make any specific claims about the way that women should be, they did have a common theme of laying out guidelines to what a women should and should not do. However, because women’s rights issues were simply too much to tackle for one paper, I decided to narrow it down to women’s sexual rights specifically. I chose this more specific view of women’s rights because of the interest that I took in “Monique and the Mango Rains.” The idea that some of the women in the novel had no idea what their sexual rights were intrigued me, so I wanted to find out more about that topic, and the more in-depth categories surrounding it. I decided to go to the library on the Western Michigan University campus, and what I found there was interesting.

The first thing I noticed when I went into the library and talked to the reference desk workers was that I really had to hunt for books on the subject. There are books about women’s struggles in many parts of the world, but Africa was surprisingly scarce. The books that I could find were mostly about northern Africa; southern parts of Africa seem to be all together ignored on the women’s rights front. After about an hour of searching, I finally found what I wanted and the texts that I was able to find were informative in ways that were different from what I expected.

I began reading a book called “Human Rights of Women: International Instruments and African Experiences.” In the first chapter of the text, the Human Rights laws of the United Nations are described. The only country on the African continent that does not participate in the United Nations is Western Sahara, and the reason is not lack of desire: the United Nations refuses to recognize them as a territory. The charter of the United Nations proclaims in its preamble the belief in fundamental human rights, and the equal rights between women and men. Men and women, under the protection of the United Nations, are equal in everything, and are entitled to enjoy the same human rights. Many countries do not follow this rule, African countries included. For many years, African governments refused to take on any equal rights amendments for women, and it’s only recently that agreements are being made in order to protect the rights of women’s sexual health, including their rights to choose whether or not to have an abortion. As of November 25, 2005, the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa was adopted by 15 African countries. While this is a great step towards women’s rights in Africa, most of the continents 57 countries are still behind on the women’s rights front.

One of the main problems that is faced when dealing with women’s rights in Africa is the idea of cultural relativism. Cultural relativism is the belief that human rights are not universal, but are to be assigned by cultural context. In upholding this belief, the mistreatment of women is no longer a human rights issue; it is instead a cultural practice, and therefore it should be treated as a tradition. This produces a very significant problem in trying to secure rights for women all across the globe, and it’s a problem that is also faced in Africa. According to Diana J. Fox, this way of thinking is a “false platform for “open-mindedness” and ironically, supports complicity with oppressive practices (43).” This is a statement that I personally agree with. Many people believe that most African women chose to live the way that they do, when really they do not have any choice in the matter at all. By taking on this mindset, it slows down the work that needs to be done with women’s rights in Africa, and gives the government a way to protect their oppressive ways in the name of tradition, even though human rights rule are clearly outlined in the United Nations Human Rights laws.

While these rules are not being followed by the government, there are some smaller groups attempting to secure better rights and equalities for women. For example, I discovered through reading the book “Breathing Life into the African Union Protocol on Women’s Rights in Africa,” that many women in the Dominican Republic of Congo (DRC) are attempting to do away with the practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). FGM is practiced more in Africa than in any other part of the world, and over 90 million African women and girls have been through the process of FGM. Complications from FGM are common, and can be fatal. The highest mortality rates for women are in the countries that practice FGM. If a woman is lucky enough to survive the practice, she could face a slew of complications, including intense pain, wounds to other surrounding organs, recurring infections, and a higher chance of losing any future children she may have due to obstruction during birth because of scarring. Because of these terrible consequences, women in the DRC are attempting to find other ways to initiate girls into woman hood, and have done so already with over 400 young women. They are attempting to spread this practice outside of their own villages so that other girls may be spared from FGM.

It’s interesting to me that although women are largely ignored in the government, there are still organizations of women out there attempting to secure their rights and equality. Although the situation is not directly related, the story about the women in the DRC attempting to stop FGM reminded me of “Monique and the Mango Rains” by Kris Holloway. I thought about all of the women who didn’t have access to or were not aware of the help that they could get when it came to their sexual rights and reproduction options. They gave birth in high risk and unsanitary areas because they didn’t know that they had other options, and then they went back to their everyday lives right after they bore their children. Many of these women had probably been subjected to FGM, and I wonder about how many experienced birthing complications because of it.

After finding this base information in the library, I decided to go online to see if I could find anything there. I ended up finding a lot of information about virginity testing, which immediately reminded me of “Xala” and the virginity testing that went on in the book. El Hadji’s third wife is not a virgin, so they want to kill a chicken in order to bloody the sheets to show the community. This is a common practice in many societies where female virginity is important to a marriage, and Africa is no exception. There are many more virginity tests, however, and many of them can be very harmful.

In South Africa, many women undergo virginity testing at a very young age. Usually, this is a test that involves making sure that a young woman’s hymen is still intact. However, the people in the community do not acknowledge that a hymen can be broken without sexual intercourse, and this can cause very serious social ramifications for the young woman involved in the testing. She will often lose all of her friends, as other young women who are pure will no longer wish to associate themselves with her. One young woman stated that “This is not the time to be sleeping with boys. We have isolated ourselves from those girls who sleep with boys. They are not our friends (Webster.edu).” It can also affect her ability to find a husband later in life, restricting who will want her as a wife. Many girls who undergo virginity testing place colourful dots on their heads afterward to show the community that they are pure, but this can often lead to dangerous consequences. Many people in these cultures believe that having sex with a virgin will cure you of the HIV/AIDS virus, so the young women who display their virginity to the community are often victims of rape and other forms of sexual violence in the hopes that they will be the cure for the disease. In more recent years, young men have also been subject to virginity testing so they can also display their virginity to the community. This practice is used in place of contraception, so two virgins will know that the other is pure, and they couldn’t possibly get HIV/AIDS from that person. However, using this practice in place of contraception has actually increased the number of young men and women who contract the HIV/AIDS virus. Out of the 23 million people infected with the HIV/AIDS virus in Sub-Saharan Africa, 13.1 million of those people are women; that’s 57 percent of everyone with the virus (Kemp 7).

There is also a very different problem that female virgins face in African countries. Because virginity is so widely desired, many of the girls who display their virginity to their communities can become victims of human sex trafficking. Human sex trafficking is a huge problem in all over the world, and it’s a problem almost exclusive to females. While men are also sometimes abducted into human trafficking rings, it is rarely for sexual purposes. The definition on human trafficking is “Recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons for the purpose of exploitation, which includes exploiting the prostitution of others, sexual exploitation, forced labor, slavery or similar practices and the removal of organs (Unodc.org).” When someone is sold into a human trafficking ring, it is almost impossible to get them back because of the exclusivity of the buyers and sellers. Even if they are found, many young girls who have been sold into human trafficking rings have a hard time marrying into their communities because they are no longer virgins. Although none of the books that I’ve read in class had to do specifically with human trafficking, the definition reminded me of the marriage situations that women faced in “Things Fall Apart.” While I don’t believe that arranged marriages are anywhere close to the horrific human trafficking situation, I do believe that arranged marriages take away a woman’s right to choose, and the words “receipt of a person” is what reminded me of “Things Fall Apart.” Okonkwo, the main character in “Things Fall Apart,” received all of his wives because of his status in the community, even though only one of his wives made the decision that she wanted to be married to him.

Throughout the course of my research, I had to remind myself to keep an open mind about the things I was reading, especially when it came to certain cultural aspects that I came across. While I agree with Fox’s statement about the false platform of open-mindedness, I do realize that a lot of the issues I read about take root in hard set African cultural traditions. Many of these traditions violate the basic laws and rights of humanity, but traditions are hard things to change. These values are so deeply rooted in African communities that they almost take on religious properties, and it will always be a challenge to find the balance in preserving traditions and righting the wrongs that have been committed against women. Even though works of fiction, we see these traditions going all the way back to before the missionaries came to Africa. I believe that through compromise these traditions can take on new forms that still preserve the basic rituals, but allow women to feel free from harm and will be needed steps in the liberation of women. The women in the DCR that are attempting to change the ritual of womanhood by replacing FGM are great examples of how traditions can still be followed without any form of harm to women and girls. However, some of these mistreatments have nothing to do with traditions, and are simply things that need to be changed. For example, the pitiful health care that women have in rural African society is something that has no base in the culture, and simply needs to be fixed in order to liberate women and help them gain their rights.

Overall, I learned a lot about African culture pertaining to the sexual rights of women, and it was interesting to see true, real life facts and situations that I could relate back to my reading. Especially while reading about the women’s health issues in Africa; it was so interesting to see how these things related back to “Monique and the Mango Rains.” My research and reading gave me answers to many of the questions that I initially had about the topic of female sexual rights in Africa, and it was exciting to see that many of the books that I read in class were fairly accurate on the topic of women’s rights.

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