

Exercise of Innocuous Power by Female Characters in Selected African Prose Fiction Works

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Abstract

This study looks at how female characters in Nawaal El Saadawi's *God Dies by the Nile* (2007), Mariama Ba's *Scarlet Song* (1986), Assia Djébar's *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* (1993), Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) and Bake Robert Tumuhaise's *Tears of my Mother* (2013) use non-aggressive types of power to negotiate for social relevance. The study is justified by the fact that African theorists on feminism have increasingly been replacing belligerent ideas found in first and second wave of Western feminism with accommodative versions of African feminisms. The paper therefore seeks to understand how female characters acquire and exercise power without resorting to militancy. Nego-feminism, a coinage of Obioma Nnaemeka, is one such variant of African feminism that forms the theoretical framework of the study. The study located the acquiescent subalternity associated with female characters within the authors' intention of demonstrating that African feminism is not equivalent to a battle of the sexes but is instead a way of creating complementarity between male and female characters. The paper argues that the form of power exercised by female characters is non-confrontational but nevertheless effective in the creation of a complementary interaction between male and female characters in the texts.

Key Words: Gender, Legitimation, Nego-feminism, Panopticism, STIWANISM

Introduction

God Dies by the Nile is a text which is set in the village of Kafr El Teen, a fictionalised rural setting representative of Kafr Tafr Tahla, the Egyptian village that Arndt (2001) identifies as being the birth place of Saadawi. This text is representative of the Islamic writing culture previously not treated as part of the mainstream North African canon of literature with regard to articulating issues on African feminism. Suad et. al (2014) includes Monica Ali, Nawal El Saadawi, and Taslima Nasrin in this category of Muslim women writers. Of these female Muslim writers, Saadawi is seen to be more vocal in her articulation of gender issues in a Muslim society. Hence, as Arndt (2001) avers, Saadawi is a writer of repute as she has authored numerous short stories and works of drama, tens of novels, non-fictional accounts as well as journalistic works that place her in the limelight of literary prolificacy.

Scarlet Song by Mariama Ba is set in Dakar, the Senegalese capital city, specifically in the street of Usine Niari Talli, with part of the action unfolding and in Paris, France. The novel is a negritudist commentary on the discord that exists between cultures, especially the Wolof culture and the French culture. Negritude is "essentially a philosophical concept (that) valorises black pride and civilisation" (Ajayi, 199, p.36). In the novel, black pride becomes manifest when Ousmane, the son of a devout Muslim family, falls in love with Mireille, the daughter of an aristocratic French diplomat and the two get married. However, they later get sundered by divisive forces that are driven by the conflict between Mireille's class consciousness and Ousmane's loyalty to his Wolof culture. The foregoing happens when Ousmane prefers to spend time with his Wolof relatives while increasingly ignoring Mireille.

Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade was first written in French as *L'amour, la fantasia*, in 1985. It catapulted Djébar into the limelight as an emergent Maghreb woman writer. By the time she was thirty years old, Djébar had written four novels in French, a big feat considering that a premium was

placed on the French as the language of the former colonizer. Women's inferior social location in an Islamic set up meant that they were denied the opportunity to acquire the language. That Djébar beat these odds and went on to win the prestigious Neustadt Prize in 1996 is the pointer to her determination to beat the odds stacked against her. In *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, which is partly semi-autobiographical and partly historical, Djébar seeks to re-write the Algerian history in order to inflect it to accommodate the significant role played by women in the war of liberation against the French colonialists. Hiddleston (2004) writes that Djébar is concerned with the experiences of the Algerian woman and seeks to show how the women sought to unyoke themselves from myriad forms of oppression at different historical epochs.

Tears of my Mother is a work that represents the nascent writing tradition from Uganda. In the novel, Tumuhaise goes off on a different tangent and negates the historicity associated with Ugandan literature, a country whose flourishing literature in the years of yore tended to be anti-totalitarian. According to Evain et. al. (2018), Ugandan early literature was written with a view to "overcoming the trauma of Idi Amin's terror regime" (p.51). However, Tumuhaise, a motivational speaker, has in this novel, successfully subverted the predominant narrative in Ugandan literature, such as that by John Ruganda, about despotic male characters who rise to megalomaniac positions of power. As a motivational speaker and writer, Tumuhaise has authored other motivational books, such as *Woman of Action: The Story of Mary Mulumba, Uganda's Leading Educationist and Leader* and *Courageous Woman: The Moving Story of Bella Wine's Prudence Ukkonika*. Therefore, Tumuhaise's answer to Boss, the lead protagonist in Ruganda's *The Floods*, is the creation of a feminized society where a female character ascends to presidency.

Chinua Achebe is best known for his African classic novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958). The text seeks to champion the *Igbo* culture by vilifying the supposed superiority of the metropolitan Western culture (Makokha, Obiero & West-Pavlov, 2011; Eckstein, 2007). His later writings, especially *Anthills of the Savannah*, show a growth in his social vision. According to Barksdale-Hall (2007), "the work shed light on how the resulting crisis in leadership brought on by ethnic strife, lack of patriotism, and a false image deters progress in Nigeria" (p.9). Further, Ben Okiri, a Nigerian poet, explains that *Anthills of the Savannah* is Achebe's most complex and wisest work of fiction in which he places female characters in a pivotal position of his narrative (Boehmer, 2013).

Defeminizing the Female Body

The use of innocuous types of power in the study texts takes the form of female characters not using their femininity offensively. Non-offensive use of feminism involves negotiation, rather than agitation, in what Nnaemeka (2004) refers to as "*nego-feminism* (the feminism of negotiation)" p. (360). The authors of the four texts make strong suggestions to the effect that the female characters need not use their feminine corporality to aggressively wrest power from the male characters. Instead, the female characters are cast as part of "the archetypal African woman [who is] a "mother"" (Ajayi 199, p.37). Being nurturing and protective, rather than sexually offensive, is made manifest since the female protagonist in *Tears of my Mother*, Nyamishana, has not used her physical attributes to agitatedly negotiate for power. Instead, her journey in her matriculation from a sexually naive girl to finally being a mother demonstrates that a woman's body is not necessarily her main pawn in her negotiation for power in the society. While in school, Nyamishana does not place her beauty above her sense of morality:

(Her) moral prowess continued to fascinate both her teachers and her peers. To them, it remained strange how a teenager could be so principled. Nobody ever saw the colour of her breast or thigh because she was always modestly dressed. Whenever other boys were using foul language, she would either try to stop them or quietly walk away (*Tears*, p.30).

From Nyamishana's aversion to prurience, it is avowed that Tumuhaise sees an African woman as one whose sexuality is not the main parameter that defines the potency of the hegemonic control that she directs at the male characters. Nyamishana's character supports Nnaemeka (2004), on nego-feminism "standing for "no ego"" (p.377). As seen above, while Nyamishana is in secondary school

and at the full bloom of her youth, she refuses to fit in the mold that society casts for the African woman- that the main source of power for a woman rests in her corporal endowments. Consequently, Nyamishana exercises innocuous power when she defeminizes her body by ignoring her physical attributes, and instead fronts her morality as a way of expressing her femininity.

Further, by refusing to foreground her femininity, Nyamishana epitomizes the concept of “female masculinity”, which Achebe (2011) identifies as being an acceptable ideological creation of a modern woman. Achebe (ibid), is a sociological study on the life of the female *Igbo* king, Ahebi Ugbabe. Ahebi Ugbabe is cast as being an example of the reality that the *Igbo* community had powerful matriarchs before the onset of colonialism. Achebe (ibid) portrays Ugbabe as an epitome of female masculinity, a doctrine where power thought to be the preserve of males is practiced by female characters. To be a woman, according to African feminists, is not to be the weaker vessel that relies on supposed gender vulnerability to negotiate for relevance. Instead, femininity is about being the complementary mortise that completes the functionality of the African male Tenon. Considering that in *Tears of my Mother*, Nyamishana rises to become a president, then she is defeminized by her “female masculinity”, and reverts to the natural leadership role of a woman, hence exercising innocuous power.

(Re)Embracing Traditional Maternal Roles

With the benefit of the portrait of Nyamishana considered above, as reliant on the concept of “female masculinity”, it is necessary to add that Acholonu and Alice Walker have argued that a strong African female portrait is not painted on the rejection of traditional gender roles that are associated with womanhood. On the contrary, as Arndt (2001) writes, “motherhood is of central importance in an African woman’s life and African women wish to have many children, (therefore;) motherhood should be mentioned when theorizing an ideology of African women”(p. 36). The image of an African feminist being completed by her embracing of traditional gender roles is reiterated by the texts on which this paper focuses.

To begin with, the recognition that acceptance of traditional maternal roles is empowering rather than disempowering shapes *Scarlet Song*. The foregoing is evident because of the presentation of Ouleymatou, one of the female characters in *Scarlet Song*. Using the character of Ouleymatou, Ba paints a picture in which the success of a nuclear family is dependent on the how such a family also meets the requirements of the extended family. Ouleymatou is in contest with Mireille, for Ousmane’s love, despite the fact that the French-born Mireille is already married to Ousmane. Ouleymatou treats Ousmane’s parents, Djibril Gueye and Yaye Khady with deference. Ouleymatou is a foil to Mireille, when it comes to embracing of domesticity. In a scene that contrasts her readiness to serve the Gueyes with Mireille’s possessiveness of Ousmane, Ouleymatou visits Yaye Khady and assists her in domestic chores that she knows Mireille is incapable of. Ouleymatou feigns shock when she finds Yaye Khady doing her ironing herself, instead of Mireille doing it for her. She decides to endear herself to Khady by relieving Khady the work she is doing:

Ouleymatou took off her own boubou and hang it on one of the wires in the courtyard. She tucked her pagne up around her waist and without another word took the iron out of Yaye Khady's hands.

She sang as she ironed: the garments slipped sparkling from her hands. She folded them and placed them in a pile on a chair in the sun.

By noon, the basin of washing was empty. Yaye Khady could not believe her eyes: she ironed so quickly and so well, better than she did herself (*Scarlet*, p. 106).

Ouleymatou’s gesture, apart from being a calculated move aimed at securing Yaye Khady's affection, is also part of the Wolof culture, in which an elder woman is assisted to take care of domestic chores by not only her daughters but her daughters-in-law as well. In this instance, the exercise of innocuous power is actualized when Ouleymatou embraces the maternal role of doing Yaye Khady’s laundry.

Further, Ouleymatou's characterization is in tandem with Flora Napa's nego-feminist construction of femininity, where a respect for elders, traditions and a readiness to adapt to social changes defines an African woman (Salami-Boukari, 2012). She is therefore able to fulfill an important requirement of a possible daughter-in-law, unlike Mireille, whose upbringing as a French girl makes her subscribe to the Western tradition in which a young married couple egocentrically concentrates on their own life while alienating themselves from the extended family. As D'Almeida (1994) avers, the writing of *Scarlet Song* evinces Ba's belief that books are a peaceful weapon that women can put into use in their quest to exercise innocuous power. In view of the foregoing, Ouleymatou therefore lays grounds for a peaceful marital *coup de grace*, where she plans to unseat Mireille from her position as Ousmane's wife. This paper notes that Ouleymatou finally succeeds in seducing Ousmane and even conceives his child while Mireille falls out with him and kills their mulatto son. Hence, Ouleymatou's domesticity, deference to the elderly Khady and embracing of traditional maternal roles, such as doing Khady's ironing, typifies what this paper presents as exercise of innocuous power by a female character in *Scarlet Song*.

The significance of domesticity and child bearing in the construction of accommodative forms of power is continued in *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*. Djebbar is an advocate of the institution of marriage and the raising up of children. She departs from first-wave Western feminists' paradigms that treat child-bearing as a form of body sexage, but instead argues for the appropriateness of a woman to use her biological endowments to mother and nurture a nation torn by years of strife. Body sexage is described by Tyson (2006) as being a radical feminist' believe that male members of a family subject the women in their spaces to forms of corporeal exploitation meant for economic gain, one of which is a bearing of many children, children who will finally belong to the men. Although Djebbar is against the social segregation of men and women, she still affirms that women are not overly concerned with an agitation for socio-economic equality with men, but are more concerned with effacing moral or religious debasement, which are articulated in Qur'an 4:34 (Hiddleston, 2004). The verse gives the following directive: "Those [women] whose nushuz you fear, admonish them, and abandon them in bed, and strike them. If they obey you do not pursue a strategy against them. Indeed, God is Exalted, Great". (Google, 2012) In this verse, "nushuz" is a word which means loyalty. It is the mentioned, direct justification of violence against women, by the Quran, that Djebbar questions, rather than a quest for social and economic egalitarianism between the sexes. Hence, in the creation of innocuous power in *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, embracing of traditional maternal roles takes the form of female characters accepting that marriage is not a form of subjugation for them.

In furtherance of the foregoing thesis, women in *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* idealise their maternal roles in the society. In the context of the war of independence in Algerian as presented in the text, here, one of the widows describes how she lost her husband to the cause after his capture by the French and the significance of the children he left her with:

The French tortured him from Friday to Sunday. On the last day, someone came and told me my husband had been stood up against a pillar, right in the middle of the village square. They killed him just like that, publicly, right in front of everybody.

He left me with young children. The last-born was still in my belly: I was only one and a half months gone. That son's now twenty! I will be bringing his bride to him next week, God willing! Because my health's not very good. I thought, 'I'll die knowing he's got his own home. I'll depart with my mind at rest! (*Fantasia*, p.207).

The woman is thus happy that though her husband is killed, he nonetheless left his progeny with her and as such, the continuity of her generation is protected. As a consequence, although the woman's husband is executed, the reality that the woman was left with children with whom she is happy, emblematises the exercises of innocuous power through an embracement of traditional maternal roles.

Notably, the method that the French soldiers use to kill the narrator's husband is not only meant to achieve his elimination but also to annihilate the collective *esprit de corps* in the marquis and the

partisans. The two words, “marquis” and “partisan”, are, in *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, used to respectively refer to the Algerian men who are fighting and organizing for political emancipation. The soldiers prolong the suffering of the man and eventually publicly execute him to douse the spirit of the spectating women and children. The French soldiers draw from the idea of sovereign torture that Foucault discusses in his philosophy on the modes of punishment for criminals. When a person was accused of wrong-doing in the eighteenth-century France of Foucault’s time, torture was used to elicit a confession:

Supposedly, the truth of the accusation was demonstrated by torture leading to confession. By the eighteenth century, this production of truth had become a consistent ritual. As the criminal was tortured, he was made to confess. As the power of the law was inscribed on his body, he was made to validate the truth of the justice of the torture and the truth of the accusations. The culmination of the ritual, execution, would also be the culmination of the investigation: truth and power combined (Dreyfus & Rabinow 1982, p. 146).

The ritual torture of the marquis and partisans is modeled from the above explanation by Dreyfus and Rabinow (1982), which, in *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade* is a way of eliciting truth from the condemned man. It is legitimated by the reality that a man under pain will undoubtedly reveal what he had concealed so far. In the case of the narrator’s husband, his readiness to die without revealing what his torturers want to know illegitimizes the sadistic power of the French soldiers. At the same time, one of the children to whom the display of power and destructiveness of life is meant to discourage is safely in his mother's body, shielded from the display of horror and gore. This paper therefore argues that Djebbar sees the power of procreation vested in a woman as an innocuous shield or cover through which she protects her future generation and guarantees its continuity. The final maturity of the then unborn son, followed by the starting of his own family, echoes this paper’s position about the potency of marriage and child-bearing, as forms of innocuous power exercise, that are deployed in the restoration of a society that has reeled for years under the suppression of foreign domination and damnation.

Innocuous and Peaceable Co-existence in Leadership

Connected to acceptance of traditional domestic roles by female characters is their peaceable involvement in traditional ceremonies and governance, areas that were hitherto male-dominated in first and second wave feminist discourses. In *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe envisions a society where finally, socio-religious barriers are lifted for both sexes to work together in harmony. The text is therefore used to express hope for a new emergent Africa that has outgrown the problems witnessed in most African states immediately after independence. In the text, Achebe offers a panacea to many of the problems that he poses in his earlier texts:

In *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe is concerned with the need for responsible governance - that people vested with power should exercise it with responsibility. The group assembled in the last chapter of the book can be read idyllically to portend a starting-ground for a new, equitable and gender-balanced beginning: Beatrice the intellectual, Elewa the illiterate worker and Agatha, the piteous religious-fanatic and maid, all represent women linked in an ideal friendship that transcends class, culture and religion; Braimoh and his taxi-driver friends and Aina, Elewa’s petty-trader mother constitute the properly thinking, hard working class; Emmanuel represents the resocialized student leader /intellectual; Colonel Johnson Ossai is used to symbolize intelligent, benevolent military (his extended metaphor of the horse being both clever and aptly intriguing indicate a good intellect); Amaechina (usually a boy’s name), is a properly androgynous name to symbolize the fusion of the male/female principles in harmonious balance; and Elewa’s uncle represents the wisdom and tolerance that come with age (Mezu 2006, p.136).

The amalgam of the names of characters mentioned above is designed to indicate how the two sexes can co-exist and mitigate the extremes of patriarchal binaries, in a nego-feminist orientation, so as to rebuild not just their country, ravaged by decades of oppressive military juntas, but also their

homes, initially under the onslaught of hegemonies anchored on tradition-imposed inequalities. As Nnaemeka (2004) avows, nego-feminism is about knowing “when, where, and how to go around patriarchal land mines” (p. 378). Hence, a mention of Beatrice, Elewa and Agatha, alongside Braimoh, Emmanuel and Ossai, points to the fact that both male and female characters, of whatever social class, have their own roles to play in the rebuilding of the country. Hence, this paper advances that an innocuous and peaceable co-existence in leadership typifies the exercise of innocuous power in *Anthills of the Savannah*.

Power in *Epistularis* Communication

Non-belligerent versions of power, in *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, are realized in the empowerment of female characters using letter-writing, as a way of achieving self-expression. Some sections of the novel have a child-narrator, whereby the incidents narrated, parallel incidents in Djebbar’s own life. Therefore, in these semi-autobiographical sections of *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, Djebbar, using the voice of her alter-ego, seeks to open up to the society the fact that the male order has unnecessarily imposed restrictions on the female order by requiring the latter to obfuscate their sensuality and responsiveness to eroticism. By putting the lead female character in the habit of letter-writing, the author deconstructs the socio-religious barrier that prevents a woman from talking about her feelings. The history and arguments surrounding the affirmation of epistolarity as a women’s form of writing are articulated by “Elizabeth C. Goldsmith [who] has brought together a collection of essays on women’s epistolarity: letters written by real women (“writers” and non-writers) as well as letters written by fictional women in novels by both men and women” (Bauschatz, 1993, p. 1). Bauschatz (ibid) makes the observation that one of the reasons as to why female epistolarity is important is because when views that affect women are articulated by men, an instance of literary “cross-dressing” and “female impersonation” is created. Therefore, this paper conceives that an exercise of innocuous power by female characters is aided by female epistolarity, because issues affecting women are best articulated by the women themselves.

In *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, The author debunks the socio-religious barrier that prevents a woman from talking about her feelings and emotions. Equally, the use of the French language, in the writing of the letters, emasculates the hegemony associated with the Arab language. In the setting of the novel, Arabic is symbolic of the paternalistic order. The foregoing assertion is made because as Ringrose (2006) avers, *Fantasia: An Algerian Cavalcade*, is a sub-sectionalised novel, in which the patriarchal conservativeness, associated with Arabic, is mitigated by the subjectivity of French:

The autobiographical sections appear to conform to the symbolic/paternal tendency as Djebbar “thinks back through her fathers” and retraces her entry into the paternal language/order. However, despite the paternal filter, these sections also reveal the presence of the semiotic/maternal as absence. For although Djebbar’s identity is reconstructed by her entry into the paternal language, it is nevertheless marked by the absence of the mother tongue. Subjectivity is constructed in opposition to the objectifying tendency of the paternal order but also in relation to the lost maternal order – a lost order which Djebbar consciously attempts to recover in the final part of the work (Ringrose 2006, p. 92-93).

Ringrose (2006) agrees that Djebbar retraces the steps of her bildungsroman narrative to the days that the patriarchal world was what defined the power matrix in her childhood and shows how femininity was under suppression. The narrator’s letter-writing is a sign of the matriarchy finally starting to (re)assert itself while the fact that it is a young and innocuous character who tells the story in this section is a signification of the authenticity of the ideas therein expressed. In effect, the semi-autobiographical, epistolary, first section of the novel, lays the ground for an expose of how innocuous power, couched in epistularis, is exercised later on in the historical parts of the text.

Saying “No” to “Bullish” Behaviour

“Bullish behaviour” is a coinage of Muriungi (2005), a term that is used to refer to the behaviour of a man in situations whereby such a man feels he is justified to instinctively gratify his sexual desires when he encounters a woman. The phrase is therefore metaphorical:

[It] supposes not only virility and excess energy, it also presumes impulsive, forceful and risky conduct in the belief that “the bull” has a right to “the cow” or what it seeks from “the cow” – mere sexual gratification without considering sexuality and reproduction” Bullish behaviour accordingly involves ignoring danger and risk and harm. It implies animal behaviour which is instinctive, irrational and in this case, risky (Muriungi 2005, p. 126-27).

Instead of female characters giving in to the “bullish” behaviour from men, their polite refusal to be drawn into acts of sexual debauchery is an exercise of innocuous power, a position that is made evident by Nyamishana, in *Tears of my Mother*.

As noted above, female characters, in *Tears of my Mother*, respond to oppressive patriarchy within the institution of the family in a non-aggressive manner but are nevertheless able to innocuously resist incestuous inclinations from male family members. Just like the Mayor of Kafr El Teen, in *God Dies by the Nile*, and Tayebwa, in *Tears of my Mother*, have been cast as only intent on a glorification of their carnal desires, Gerald, a maternal uncle to Nyamishana, fits the same mantra of sexual predation, pedophilia and sexual debauchery. In an apparent subversion of the expectation that a maternal uncle is a surrogate parent to his sister's child, Gerald ensures that his wife is away from home when Nyamishana goes to spend the night in his house. Nyamishana is convinced that since Gerald is her uncle, she can enjoy the sanctuary of his house as she looks for a job in Kampala. This happens several years after she has completed her university studies. Her hopes are however broken by the turn of events when she goes to spend a night in Gerald's house:

Gerald received her warmly and life went on until one fateful night when in a sleepy mode, she felt a hand groping for her breast. She thought that she was dreaming but upon fully waking up from her sleep she realized there was a figure next to her, right in her bed.

"Someone help. Someone help me, please," she alarmed at the top of her voice.

"There's no one to help you," whispered a familiar voice. "Your auntie hasn't returned from the village. It's only you and I in the game."

"Uncle Gerald, so it's you doing this to me?"

Switching on the light he assured her: “We either do it here and now, or tomorrow first thing in the morning you pack your things and get out of my house.”(*Tears*, p. 66).

From the way Gerald treats his niece, it is evident that as a man, he regards Nyamishana, a woman, as being a helpless person. He seems to affirm sentiments expressed by Mohanty (2000), to the fallacy of African communities in which men are treated as always powerful and women as always powerless. Nyamishana chooses to deal with Gerald's affront in a nego-feminist way. Her response is similar to what Nnaemeka (2004) sees as an ability for women to “cope with successfully/go around”(p.378). Further, in view of the fact that Nyamishana politely declines Gerald's incestuous inclinations, then it is concluded that she rejects his “bullish” behaviour innocuously by declining his overture.

Similarly, in *God Dies by the Nile*, Saadawi paints a portrait of a Muslim society where the despoilment of young girls elicits an innocuous rebuttal from such girls. Some of the women afflicted by such exploitation choose to respond in non-violent manners. For instance, Nefissa, a niece to Fatheya, is forcibly uprooted from her father's house to go and work as a domestic servant in the Mayor's house. While in the Mayor's house, the Mayor sexually exploits her and finally impregnates her. She is compelled to disappear from Kafr El Teen, and unable to take care of her baby, decides to desert the infant at Sheikh Hamzawi's doorstep. Chapter three of the narrative, which documents Nefissa's suffering as she journeys from the Mayor's home begins thus:

She piled up pieces of stone and pebbles in the ditch beneath the slope of the river bank, covered them with earth, and flattened the surface with the palm of her hand. Then, resting her arm on the ground, she sat down with her back to the trunk of a mulberry tree. The earth was fresh against her hot skin. A damp coolness seemed to flow from the tree into the aching muscles and bones of her back. She pressed her forehead and face up against it, licking the moisture that exuded from it with her parched tongue (*God Dies* p.18).

The above description that refers to a “she” prefigures that the noun represented by the pronoun “she” is going through a difficult time. She has taken some time off to rest near a river, having endured a long trek on a hot day. The coolness of the water and the shade offered by the mulberry tree offers temporary reprieve from the suffering resultant from the long trek. While one might have expected Nefissa to expose the Mayor’s travesty, she chooses to run away from his home, in an exercise of innocuous power, designed to further curtail the bullish behaviour from the Mayor.

Later on, in the story, the narrator relates how the Chief of the Village Guard had been sent to Kafrawi’s house to persuade Kafrawi to let Nefissa work in the Mayor’s house. Initially, Nefissa adamantly refuses to assent to the Chief of the Village Guard’s injunctions and hides above the oven. In an ironic twist of events, it is Nefissa’s father, Kafrawi, who orders Nefissa to stop hiding. He tells her, “You, Nefissa, come down here at once” (*Anthills*, p.21). Nefissa is eventually handed over to the Mayor for light domestic work but mainly to satisfy the Mayor’s voyeurism. Her position becomes that of a “femme-maitresse”, a term that Nnaemeka (1997) uses to refer to a woman who is also a man’s concubine. She finally bears an illegitimate child, fathered by the Mayor. Aware that she does not have the wherewithal to raise the child, she decides to take the innocuous way out by leaving the infant at the doorstep of Sheikh Hamzawi, hoping that the childless man will rear the child. Hamzawi wakes up the following morning and discovers the infant at his doorstep:

His foot collided with a body that was neither that of a dead rabbit, nor of a dead cat. It was moving, and alive, and also much bigger. He was seized with fright thinking it could be a spirit, or an elf of the night. But a moment later he heard a faint moaning, and when he looked down at the ground despite his dimmed eyesight, he could discern what looked like a rosy face, two eyes with tears at the fringes of the closed lashes, and an open mouth with lips which trembled slightly, as it breathed in air with a gasping sound. For a moment he stood stock still not daring to move. Could it be that Allah had responded to his prayers? Had the amulet of Haj Ismail at last produced its magic effect? This child seemed as though it had fallen from the night sky right in front of his door, just as Christ had come down from on high to where the Virgin Mary had lain down to rest under a tree (*God Dies*, p.34-35).

The fact that Hamzawi is happy to get the baby, attributing his luck to Haj Ismail’s charms or Allah’s benevolence, points to the fact that Nefissa judged the situation accurately. Her action is thus an innocuous way of exercising her maternal power and a way of defying the Mayor’s bullish behaviour of impregnating her, a vice that would have made her child to suffer because Nefissa cannot adequately provide for the baby.

Conclusion

This paper has started with an introduction on the texts handled. The authors argue that nego-feminism is an alternative theorization on West African feminism. The thrust of nego-feminism is the reliance on complementarity of the sexes, rather than agitation for equality. The paper has demonstrated that eroticism hinged on female sexuality is not a weapon that female characters in the study texts use to negotiate for power. Instead, the characters sampled embrace their maternal and domestic roles and in so doing share leadership positions with male characters. Within the Muslim sub-culture, the paper has been used to show how the writing of letters by girls is a peaceable and innocuous way of exploring female sexuality. Lastly, the penultimate section before this conclusion has been used to articulate how female characters respond to sexual predation without a resort to militancy.

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