

Presenting at 'Africa-Asia: A New Axis of Knowledge'



It was with great pleasure that the International Institute for Asian Studies (IIAS) and the International Convention of Asia Scholars (ICAS) could once again serve as the principal facilitators of the Second Edition of the International Conference 'Africa-Asia: A New Axis of Knowledge' in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, 20-22 September 2018. The honour of being associated with this major effort alongside the Association for Asian Studies in Africa (A-ASIA) and the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM), stems from a continuing commitment to collaboration beyond boundaries of any kind, a collaboration that must include academic, cultural, public and social actors from the two most populated and dynamic 'southern' regions (or continents) of the world, Africa and Asia.



The conference was an extraordinary event, enjoyed by so many, both new and familiar participants, and supported by first-time and long-standing partners. The cooperation provided by our local hosts at UDSM was truly exceptional, and the conference would not have been quite so gratifying, let alone possible, without them.

More information about the previous two conferences, including programmes, speakers, the platform, organisers, etc. can be found on the website <https://africasia.org>.

The previous issue of The Newsletter included a small selection of commentaries sent to us by attendees, who like us agreed that the meeting in Tanzania was a uniquely

stimulating and thought-provoking collaborative event. This issue presents you with an assortment of papers presented at the conference, just to give you a glimpse of the great range of topics discussed. We hope you will join us and present your research at the third 'Africa-Asia conference'. Dates and location will be announced soon!

Patriarchy and the representation of women in Africa and Asia

Catherine Olutoyin Williams

An increase in awareness for women's liberation, and changes in practices concerning family relations (domestic violence), education, and media advocacy with respect to the representation of women, have as yet failed to yield the desired results in Africa and Asia, mainly because of the resistance to change that is firmly entrenched in patriarchal ideologies handed down through socialization as an undocumented memory of the people. This reality for the vast majority of women in Africa and Asia was described by Lynne as "the timeless truth of women's lives".¹

Socialist feminists argue that oppression of women is rooted in class structure, unpaid labour, sex and reproduction.² African women have always been noted for their salient activities such as procreation, child care and collective preparation of the young ones for communal co-existence. Oppong identified seven roles played by women in Asia: parental, occupational, conjugal, domestic, kin, community and individual.³ Yet, specific economic and cultural issues leave most women at the mercy of men. These women are in many cases confined to the four walls of the family home, in which their activities are restricted to procreation and household chores. Within African and Asian societies, being married is a sign of respectability, whilst single mothers, unmarried and divorced women are stigmatized. Many women struggle to attain economic independence, and socio-cultural and political encumbrances steeped in patriarchy put women in a position of bondage. In a patriarchy, authority is exercised by the male head of the family and inheritance occurs through the male children. Patriarchies define the constructs of masculinity and femininity, and as a practice they foster the political differences between freedom and subjugation.

This paper, presented at the second 'Africa-Asia' conference (Dar es Salaam, 2018), explores issues raised in the memoir by Mukhtar Mai, *In The Name of Honour*, in the



Portrait of Buchi Emecheta. Artwork in batik for "Head Above Water", by Marina Elphick.

biography *Woman at Point Zero* by Nawal el Saadawi, and in Emecheta's autobiographical *Head Above Water*.⁴ It looks at how women are represented and treated, and at the values that are placed on the girl child. The discourse is foregrounded in Homi Bhabha's post-colonial theory and post modernism within a patriarchal and socio-cultural context.

Female subordination in Africa takes intricate forms grounded in patriarchal tradition and culture. Though education is accessible to women in Nigeria, culture still subordinates women. After her father's death, Emecheta's brother sold their mother to a relative, so he could afford a 'khato siliki' head scarf for his coming-of-age dance festival. Emecheta left her violent husband when she was just twenty-two even though she had 5 young children in tow. She successfully moved on and eventually obtained an Honours Degree in Sociology from the University of London, yet even so continued to wish that her irresponsible husband had fulfilled his societal role as the head of the family. At one time, to secure accommodation

for herself and her children, she had to lie about her marital status because no landlord would readily rent an apartment to a single mother.

Within the contexts of both *Woman at Point Zero* and *In The Name of Honour* the future of the girl child is highly compromised as her existence relies on the benevolence or malevolence of the males who cross her path. These females' wellbeing, essence and happiness are entirely dependent on the mood and disposition of their male companions, whether father, brother, uncle or husband. The men in *Woman at Point Zero* are gainfully employed, while the women are mainly confined to the home. Firdaus, the protagonist of *Woman at Point Zero* was married without her own consent to a man old enough to be her father, while Mai in *In the Name of Honour* was sacrificed in an act of honour revenge, for a crime allegedly committed by Mai's 11-year-old brother against the local Mastoi Baloch clan. She was dragged into a shed, gang raped by four 'upper class' Mastoi males, while her relatively lower class and certainly less powerful family members helplessly awaited her release. Patriarchy, the driving force behind Mai's Pakistani village's traditions and class divisions that guide daily activities led Mukhtar Mai to conclude in her memoir, that "A woman is nothing more than an object of exchange from birth to marriage, according to custom she has no rights" [p.28]. In despair, and as tradition would expect from her to restore her family's honour, Mukhtar was ready to commit suicide, but her mother persuaded her not to. She rose to the challenge and sought redress in the court of law. With the assistance of local and international activists and journalists she eventually received monetary compensation, awards and recognition, but her rapists have remained unpunished by law.

In most communities in Africa and Asia, there exists a great preference for male children. Saha & Saha illustrate how women are not accepted and do not receive proper regard from their husband's families until they give birth to a male child.⁵ Buttressing this fact, Firdaus (in *Woman at Point Zero*) commented that when a male child dies, the father will beat the mother, eat his supper and go to bed, whilst the death of a female child attracts no violence [p.18]. Firdaus was beaten for the death of a male child, as she had failed to provide the expected high level of health care and nurturing for the male child. Supporting Firdaus' account of going hungry alongside her mother, whilst her father ate in

times of food shortage, Cain demonstrates how females in South Asia are discriminated against with regard to the allocation of food and healthcare within the family.⁶

Violence as a tool of control in patriarchal societies is evident in the three texts. Firdaus was battered by her husband, forced into prostitution, and was continuously on the move in her attempts to escape violence and abuse. Eventually she committed murder in self-defence, and was hanged for her crime. In this biography, Saadawi depicts men as unscrupulous and hypocritical bigots who sexually exploit defenceless women. The men in Mukhtar Mai's autobiography, *In The Name of Honour*, have little or no regard for women; they are exposed to the whole world as predators who use rape as a means of punishment while hiding under the protective arm of patriarchy and religion. Emecheta presents her male characters as simple-minded opportunists who take advantage of the patriarchal society to exploit, cheat, oppress and dominate their women.

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Notes

- Lynne, S. 1987. *Is the Future Female? Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism*. London: Virago.
- See for example, Haraway, D. 1991. *Simians Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*. New York: Routledge.
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