

# THE IMAGE OF WOMEN IN CYPRIAN EKWENSI'S *PEOPLE OF THE CITY*

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## Abstract

The fictional world of Cyprian Ekwensi is perhaps intentionally concentrated in the urban cities, where characters such as politicians, taxi drivers, show biz experts, traders, civil servants interact in an environment mostly portrayed as dirty, disorderly, planless, chaotic, highly populated and noisy. In this sophisticated and artificial world, women and young girls who often migrate from the rural villages (infested with poverty and disease) to the metropolitan towns, play unenviable roles as rogues, thieves, cheats, hangers on, criminals, security agents and social misfits. In impoverishment, they will fall victims to men, who use and abuse them sexually, impregnate them, infect them, love them, deceive them and abandon them in misery, disease and death.

## Introduction

Cyprian Ekwensi, a popular Nigerian fictional writer, sets most of his novels in the urban cities. Because cities are almost always "infested" by girls and mature women, most of his novels centre around women, urban life, night life and their moral antecedents and implications. Ekwensi is passionately interested in the female characters, their migration from rural villages to urban cities and their activities, roles, adjustments, maladjustments and the final effects of social life on the female characters.

Some of the financial works of Wkwensi that x-ray the female characters include: *When Love Whispers* (1948), *Jagiiia Nana* (1961), *Iska* (1960), *Jagua Nairn's Daughter*. In these novels, Ekwensi is interested in the female characters, their movement from rural to urban societies and the effects of the society on these often innocent and unsuspecting young women.

According to Darlhone (1982), "Ekwensi is extremely interested in handing FEMALE Characters and can treat them with deep sensitivity". In the long essay that follows, the novel, *The People of the City* (1954) is selected for a detailed study of Cyprian Ekwensi's presentation, characterization, attitude and impression with respect to female characters in the chosen novel. The approach is to study the novel thoroughly and by extracting what the novelist says about his female characters what other characters say about female characters and what female characters say about themselves, we arrive at the totality of the way and manner female characters are perceived, presented and appreciated by the writer.

In a nutshell, the IMAGE OF WOMEN in this essay consists of what the female characters in the novel think and do, what the writer thinks and says about them and what other characters think and say about the female characters in the novel.

From page 1 of the novel; Ekwensi tells us that "*Calypso Music* delighted the city women a great deal and that wives would, on hearing Sango's music, drop their knitting or sewing and wriggle their hips' shoulders, and breasts, sighing with nostalgia of musty nights years ago, when lovers eyes were warm on their faces". Similarly, girls who had not hooked any yet, would twist their waists alluringly before admiring eyes of men, templing, tantalizing and promising much but giving little, basking in the vanity of being desired.

From the above picture of women by the novelist, it is clear that women seem to regret old age when they are wives and can do nothing again because of the bounds of marriage. Women also love music. They also tempt men by using parts of their body to attract men. They thrive in vanity and empty promises.

That is why on page 4, the main character in the novel Sango, was sternly warned by his mother to avoid women in the city. In spite of the mother's warning, on P.4P, a girl comes to Sango's house early in the morning, "wearing a loose-revealing trifle materials that cling to her body curves so intimately that the nipples of her breasts showed through". In the above, women as a tempting being through indecent and provocative dressing is clearly shown. That is why on P. 5, Amusa Sango tells Aina his girl-friend, "Aina, you are a man-killer". To be a man-killer refers to the destructive effects

of Aina's indecent dressing that bares all her hidden and private parts to men as a bait to catch them.

From Page. 5, it is shown that women always ask for love. Aina asks Amusa Sango:

"Will you always love me as you loved me last night, no matter what happened, will you always love me"? To Sango, last night was over and men make promise yesterday because they selfishly wanted something from a girl.

Again on P. 5, we are told that car head-lamps shed their intruding rays on girls who hovered around the glitter like moths. This class of women is presented as prostitutes or commercial sex workers who sell their bodies to any willing man, no matter his tribe, religion, age, educational attainment or social status.

Again, from Page 8-9 IT Aina, Sango's girl friend, is presented as a very beautiful woman but also a rogue. We are told that she stole a wrapper from a shop and was beaten, disgraced and put naked by tearing all her dresses leaving with her only pants and bra.

On Page 13, Sango sees Aina's mother, an eighty year old woman and believed her to be a witch. People hardly talk of wizards but witches. In this novel, women are seen as witches and bringers of evil and misfortune.

Again, from Pp. 14-15, Aina pleads guilty in the court in the case in which she is accused of stealing a wrapper. This confirms the accusation that she stole the wrapper. To this end, she is jailed for three months.

On Page 19 following, Ekwvncsi presents women as social victims. They are pursued and hunted by men for sex, sacrifice and other exploitative purposes. Ekwvncsi writes on P 19:

She was lying on the floor, dead. They had killed her and her child too.  
The woman was lured to the Magamu Hush, raped, clubbed to death.  
And her child strangled by the drunkards who borrowed her  
grainmaphone but wouldn't want her to get it back.

Here, women are presented as helpless victims of social wickedness.

On P. 23, the novelist paints women as people who mature earlier and know the wiles of life such as body beautification, sex, traveling, lying, cheating, and deceiving. He describes a young girl, Dupe Martins as "someone who is in the dangerous age, otherwise called the age of madness. She was in her mid teens". She is described as a city girl who was born in the city, had her primary education and perhaps the first four years in the secondary school, yet she knew all about Western sophistication -making-up. Jazz, Cinema, Pornography and so on. Ekwvncsi describes her as:

A kind of girl who would walk her shoes thin in the air-conditioned atmosphere of department stores, to hang about all day in the foyer of hotels with not a penny in her hand-bag (P. 23).

On Page 26, the writer describes a situation where young girls leave their buckets at public pumps and steal away under the trees where the glow of cigarette-ends told of a waiting lover and the headlamp of a passing car would suddenly reveal embracing couples. So women indulge much earlier than men in sexual exploits and immoral activities. To accentuate this view, on P. 29, the author presents women as people who cherish greatly the wearing of transparent dresses that expose their vital parts to allure and attract men to themselves. This picture of women is persistent in the novel.

On P. 30, women are portrayed as apple of discord or the centre of controversy among the menfolk. When Sango Amusa wanted to show interest in Beatrice, an Europeanized African lady, Bayo tells him:

I don't know what she does, she is new: they say her mother is here, but I don't know. She is hot stuff. Keep clear. The Europeans are crazy about her. I hear tales of disputes settled out of court on her behalf. If you are looking for trouble, well... remember Aina.

Aina, it can be recalled is a girl in Sango's life, who is a sex maniac, a rogue and an indecent dresser. As one reads further, it becomes evidently clear that Beatrice represents the of woman

who can never be satisfied by one man. In her shameless boldness, she approaches Sango first in a party and expresses her love and desire for him. Meanwhile, she is in the party with her white "husband". As they open up conversation, Beatrice tells Sango"

I enjoy your music I have always wanted to see you more closely...My husband has just returned from England, and is very busy. I wish he would bring me here so more I like high life...he is a nice fellow; he loves me very much. But lots of men also love me and I am going to leave Grunnings...(The husband) (P. 31).

She is not satisfied with her husband's love and she wants other men in her life. This is why men fight over her. Beatrice wants total freedom and says so in these lines:

When I live on my own I will be happy, I came here to live and enjoy life for a short while, I enjoyed my life, went to big functions, night clubs...I always wanted to be free (I. 32).

In this novel, Ekwensi presents women as people who are always in need of freedom to enable them enjoy life. That is why in the city single girls rent rooms and live alone. This enables them to receive and change men like wrapper.

On Page 34, Sango's neighbour, Rose is presented as a whore. According to Sango, 'it was the first time he had spoken to the prostitute'. Because Sango came late from a night part and met his flat in total darkness, following his landlord's disconnection of his line, Rose use the opportunity to come close to Sango. According to Ekwensi:

Rose came into Sango's room, giggling. She was enjoying the situation immediately. Sango thanked her for her lantern and as soon as she left, he and his friend plunged into darkness.

The above paints a situation where a prostitute hires a flat and lives in the same compound with other people. Rose, Sango's neighbour wanted to use Sango's predicament to trap him into her sexual net but he resisted her.

On P. 37, the novelist presents a fourteen year old girl, a hawker, who hawks sex also. One morning, she visits Sango with the hope of seducing him. According to Ekwensi:

She was not more than fourteen, but her breasts were taut and large with ripeness. She had sleepy eyes, a husky voice and soft lips... Sango looked up and down the corridor and saw that no one was in sight. She pushed her breasts against the door and made eyes at him (I. 38).

This is a great temptation for Sango. Although he tried to touch her breasts and thighs but he resisted this and tells her; "No no, girl, go to bed. All girls of your age are lying in their mother's beds. He then shut the door against her. Yet she refuses to go away. Rather, she brushes her hands against the door and says; "Doctor, I want to tell you something..."

Here, the image of a woman is that of a tempter, a satan that wants to deceive and devour a man as was witnessed in the garden of Eden.

On P. 43, women are presented as agents of the police and other law enforcement groups. Aina's mother, an eighty years old woman helps the police CID men to get hold of some drug peddlers and impostors. She gives Bayo and his fake doctor marked money and in the process lures them to the police. This is usually a common and simple job for women in real life situation.

On P. 49, the novelist shows Lajide's eight wives who pretentiously tolerate polygamy, yet inside them they hate one another and are rivals. The visit of Beatrice to Lajide's house arouses his wives' jealousy and suspicion. Ekwensi captures the situation this way:

As she (Lajide) sat down, one of his wives, Alikatu came into the rooms, carrying a large bowl of some aromatic fluid. She set it down and eyed Beatrice with all the venom of a possible rival...(P. 49).

On the same Page, 49 women are portrayed as powerful, domineering and influential. For instance, because Beatrice comes to Lajide's house to ask him for an accommodation, the man virtually lost sense of logic and reasoning because of his passion for her and his inordinate desire to have her as a mistress, his eight wives not withstanding. Having seen his passion and desire for her body, she mockingly asks him;

You like me, what of your wives? I don't want any trouble.

At this point, Beatrice is living with a Lebanese, Grunnings, for whom she had had three children, but she visits Lajide and also meets Zamil. She also thinks so much about Amusa Sango. Let us listen to the author:

Beatrice thought the house was better than the one she shared with Grunnings on Rokiya-lil. But she thought she might as well be Zamil's mistress. Zamil got into the car and held the door open for Beatrice to conic in and sit beside him. And there she sat between two men, each trying to please her, while her mind dwelt on Amusa Sango and his plight (P. 51).

The picture being painted above is that the modern African woman in the city is not satisfied with one man. She keeps and enjoys different men at the same time.

Again, from Amusa Sango, we learnt that if women are in need of accommodation, especially the single and attractive ones, men are always willing to oblige them. The men in return want the women as mistresses or girl-friends. If however a man needs accommodation, he is made to pay six months or one-year advance. This happened with Beatrice the first whom men wanted to offer shelter at no cost while Sango has been looking for a house for many months without success.

On Page 53, Amusa Sango describes a girl with him as a pick-up. That is a casual friend who could be discarded, picked or dropped anytime anywhere and anyhow. That is how some city men see and treat modern city girls in the novel. Similarly on page, 53, Beatrice makes it bold what attracts modern women to the city. According to Amusa Sango, Beatrice disclosed to him what brought her to the city. He says of Beatrice:

Beatrice came from the Eastern Greens, from Ihe coal city. She made no secret of what brought her to the city; high life, cars, servants, high-class foods, decent clothes, luxurious living... Since she could not obtain the high-life herself, she must obtain it by attachment to someone who could provide it (P. 53).

On Page 60, Amusa's mother warns in him not to associate with or marry the city women whom she describes as "gold-digging women of the city. By this Amusa's mother sees the city women as social parasites and exploiters of men. That is why she grooms a local Elna for Amusa as a wife.

Qa^a&eC^Bayo,, Amusa's friend, tells him about" a woman who wants his hand in marriage. He refuses the dangerous attractive offer and reports to Amusa thus:

Only the other day, a lady bought me a new suit and gave me ten pounds on top. She is about forty-five, very wealthy hut no child. She has married thrice but no children. She wanted me to fulfill her desire but I refused (Pp. 66-67).

From the above picture, we see the modern African women in the city as suffering from barrenness, a divorcee and a dangerous trap to men to help her fulfil her feminine desires.

On Page 67, Ekwensi presents women as being too emotional and passionate in their relationship, especially with men. For instance, Bayo tells Sango about her Lebanese girl-friend Suad and the level of their friend relationship.

Do you know, Sango, what frightens me is that the girl cannot sit down or think or even cat or sell her brother's cloth in the shop, she is thinking of

Bayo. She is always at the window. I pass there one hundred times in one day and it is still not enough for her... Do you think she is mad?

The point there is that women are presented as those who love with passion and hate with passion.

Again on page 68, Aina, a former girl-friend to Sango tells him,

I came to the city because of glamorous surroundings, the taxis, the quick drinks, the fashionable hotels, the wearing of the aso-ebi, to have men who wore white collars to their jobs as lovers, men who could spend... It is money I want now. Amusa, I 'm coming to visit you, get some money ready for me (Pp. 68-69).

The above quotation is an eloquent testimony that the African woman in the city is fashion conscious, enjoyment oriented, money mad, and always desirous of men. The city women shamelessly suggest marriage to men. For instance, Aina tells Sango, "Many me now Sango. Don't you know I love you very much? Sango, I will die for you".

In addition, the city woman is presented as being too demanding. Aina tells Amusa Sango:

I want new clothes: the native Accra dress ...really special. The clothes I had before I went to jail are of no use to me now. I want to be wearing glamour specs, not for my eyes. My eyes are okay, -for fancy. I want a gold watch too. (P. 70).

In the above, we see Aina as being fashion conscious, materialistic and worldly. It is the awareness of the material tendencies of the city woman that made Zamil, the white business man to insist on searching Aina before she was allowed to leave his supermarket. Ekwensi captures the ugly scene very well, when he writes on P. 72, "it was an embarrassing moment for her when she was led into a private room and stripped to her undergarments. In the folds of her garments or dress Suad Zamil's sister, found the five pounds Sango had given her" (P. 72).

And because nothing was found on her after the search, she was proud and wished she could overcome once and for all that itch to lift things (P. 73).

On page 77, Ekwensi tells us that "Beatrice had become the thorn in Lajide's flesh, the one woman his vanity and money could not conquer in a city, where woman yielded to money and influence. From this point, Ekwensi is saying that in spite of all odds, there are still few girls who still respect their background and parental upbringing. According to the writer, "Beatrice came from a poor but proud family where values still mattered" (P. 77). So not every woman in the city is corrupt, rotten and hopeless.

On page 80, it is portrayed clearly that women are necessary evils, Chief Lajide says that women are trouble but they help to soften life because life is too hard. He however went ahead to opine that they soften life if a man has only one woman but people like him that have eight (8) wives, life is hell (P. 80).

In another portrayal of women, Ekwensi, tells us on P. 92 about women who dress seductively and indecently, exposing their private parts such as firm breasts, laps and waists to attract men. In this case, it is one of Lajide's wives who dresses seductively in order to be admired more by her husband. We are told that women in their competitive bid for their friend's or husband's love, go to the extent of putting "love potion" in the man's food to get him whole and entire (P. 92).

On page 94, we are told that black women easily fall prey to white Merchants like Zamil, the Lebanese businessman. He gets the young girls, uses them, satisfies his sexual urge and curiosity and dumps them mercilessly.

Ekwensi tells us about Zamil and our young ladies, on (Page 94):

Just think of Zamil. How many girls does he marry in a year? He pays the girls good money if they are virgins, then he throws them away after his curiosity has been satisfied. What future have Sybil and Beatrice? What decent man will ever take them into their own homes and keep them?

It is to be noted that Sybil and Beatrice were among the numerous girls whom Zamil had used and dumped. He indeed over-used them, that is why it is going to be disastrous for any man to take them home as wives.

On page 97, Ekwensi portrays women as agents of death and the brain behind the death of many men. Woman cause men's death directly and indirectly. Because of the emotional love between Bayo and Suad, Zamil's sister, Bayo takes a great risk by visiting Suad in the night. While Bayo and Suad are entangled in love expression, Zamil, out of anger and cultural colour bias and jealousy shoots Bayo and his sister to death. And that is how Bayo lost his life because of a woman. Ekwensi captures the ugly scene in this way;

Bayo, embrace me, sweetheart before I die... hands off; Zamil had emerged from the bushes, in his hand a dark object rested. ...Two cracks, split the air. Bayo groaned, clutching his stomach. This was the final moment. The life was ebbing fast from him. Suad clung to him and lifeless and tangled together both of them crashed to earth. The madness of Zamil had vanished with the slaughter of the two lovers who were too happy to know or care. (P. 97).

Here, Ekwensi, captures vividly the similar tragic scene in William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, where two genuine lovers died for the sake of each other's love. Here, the author seems to be saying that some women are capable of showing true love by even paying the supreme price.

On page 101, the author gives the impression that it is difficult to understand women fully. For instance, Kofi tells Sango in confidence about Beatrice the first; "I have never understood her and never shall". It is also on this page 101. That the jealousy of women is openly portrayed. When Beatrice visited Lajide, his seven wives came out and sat in the sitting room to observe Beatrice and perhaps know her purpose for coming to see their husband. That was why Lajide angrily commanded them interrogatively, "what are you all doing here? Get out and let me speak to my visitor". Beatrice the first is the visitor and the intruder.

On page 103, the views of Lajide are used to portray the level of jealousy, wickedness and heartlessness of women in fighting for men. Because Lajide's seven wives see Beatrice as an intruder and a possible rival, they collectively dealt with her in the manner presented below:

Beatrice was waiting for her taxi under the almond tree when the seven women made straight for her... They beat her with fists, tore her clothes, scratched her skin till the paint and powder ran with blood and sweat. Beatrice screamed for help, but no help came. Kekere arrived, carrying a bowl... while other wives held down, Kekere rubbed the pepper into her nostrils, mouth, and on an impulse into her most private parts only then did they leave her to writhe and wriggle in shame and humiliation, deprived of every vestige of attractiveness that had let their Lord and master astray from them. She was totally disgraced (P. 103).

From the above, a clear picture of women as a jealous, wicked, heartless and angry lot is presented. Imagine a woman rubbing pepper into the vagina and other private parts of a fellow woman, simply because the victim visited their husband. And from the preceding stories to the pepper incident, the woman Beatrice had come of business and not for love. But Lajide's wives misunderstood her purpose and punished her without mercy and remorse. By this, the city women are presented as intolerant.

Again, from Pages 104-105, the writer tries to portray a common phenomenon with Nigerian city girls. Some of them who are heartless and wisely crude, would always extort money from their male fiends by "pretending to be pregnant". And because most men are easily scared to be associated with illegitimate children and pregnancy, they always give out their last kobo to the women to embark on abortion without the man's attention. Because of this morbid fear, some city girls or women use "artificial pregnancy" to harass and blackmail the male-folk in order to get money from them. This is exactly what Aina did to Sango.

Let us listen to Aina as she addresses Ainusua Sango on the above subject.

Aina: "I want you to help me because I am pregnant".

Sango: "So you are pregnant and you think I am the father?"

Aina: Since that night at the Beach, I have not been feeling well. I did not want to come till I was sure. My mother is prepared to take you to court to claim damages if you refuse to marry me. Perhaps, you will let us have about ten pounds to maintain ourselves till the child is born (P. 105).

The above was obviously a clear blackmail and Sango's threat to invite the police did not move Aina. When Sango raised the issue of calling the police Aina replied; "I am not afraid of them. What do I care?"

The city women are not afraid of the police. They rather know the rank and file in the police force because the police give them coverage and protection in their crimes. But Sango could do nothing to escape Aina. Although he said the "child" is not mine. Certainly not and you know it, I am helping you because of memories. And Sango gave Aina all his savings for six months.

On page 108, the writer paints, women as people who are involved in over indulgence or over-doing of everything. Moderation is not in their dressing and demanding dictionaries. According to Ekwensi, the city is like a den for these women. For instance, he observes:

In these dens the girls were slick with too much of everything. Too much lipstick, so that their lips were either caked or too invitingly moist: too much lips, too much of their thighs showing beneath their unfashionable skirts too much breasts bursting the super-tight blouses.

A mental picture of the city girls described above speaks of a loose, carefree and public woman, who is sexually commercially inclined. This is one of the pathetic images of women in the literacy works of African writers. On page 109, the writer describes a girl in a public show whose interest lies in what she can get from men. She is described as "a tall girl in red jeans and scarlet lipstick that contrasted rudely with her chocolate skin".

This lady is so sexually cheap to get that a little whisper into her ears by a hotel steward gets her to and for a white-man-Grunnings. According to the passage:

He whispered into her ear. Some, moment later, she, was sitting opposite Grunnings and smoking his cigarettes (P. 109).

Again, the women of the city are seen as a source of danger to the menfolk. To this extent, local women always warn their sons in the city to beware of city women and their love potions. That is why Sango's mother on P. 110) brought Elina, the local girl she prepared and preserved for Sango to marry, to Lagos. Ekwensi writes on P. 110):

It meant that his mother was tired of talk and had brought the girl (Elina) with her to make sure that her son (Sango) was now safely out of danger from the women (P. 110).

In the final analysis, Ekwensi seems to be making a very strong point in *People of the city*. Most of the female characters in the novel are either dead in the city or probing towards death. They are essentially involved in crimes such as stealing, obtaining by trick, (419), prostitution, money swindling and all sorts of criminal activities. The message that is crystal clear in the novel is that the city serves as a death magnet to women and many of them die miserably and uncelebrated in the city.

The case of Beatrice the first, a one time city beauty and celebrity was reported dead by her Ghanaian last lover. According to him, she died miserably and was buried like a pauper or dog.

She is dead. Dead... she died last week. And what pains me most... she was buried as a pauper (P. 111).

So, all the money she accumulated from all kinds of men did not lift her to the high social class. Men simply admired her lustfully, used her recklessly and dropped her effortlessly.

It was at this juncture that Ekwensi gave reasons why the girls rush to the city. He says:

I have often asked, why do girls leave their happy homes and come to the city on their own? No brother, no knowledge of anything, no hope. They just come to the city, hoping some men will pick them up and make them into something. Not just one man but many men. And some disease, something incurable picks them up. You see them dress and they are just shells. Hollow and sick... (P. 112).

The above is a summary of the fate of the innocent women who leave their happy homes in the village for greener pastures in the city. They find temporary joy, happiness and enjoyment but die in poverty, disease and disgrace afterwards.

However, Amusa Sango sums up the forces that drive most young women to the city in these words:

I will tell you why she came to the city (Beatrice the First) Kofi. She was not contented with poverty. Remember, not many people like to remain where fate has placed them. I have known the home of Beatrice. I can tell you. If you have been there yourself, you would not condemn her actions. She was running away from it (P. 112).

In spite of Sango's explanations and exoneration of Beatrice and a lot of her likes on the grounds of hardship and poverty, Kofi, the Ghanaian lorry driver was not convinced and saw no justification for irresponsible wastage of productive youthful lives on the flimsy excuse of poverty. He then concludes about Beatrice and other young girls who wine and waste in the city.

But she threw her life away. The city eats many an innocent life like hers every year. It is a waste of our youth! It must stop.

In conclusion, Ekwensi sees the female characters in *People of the City* as dissatisfied people who run away from their rural areas to the city to change their fate from poverty to riches. In trying to achieve this, they engage in illegal and dehumanizing activities such as stealing and commercial sex business. And ironically, they get the money in the city, get into trouble in the city in the aspects of police cases, abortion, disease and sometimes death. Some die poorer than they were before they come to the city.

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