

Deliverance of Women from Patriarchy in Aminatta Forna's *Ancestor Stones and The Memory of Love*

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Abstract

Women in society overcome many hurdles and opposition. In Aminatta Forna's *Ancestor Stones* (2006), a polygamous family structure, a patriarchal system which is pursued in African society is clearly pictured. *The Memory of Love* (2010) speaks about the brutal selfish behaviour of men towards women by using them as inanimate object. Women are disrespected and ill-treated in the patriarchal society. Both the works give a brief outline of the domestic problems of African women and how they are treated nothing but like an object or as a servant. Violence and subjugation are very common in patriarchal society and, in the following novels, Forna focuses on the emancipation of African women and how they manage to come out of the male superiority power by achieving their own self-respect. The paper clearly focuses on the gender imbalance in the society, which speaks about discrimination and the humiliation that have shaped women in society. The novel is rich with the beauty of the memories of female characters and moves forward towards the domestic sphere, which distinctly shows more about the polygynous patriarchal culture of Africa, and their day-to-day-life struggles. The study is based on the concept of a feminist perspective which is analysed with the idea of Simone de Beauvoir and deals with gender identity and representation in a male-dominant society.

Keywords: Domestic violence, Family, Patriarchy, Polygamy, and Women.

Women in society are characterised as unpaid slaves. Every woman faces a variety of problems in their day-to-day life. Some of the major dilemmas women overcome in society are demeaning, sexual assault, discrimination, prejudice, and limitations. African countries

are known for their natural resources, traditional rules and practices. One of the common features in their traditional practice is the polygamous family system. In African society, the polygamy system has a major impact on the lives of women. Because in this system men are considered as superior, this leads to a patriarchal society. The problems faced by women in the patriarchal society are clearly exposed by Aminatta Forna in her works *Ancestor Stones* (2006) and *The Memory of Love* (2010).

Feminism is a study that deals with the problems of male dominance over women. Similarly, it deals with gender inequality, persecution, rights for women education etc. The theory probably focuses on the politics based on gender, prominent rights of women and their basic interests. Simone Lucie Ernestine Marie Bertrand de Beauvoir a French existentialist and feminist activist opines in her work *The Second Sex* (1949) that, “One is not born a woman, one becomes one” (283). This clearly shows that, due to the various kinds of circumstances in society, women are suppressed due to gender discrimination which forces her to accept the fact that she is a woman, nothing more than that.

Aminatta Forna’s portrayal of each women character in the select works stimulates the women readers to argue for their own self-identity and speak against gender issues. *Marie Claire* French International monthly magazine opines that, “A fascinating evocation of the experience of African women, and all that has been gained – and lost – with the passing of old traditions”. The paper moves forward and showcases the common complications of women due to the problems in stereotypical society.

Ancestor stones revolves around the memories of four women, Asana, Mariama, Hawa, and Serah, which are shared with the protagonist Abie. The main problems in the lives of four women are the polygynous family system. Problems between co-wives in the patriarchal society in Africa are also clearly pictured. On the other hand, *The Memory of Love* focuses on the life of a mother and daughter named Saffia and Nenebah whose life has been shattered due to the male chauvinism during and after the civil war.

In *Ancestor Stones* the author speaks about the discrimination of women caused by the inequality of their gender. Asana has been victim for discrimination since her childhood because of gender inequality. Though she was the first born in the Kholifa family, Asana was not even given the proper care and attention, even by her mother because of her gender and the family cared only Alusani her twin brother.

This clearly shows societies partiality towards females, and it still exists. Asana tells that, “My brother slid into this world....My mother...she traced his features with her fingers...That was how it all began. This thing between him and me. Because his first deed in this world was to take from me what was mine” (17). The gender discrimination which is seen in the novel can be compared with Mahesh Dattani’s *Tara* (1990). The novel revolves around the injustice caused to Tara by her family by placing her legs on her twin brother Chandan. This shows the gender discrimination which still exists in the society.

Focusing on the life of Tenkam, the sixth wife of Kholifa and the mother of Hawa was deeply tortured and cornered by her remaining ten co-wives. One of the important reasons for her bad situation is because she is the most loved wife of Kholifa. Her husband Kholifa assigned a personal maid for Tenkam to do the household chores and also built and gave a separate house for her. These are not executed for the rest of his wives. Hawa tells that, “He chose her himself....I knew the other wives bad-mouthed behind her, back. They did not care that I heard them. That’s the way our people are” (63).

Patriarchy is considered as one of the dominant systems in society due to male power. In the novel, Fornia makes the point that patriarchy is widening its clan not alone with the help of men, but also due to some dominant, aggressive women who are against their own gender. From the incident of Tenkam we can understand that the first enemy for women is women. Such kind of enmity arises at the situations like jealousy, wrath etc. Tenkam was abused by her co-wives even on her death bed.

In the case of Saffie, the mother of Serah, the tenth wife of Kholifa, was severely affected due to the patriarchal polygynous family system. Saffie, she is the tenth wife and is considered as nothing more than a servant and treated with no respect. Through the life of Saffie Aminatta Fornia expose a cruel patriarchal society. Saffie’s character was abused because she was loved by a man who used to work in construction. Although Saffie didn’t love him, other people around her including the co-wives badmouthed that it was her responsibility to be liked by some other men. The villagers talked that, “Well did they or didn’t they? The tenth wife and the cement man? Guilty cried the elders” (102). So as a punishment Saffie paid extra bride price to stay with her husband Kholifa.

Every incident in the novel exposes how society and the family are seeing women as a sexual object rather than human beings. The injustice made against women in the patriarchal society is very well portrayed by Aminatta Fornia, woman is mentally abused because she was

loved by someone, which is not her fault. In the male-dominant society, it is women who spoken badly even if they are the victim of situations like sexual assault, psychological abuse etc. and most of them never question a women victim who pushed her in such situations.

Asana is the third wife of Osman Iscandri. She was sexually abused and humiliated. He even sexually harassed her during the time of her pregnancy. Asana tells that, “I tried to crawl away from him, naked on my hands and knees. Then was nowhere to go....In the end I allowed him to win...I begged him to stop” (116). Even in such situations, Asana’s family didn’t even support her they asked her to adjust and lead the life with Osman by forgetting the humiliations caused by him. This incident clearly shows the injustice caused not only to Asana but to the whole women community by stereotypical societal norms.

Hawa was humiliated because of her infertility by both of her husbands. At first, Hawa married a butcher and had six children. She was unaware of the tubal ligation treatment on her, during the delivery of her sixth still born child. In Africa, a man’s richness is seen through the number of his wives and children. And Hawa’s life has become miserable in her husband’s place because of her delayed pregnancy, because both of them were unaware of the tubal ligation. Hawa says that, “The months passed and I did not conceive again....I went back to the clinic...she bend her head to read what was written there, ‘Tubal Ligation’” (181).

Hawa was separated from her husband and started to live in her father’s place. There she met Khalil and got married. Hawa tells that, “My lasted three years” (190). Due to Hawa’s infertility issue, she chose Zainab as her co-wife, but everything changed when Zainab got pregnant. The couple moved to another city without informing Hawa. Thus, Hawa was separated from her second husband with the same issue that she could not bear any more children. In the life of Hawa she was considered as an untouchable person because of her infertility, though she had children. The men in the novel considered women as a sexual object and it’s the men who take decisions in the life of women, so women are considered as a child-rearing machine and want to produce more heirs to the family until their husbands want.

Mariama’s hatred towards the male community began from her childhood after witnessing her mother Sakie’s condition. Mariama’s mother Sakie was physically assaulted and mentally disturbed and insulted for practicing her family custom of reading fortune with some mysterious stones belonged to her ancestors. Mary tells that, “Still to this day I can

picture her....They shaved her head. What else to do?"... (52). After all the humiliation, Sakie became insane and died. In the patriarchal society, women don't even have any rights to follow or do things they want. They should follow the rules preached and decided by the men. If they disobey the rules, the women are utterly humiliated till their death.

Serah, the daughter of a tenth wife, hates the polygynous family and marries Ambrose; in the beginning of their marital life he also hates such unwanted old rules and system. But her life becomes miserable after knowing about her husband's extra-marital affair with her friend Hannah. After Serah's warning against such illegal relationship, Ambrose decided to marry Hannah and decided to begin a polygynous family, which Serah opposed and broke the marriage with Ambrose.

The Memory of Love revolves around the memories of Elias Cole who shattered the life of the woman whom he loved. Saffia, the wife of Elias Cole's colleague Julius, got married to Elias after Julius death. Elias betrayed Julius, a protestant, during the collision of the civil war in Sierra Leone, to marry his beautiful wife. But after the marriage, Elias understood that Saffia never loved him and Elias even understood that his infatuation with Saffia had turned into a wrath, Elias says that, "There came time when I became jealous of Saffia, what she kept inside and would not share. My jealousy – frustrated and unappeased-transformed into anger, a low, unworthy rage" (291). Finally he started to have an extra-marital affair with his former lover, Vanessa. Elias Cole character describes that women are only used for physical pleasure.

The male characters presented in both the novels never accept their mistakes. Instead, they just highlighted the mistakes and blame the women for pushing them into such situations. For example, Elias Cole never felt guilty of having an illicit affair with Vanessa while Saffia was alive. The reason he believes is that Saffia is still in love with her dead husband. This shows, according to men's thought process, women should suppress their feelings, emotions and thoughts.

All the four women in the novel *Ancestor Stones* decide to lead a respectful life. After being separated from Osman, Asana decided to achieve something in her life without even the help of men, to lead a respectful life finally after her hard work for years Asana owned the biggest clothing shop in the town, as with respect everyone addressed her as 'Mambore'. Mariama is a teacher and never wants to get married. According to her, no one should control

her life. Though Hawa was abandoned by both of her husbands she didn't lose her hope in life. As a single mother she gave the best life to her three sons.

Ambrose and her friend Hannah's betrayal shattered Serah, after leaving him the author has shown a deepest character development on her who had become bold enough to stand against the soldiers. There is an incident where Serah is the head of the polling station and conducts the election successfully and handed the ballot boxes to the counting officer without the knowledge of soldiers who were waiting to burn the voting papers. She cleverly tackled the situation without any tension with the help of other women.

The male dominant facts seen in the novel *Ancestor Stones* can be compared with Sarita the protagonist of *The Dark Holds No Terrors* (1990), by Shashi Deshpande. Sarita suffered due to gender inequality in her mother's place. After marriage, her husband Manohar used to humiliate her for being more talented than him. Finally, Sarita took a step ahead to achieve her independence and moved out of her husband's house, this particular novel *The Dark Holds No Terrors* is also filled with the patriarchal power in the society which ends with the message of self-respect and empowerment is basic needs of women and it's their duty to achieve it.

Aminatta Forna's *The Memory Love*, Elias Cole accepted his mistake of betraying his wife when he saw his own daughter in the same situation. Mamakay the only daughter of Saffia and Cole learns about her father's affair at her young age and leaves the home after Saffia's death. She even joined in the protest against her father's will by discontinuing her studies. The characters of both Saffia and Mamakay show a drastic difference. Saffia was gentle and soft she accepted drastic situations and never voiced out. But her daughter Mamakay voiced out for her country's better future and also accepted to lead a life with her unborn child.

The emancipation of women in both of the works describes their rise from their typical stereotypical world hits really hard and becomes a motivation for women who are still struggling with accepting the patriarchal society. While seeing the lives of the mothers: Namina, Sakie, Saffie, Tenkam and Saffia, they accept their disrespectful, humiliating life because they are uneducated and unemployed. They do not have any shelter if they leave their husband. But their daughters were never like their mothers. They boldly stepped out of their marriage and proved to society that a woman can achieve their own identity without the help of man's power.

The paper focuses on the problems of domestic issues, marital rape, gender equality, humiliation, and abasement which have come under the concept of second wave of feminism. Women in the novel tackled all these problems in the patriarchal society and achieved their respect. The women in the novels believed in themselves and understood that it is their duty to achieve their own stand in the society.

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