

Feminism Ideology and Institution of Patriarchy in African Novel: Analysis of Selected Works of Women Writers and Gynandrists

Albert Rutere
Laikipia University

Abstract

This paper uses feminism ideology in reading and understanding the effects of patriarchy in the African Novel, a generic reference to novels articulating African experience. The paper analyses selected works of African women writers and gynandrists from Anglophone and Francophone Africa. Gynandrists are men writers sympathetic to women cause. Specifically, the paper examines feminism and patriarchy in Postcolonial novel, where several gender issues are identified and explored. Even further, the paper discusses the ideology of feminism and its multiple strands is used as an ideological praxis to underline women struggles in taming the institution of patriarchy. The selected novels are Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *Devil on the Cross*, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood*, Mongo Beti's *Perpetua* and Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*. Instances of the strategies that women are employing in the aforementioned literary works are analysed and elevated to exemplify the use of feminist ideology in taming patriarchy. The paper also appreciates the bold attempts women have made to reverse men's dominance in social, political, and economic domains in order to establish gender respect, equality, and partnership for the survival of the society.

Key Words: feminism, women, patriarchy, women writers, gynandrists, African novel

Introduction

Feminism in whatever form endeavours to engage the institution of patriarchy that in most part dominate women, children and weaker men. Feminism ultimate goal is to empower the oppressed and make them relevant in the society.

Consequently, all strands of feminism, be it radical or liberal, focus on taming patriarchy in order to ensure that gender respect, equality, and partnership are in place for the progress and survival of the society. However, this paper examines the ideology of feminism in the reading and understanding the strategies women are using to withstand patriarchy in the post colonial African Novel, a generic reference to novels articulating African experience. The paper argues that feminism and its multiple strands can be used as an ideological praxis to appreciate women struggles against the institution of patriarchy in Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *Devil on the Cross*, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood*, Mongo Beti's *Perpetua* and Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*. Ultimately, the paper underscores women's resistance to patriarchy as a bold attempt to reverse its dominance in social, political, and economic domains. As Rutere (2010) observes:

[P]atriarchy that exploits is oppressive and a stumbling block to women's advancement in the society. However, women are aware of this menace and have shown endless ingenuity in their struggle to dismantle inequity in gender relations in order to lead dignified and ultimately meaningful lives in the society (pg. 68-69).

Majorly the struggle to tame patriarchy and its oppressive structures has to be consistent in order to bring gender respect, equality, and partnership in the society.

Feminism as an Ideology

Feminism is an ideology that focuses on the study and correction of the social, political, and economic inequality between men and women. Lorber (2001) observes that, Feminism is a social movement that focuses on the advancement of women's status [in every society]. Its genesis, "as an organized social movement," Feminism was evidently prominent in Europe and America in 19th century (1). Thereafter, strands of Feminism have flourished. To mention but a few pioneer feminisms, there is Black Feminism associated with Alice Walker. This feminism focuses on issues of women of color. It distinctively makes a departure from earlier feminism that was blind to issues of oppression perpetuated by white dominated society and, consequently, experienced by women of color and their men. Alice Walker, further coined Womanism, a type of feminism whose core ideology is to love a woman and equally articulate issues of women regardless of their color. In other words, Womanism agrees with other feminisms on total liberation of women from men's oppression, but differs specifically with earlier feminism dominated by white women over the sources of oppression and as experienced in different cultural contexts. Therefore, in view of cultural

diversity Womanism is a more inclusive concept which would adequately address issues affecting all the women.

With time Radical feminism emerged and was adopted as an ideology to eradicate patriarchy in whatever form as the only stumbling block to women progress. There was also, liberal feminism whose core focus was to look for a middle ground to resolve gender issues and ultimately have dialogue and partnership between men and women in the society. Indeed, other strands of feminism have been defined and articulated to understand and champion women issues in specific cultural backgrounds; hence, one is likely to read the reworked feminisms like African Feminism, Western feminism, Asian feminism, and so on. Today feminism is recognized as a grass root movement that endeavors to transcend boundaries of social class, culture and religion. Indeed, feminism is more acceptable as a culturally specific ideology. It is in most part studied because as (Lorber, 2001; Johnson, 1995) argue “[I]n many cultural settings, patriarchy is entirely faulted for appropriating available resources in the social, political, and economic structures to the detriment of women”(qtd. in Rutere, 2010, pg.14), children, and weaker men

Proponents of all strands of Feminism argue that gendered and sexed identities such as man and woman are socially constructed. They precisely observe that women have the ability to accomplish as much as men. According to de Beauvoir (1989) “one is not born, but becomes, a woman. [...] it is civilization as whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine” (pg.267). Indeed, gender is understood as a mechanism for perceiving the socially constructed roles for males and females. Gender, de Beauvoir further reiterates, can be perpetuated endlessly if it is not resisted. “Indeed, without rebellion [...] men will [surely] conspire to objectivize a woman and finally condemn her to immanence (de Beauvoir qtd. in Rutere, 2010 pg.14) as human history attests in all societies.

Patriarchy and its Crippling Ideology in the Society

The institution of patriarchy has been identified as the crippling male ideology that defines and perpetuates gender inequality and ultimate marginalization of women in the society. Several gender scholars have exposed patriarchy as the stumbling block to women progress in social, political and economic domains. Fortier (1975) contends that “virtually every society [...] has been patriarchal. [Indeed], patriarchy defines a system of relationships in which men “own” the women and children and rule over them. [...] Throughout history, patriarchy has enjoyed the solid support of religion, the political system and culture” (pg. 278). Therefore, it is arguable that patriarchy has been intrusive and domineering in the society since time immemorial.

Further, patriarchy classifies and contains women in subsidiary position. Millet (1971) observes that “the crippling effect of patriarchy manifest itself in sexual relationship and it is the root cause of subordination of women” (pg. 45). Furthermore, patriarchy is common and firmly rooted in the social, political, and economic structures of the society as evidenced in its manifestation in many forms in history and location (Millet, 1971. pg. 46). Patriarchy is intimidating and exploitative. Johnson (1995) terms it “patriarchal terrorism, a product of patriarchal traditions of men’s right to control ‘their’ women [...], [precisely] a form of terroristic control of wives by their husbands that involves the systematic use of not only violence, but economic subordination, threats, isolation, and other control tactics” (pg. 284). And in total agreement, Marler (2005) perceives patriarchy “as the social arrangement in which men possess structural power by monopolizing high-status positions in important social, economic, legal, and religious institutions”(pg. 53). Even further, Lerner (1993) maintains that “once established as a functioning system of complex hierarchical relationships, patriarchy [in history] transformed sexual, social, economic relations and dominated all system of ideas” (pg. 3). Indeed, patriarchy absolutely amasses power and renders the other groups of people powerless in the society.

Feminism and Appreciation of African Novel

Ngugi Wa Thiongo’s *Devil on the Cross* is a postcolonial novel that underlines women strategies in deconstructing patriarchy that largely dominates their lives. The text specifically castigates patriarchal terror that is directed to Wariinga. Wariinga and other women alluded in Kareendi’s sub narrative within the main narrative are presented as helpless victims of seduction, contempt, and revenge by men. Equally the humiliation of women in *Devil on the Cross* is done in order to retain male supremacy in the society. Kareendi’s story ridicules the sexual humiliation that women undergo day in and day out.” [...] women’s thighs are tables on which contracts are signed’ [...] modern problems are resolved with aid of thighs” (Ngugi, 1982. pg. 19). This devastating experience is part of the common problems that every lady encounters in modern Kenya. Consequently, Kareendi observes that “[T]o Kareendis of modern Kenya, isn’t each day exactly the same as all the others” (Ngugi, 1982. pg. 26) and endlessly the situation may continue to be so if not discontinued.

However, patriarchy does not go untamed in *Devil on the Cross*. Wariinga at the closure of the novel takes a bold action that is only understood in the context of radical feminism to kill the Old Man from Ngorika and the villain that impregnated and abandoned her in her formative years. With finality, Wariinga ridicules and kills her tormentor as she says “[T]here kneels a jigger, a louse, a flea, a bedbug! He is mistletoe, a parasite that lives on the tree of other people’s lives” (Ngugi, 1982, pg. 254). This action explains the distinctive spirit of

resistance that Ngugi's women characters have in taming patriarchy. As, Evans (1983) observes "in Ngugi's novels women are shown to have a fundamental role in the struggle against oppression and exploitation, and often courage and hope are ultimately found in their hands" (pg. 57). Also, Levin (1986) adds "[O]ften in the face of crushing odds, his heroines survive. They are active, intelligent, courageous, defiant" (pg. 218), and sometimes rebellious as the situations unfold.

Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* examines the struggles women undergo, while reacting to patriarchy. Nnu Ego, the protagonist and other women have experienced patriarchal terror in their childhood through youth to adulthood, especially during marriage. Nnu Ego is passed like a commodity from one marriage to another. In her first marriage, Amatokwu abandons her with contempt. When Nnu Ego confronts Amatokwu about the way he handled her. Amatokwu retorts that "[I] am busy man. I have no time to waste my precious male seed on a woman who is infertile. I have to raise children for my line. If you really want to know, you don't appeal to me anymore. You are so dry and jumpy. When a man comes to a woman he wants to be cooled, not scratched by nervy female who is all bones" (Emecheta 1984, pg. 32). Indeed, Nnu Ego is blamed for infertility and failure to be sexually attractive.

However, in *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta appreciates women's dynamism and resilience to withstand patriarchy. Adaku, Nnaife's wife rebels from her unloving husband and opts to be a prostitute because of the demands put on her to bear a son. Further she is denied justice by men in the settlement of her difference with her co wife. All in all Adaku is not recognized. Even further, Kehinde, Nnaife's daughter refuses the man her father identified. She will get married to Arem, the butcher's son. Emecheta (1984) through the narrator ridicules Nnaife thus "[H]e [Nnaife] had never had much time for his daughter. One planned for and had sleepless nights over boys, girls, on the other hand, were to help in running the house and be disposed as soon as possible, unless one was asking trouble. (pg.204). For Nnaife, he is disappointed because Kehinde is contradicting Ibo patriarchal expectation on women by intending to marry Ladipo, a Yoruba man from a Muslim family

Thereafter, Nnaife is jailed for five years for becoming violent over Kehinde's action to elope with her choice. This in itself is a poetic justice done to an oppressive man. Notably, Nnaife drove Adaku to prostitution and Nnu Ego to misery. The latter's situation is emotive because Nnu Ego died on the roadside on her way to Ibuza "[S]he had never really made many friends, so busy had she been building up her joys as mother"(Emecheta, 1984. pg. 224) and sole provider to her ungrateful male children. Indeed "[S]till many [people] agreed that she had given all to her children. The joy of being a mother was the joy of giving all to your children they said'" (Emecheta, 1984. pg. 224). The Joys of Motherhood turns out to be The Sorrows of Motherhood to Nnu Ego and other women. This

unfortunate situation for a woman is what Emecheta is castigating and calling for its deconstruction through women rebellion and to be precise the use of Radical Feminism

Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* examines women's multiple struggles in taming patriarchy in colonised Northern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. The novel uses Tambu as the persona to explore women marginalisation by patriarchy and the strategies, among them accommodation and rebellion to maneuver this oppression. Indeed, the text is a bildungsromans novel that sees Tambu grow and come of age in a patriarchal structure. Tambu who is an observer and commentator is knowledgeable about her fellow women's difficult situation, what they feel about it, and their reaction, while in most part empathizing with them. The overall women discourse is to withstand patriarchy using means within their abilities. Therefore, *Nervous Conditions* in words of Patchay (2003) is a novel that "[B]y foregrounding the histories of women *Nervous Conditions* not only challenges the positive roles on offer for women' but also uses the stereotyped, maligned, colonized, and abused body of the African woman as a site of resistance" (pg. 148). The resistance is also an inspiration to women in their efforts to tame patriarchy with success.

Although patriarchy is intrusive and crippling to women, especially in the agency of Babamukuru, it is resisted actively and to a lesser extent passively by women. Nyasha rebels against her, father's condescending attitude and even physically punches him when he scolds her for hanging out with boys. Lucia defies Babamukuru's advice to move to Takesure's home and become his wife. In the same vein, she resists to become a second wife to Tambu's father. Selfishly, Tambu's father had "[- -] found her desirable and argued besides that the child might be a boy, which would be good since at the moment he only had daughters" (Dangarembga, 1989. pg. 125). Defiantly, Lucia instead makes efforts to empower herself by acquiring literacy which make her demand to be given a job at Babamukuru's mission school. Mama Chido or Maiguru, Babamukuru's wife rebels and wants her autonomy. Maiguru does not want her income controlled by her husband in addition to making her cook for his extended family, especially over Christmas breaks in the rural areas.

Equally, Ma'Shingayi detests Babamukuru because of his patronage that has alienated her children and rendered her husband weak. Patchay (2003) argues that, "Ma'Shingayi appears to be the most oppressed of the women in the novel; she sees the virulence of 'the Englishness' that seduces her children and 'enfeebles' her husband in the presence of Baba" (pg.148). In Ma'Shingayi's thinking, Babamukuru is a bully and a symbol of oppression to both women and weaker men like Jeremiah, her husband. Even further, Tambu dislikes Babamukuru's dominance over her fellow women. Precisely, at the closure of the novel, she writes:

I was young then and able to banish things, but seed do grow. Although I was aware of it, no longer could I accept Sacred Heart [Her School] and what it represented as a sunrise on my horizon. Quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to this time when I can set down this story. It was a long and painful process for me, that process of expansion. It was a process whose events stretched over many years and would fill another volume, but the story I have told here, is my story of four women whom I loved, and our men, this story is how it all began (Dangarembga, 1989. pg. 204).

Indeed, women's rejection of patriarchy in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* is a product of a conscious process that commences with their pragmatic accommodation of patriarchal excesses, to outright rebellion that accord them gender respect, autonomy, and fulfillment. Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* explores gender inequalities in the context of the intrusive and oppressive patriarchal African society and colonial patriarchy. From the outset, it is even unthinkable for women to challenge the two forms of patriarchy. However, when African railway workers attempt to strike and the French government stays put and consequently hunger bites the workers and their family, women swing into action. At first it is Ramatoulaye, who slaughters Mabigue's goat to feed *God's Bits of Wood*, the dying children leading to her arrest that lead to the confrontation of women fraternity and the French colonial police. Even further women swing into action to take over the unsuccessful male strike. The women march from Thies to Dakar, the seat of colonial authority to demand the reinstatement of their men to work, an action that ends the strike and harmony is restored.. As Rutere (2010) argues:

“[T]herefore, in *God's Bits of Wood*, there are two revolutions intertwined and both of them emanate from social, political, and economic disequilibrium. The revolutionary strike portrayed in the novel serves a two-pronged use: to change the colonial rule and male domination over females. (pg. 66)

Indeed, Ousmane juxtaposes the first wave of strike by men and the second one by women and equates them to the two revolutions. In the second strike women resilience encapsulated in their female resistance is inspiring admirable. Appreciating women significance in driving the society in the desirable direction, Rutere (2010) reiterates:

“[I]n particular, Ousmane switches gender roles to enable women bring about the revolutionary change needed in the society. Thus, during the march of the women from Thies to Dakar, the men take up the traditional roles of the women because they only give moral support (pg. 66)”.

In addition, the men fraternity in the journey may have initially taken the role of curious observers anticipating failure of women mission. However, as the success of women effort unfolded they embraced the bold action.

Despite women rebellion to tame patriarchy, they are not losing sight to have normalcy in the society for the good of all. At the closure of the novel women desire to have gender harmony is clearly underlined in the song of Maimouna, the blind woman. She expresses “that mankind should acquire the humane spirit to live without hatred. “From one sun to another. The combat lasted, [...] But happy is the man who does battle without hatred” (Ousmane, 1995. pg. 248). The song abhors hatred and supports gender partnership for progress and survival of the society. This is the very principle that basically anchors Womanism in the struggle against patriarchy.

Mongo Beti’s *Perpetua and the Habit of Unhappiness* examines women’s tribulations under patriarchy through the characterisation of Perpetua, the protagonist. Perpetua’s mother, an agent of patriarchy would want to marry her off early in order to raise money to get Martin, her son a bride. Rutere (2010) observes that [T]he humiliation that Perpetua undergoes under the hands of two immoral and vengeful “husbands” is unimaginable, or unthinkable” (pg. 64). Although, Perpetua is ultimately married to her ruthless husband and undergoes “starvation, isolation, and sexual humiliation” (Beti, 1978. pg.28), her resilience is evident in resisting patriarchy. Perpetua and her friend Ann-Maria reject police blackmail, geared to promote Baba Ture’s dictatorial party in Zombetown (Beti, 1978. pg. 118). According to Ellerman (1993) “[T]his incident marks the beginning of Perpetua’s maturity; as a witnessing martyr, she has acted out of a sense of conviction and will continue to do so” (pg. 29) and evidently she has shown signs of defying her husbands.

It is arguable that Perpetua’s coming of age and consequently wading off patriarchy in whatever form constitutes her feminism. She at first employs pragmatic cooperation as a strategy to tame patriarchy, and only through humiliation that she redeems herself to be human and rebels against the same menace. Perpetua’s inspiring actions of rebellion that earns herself respect and psychological relief underlines female resistance only understood in the ideological framework of radical feminism. Therefore, Perpetua’s intelligence and competence in books overtakes that of Edward, her daft husband. If this potential in Perpetua and other women is actualised through education, it will empower them to sustain their narrative of deconstructing patriarchy in all its forms in social, political, and economic domains in Cameroon and beyond.

Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter*, an e[pi]stolary novel explores the multiple problems women experience under patriarchy when they are abandoned in love and marriage. Ramatoulaye, the protagonist and her childhood friend Aissatou

experience abandonment when their lecherous husbands take young girls to be their daughters as second wives. However, in the over all, Ba's *So Long a Letter* as Pritchett (2000) maintains "[T]he issues that are addressed [in the text] specifically focus on social, political and economic effects, women experience through polygamy" (pg. 51). The issues thus implied are perpetuated by patriarchy largely condoned in African traditional practices and Islamic religion

The reactions of the two women are different. For Ramatoulaye, she stays put and fights from within. She pursues the strategy of accommodation, while Aissatou rebels. Aissatou quits her marriage and relocates to America where she manages to secure for herself a well paying job to raise her four children single handedly. Admiring the action of Aissatou, Daba, the young daughter of Ramatoulaye, urges her mother to do as Aunt Aissatou did to her husband. Daba does not comprehend why marriage is not founded on respect, equity, and partnership. She intends to pursue this principle with her fiancé and have such a marriage. Ramatoulaye's strategy to remain in marriage despite the sorrows she experiences could be perceived as accommodative feminism, while Aissatou's strategy to quit marriage underlines radical feminism. Daba's thinking about marriage is an idea anchored between liberal feminism and radical feminism

Conclusion

The focus of this paper was to give an application of Feminism in reading and appreciating African novel from selected African women writers and gynandrists from Anglophone and Francophone Africa. Hence, the novels, Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *Devil on the Cross*, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood*, Mongo Beti's *Perpetua* and Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* are analysed for exemplification. The paper defines Feminism and a few of its strands to offer an ideological praxis guiding women strategies in taming patriarchy. Patriarchy is defined and discussed as a stumbling block to women progress in the society. Consequently, it is explored in the aforementioned novels, while underlining the type of feminism pursued by women to wrestle and eventually tame patriarchy.

Among the feminisms, women pursue prominently are accommodative feminism and radical feminism. Accommodative feminism is perceived in women's pragmatic cooperation with men, while radical feminism manifest in women revenge against men for the past wrong done to them. Although, radical feminism is the option for a few women like Waringa shooting the old man from Ngorika in *Devil on the Cross* and Adaku's protest to become a prostitute in *The Joys of Motherhood*, many writers discussed have evidently indicted patriarchy and advocated for the taming of this menace in order to establish gender harmony in the society. The taming of patriarchy is appreciated as one significant step toward the creation of a society that embraces the values of gender respect,

equality, and partnership in the society. Thus the study concludes that women efforts to tame patriarch in the selected texts are bold and inspiring admirable

References

- Ba, M. (1981). *So Long a Letter*. London: Heinemann.
- Beti, M. (1978). *Perpetua and the Habit of Unhappiness*. London: Heinemann.
- Dangarembga, T. (1989). *Nervous Conditions*. Seattle: The Seal Press.
- de Beauvoir, Simone. (1989). *The Second Sex*. Trans. & Ed. H.M. Parshley. New York: Vintage Books.
- Ellerman, E. (1993). The Passion of Perpetua: A Generic Approach to Beti's Perpetua. *Research in African Literatures*, 24(3), 25-34.
- Emecheta, B. (1984). *The Joys of Motherhood*. Oxford: Heinemann.
- Evans, J. (1983). "Mother Africa and Heroic Whore: Female Images in *Petals of Blood*. *Contemporary African Literature*. In Hal Wylie et al. (Eds.). *Contemporary African Literature* (pp-57-65) Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press.
- Fortier, L. (1975), Women, Sex and Patriarchy. *Family Planning Perspectives*. 7 (6), 8-281.
- Johnson, P. M. (1995). Patriarchal Terrorism and Common Couple Violence: Two Forms of Violence against Women. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 57(2), 283-294.
- Lerner, G. (1993). *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-seventy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Levin, T. (1986). Women as Scapegoats of Culture and Cult: An Activist's View of Female Circumcision in Ngugi's *The River Between*." In, Eds. Carole Boyce Davis and, Anne Adams Graves(Eds.). *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature* (pp-205-221). Trenton: Africa World Press.
- Lorber, J. (Ed.). (2001). *Gender Inequality: Feminist Theories and Politics*. Los Angeles: Roxbury.
- Millett, K. (1971). *Sexual Politics*. New York: Avon Books.
- Marler, J. (2005). The Beginnings of Patriarchy in Europe: Reflections on the Kurgan Theory of Marija Gimbutas." In Cristina Biaggi (Ed.). *The Rules of Mars: Readings on the Origins, History and Impact of Patriarchy* (pp-53-75). Manchester: Knowledge, Ideas & Trends.
- Ousmane, S. (1995). *God's Bits of Wood*. Oxford: Heinemann.
- Patchay, S. (2003). Transgressing Boundaries: Marginality, Complicity and Subversion in *Nervous Conditions*. *English in Africa*, 30(1), 145-55.
- Pritchett, A. J. (2000). "Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*" In Margaret Jean Hay (Ed.). *African Novels in the Classroom* (pp-49-62). London: Lynne Rienner.
- Rutere, M. A. (2010). *Women and Patriarchal Power in Selected Novels of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o*. Baltimore: Black Academy Press.
- Wa Thiong'o, Ni. (1982). *Devil on the Cross*. Oxford: Heinemann.