

Troubling Depictions of Gambian Womanhood in Dayo Forster's Reading the Ceiling

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Abstract : Dayo Forster's impressively crafted *Reading the Ceiling* (2007) enjoys a relatively high profile among Western readers. It is one of only a handful of Gambian novels to be published by an international publisher, Simon and Schuster of London, and was subsequently shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writer's Best First Book Prize in 2008. It is currently available to US readers in print and as an e-book and has 167 ratings on Goodreads. This paper addresses the possible influence of the book on Western readers' perception of The Gambia, or Africa in general, through its depiction of the conditions of Gambian women's lives. Through a close reading of passages and analysis of imagery, intertextuality, and characterization in the book, the paper demonstrates that Forster portrays the culture of The Gambia as oppressively patriarchal and the prospects for young girls who stay in the country as extremely limited. *Reading the Ceiling* starts on Ayodele's 18th birthday, the day she has planned to have sex for the first time. Most of the rest of the book is divided into three parts, each following the chain of events that occur after sex with a potential partner. Although Ayodele goes abroad for her education in each of the three scenarios, she ultimately capitulates to the patriarchal politics and demands of marriage and childrearing in The Gambia, settling for relationships with men she does not love, cooking and cleaning for husbands and children, and silencing her own opinions and desires in exchange for the familiar traditions of patriarchal—and, in one case, polygamous—marriage. Each scenario ends with resignation to death, as, after her mother's funeral, Ayodele admits to herself that she will be next. Forster uses dust and mud imagery throughout the novel to indicate the dinginess of Ayodele's life as a young woman, and then wife and mother, in The Gambia as well as the inescapability of this life. This depiction of earthen material is also present in the novel's recounting of an oral tale about a mermaid captured by fishermen, a story that mirrors Ayodele's ensnarement by traditional marriage customs and gender norms. A review of the fate of other characters in the novel reveals that Ayodele is not the only woman who becomes trapped by the expectations for women in The Gambia, as those who stay in the country end up subservient to their husbands and/or victims of men's habitual infidelity. It is important to note that *Reading the Ceiling* is focused on the experiences of a minority—The Gambia's middle class, Christian urban dwellers with money for education. Regardless of its limited scope, the novel clearly depicts The Gambia as a place where women are simply unable to successfully contend against traditional patriarchal norms. Although this novel evokes vivid imagery of The Gambia through original and compelling descriptions of food preparation, clothing, and scenery, it perhaps does little to challenge stereotypical perceptions of the lives of African women among a Western readership.

Keywords : African literature, commonwealth literature, marriage, stereotypes, women

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