

Black Feminist Writers' Perspectives of Violence Against Women

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Abstract

Feminist movements were formed for women to defend themselves as they seek self, cultural, marital, economic, religious and political emancipation and gender equality in different societies they found themselves. The African woman and her peers in diaspora are subjected to other social oppressive conditions in addition to the inhibiting structures found in the developed countries, especially economic deprivations and violence against women. Using Feminist theories, this study exposes violence against women as they are represented in some selected African and African-Diasporic literature. It advocates for justice and equity by highlighting the need for African women and women of African descent to liberate themselves from insidious cultures, traditions, customs, norms, and values that have denigrated and designed their lives for social injustice and violence against personhood and its accompanying ramifications in society.

Keywords: Gender inequality, oppression, African woman, feminism and emancipation

Introduction

From the creation of man, there has been extreme use of violence against women to subdue them and make them feel inferior, weak and dependent on men. Orjinta (2013) rightly asserts that 'one who is weak, dependent and inferior is reduced to the domesticity, docility, invisibility, invocality, poverty and passivity' (14). There are various acts of

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violence: cultural, physical and sexual against women depending on the culture of the society women find themselves. As a result of oppression against women because of gender inequality, feminism as an ideology emerged in the 18th century as a movement against the oppression of women by men, culture tradition and religion. With the use of feminist theories, this study examines the representations of violence against women in selected African and African diasporic fictions. It aims at highlighting how the variants of feminism help Black feminist writers conceptualize new images of self-actualized women as models for women liberation.

Both white and black feminists fight for gender equality, but Audre Lorde observes that the oppression of the black woman is not only based on sex but also race and class (Lorde 1983). This makes the pain directed to the black woman more than triple the pains of women of the white race. It also leads to the black feminists propounding variants of feminism that can effectively solve the black woman's gender-related problems. Alice Walker (1983) proposes 'Womanism' as a variant of feminism for the black woman's struggle for gender balance. Orjinta (2013) confirms that African American and African women and their male sympathizers courageously carved their feminist discourse and praxis as a revolution per excellence. He also highlights that these women, led by Alice Walker refuse to subject to the sin of conformity as regards certain uncomfortable norms and duplicity in the mainstream Euro-American feminism. Urama (2021) in support of this asserts that differentiating African feminism from Western feminism is crucial. Alice Walker's Womanism and Audre Lorde's 'Womanism' and other variants of black-African feminist theories based on African culture like Mary Kolawole's 'Womanism', Chikwenyi Okonjo-Ogunyemi's 'African Womanism', Obioma Nnaemeka's 'Nego-Feminism', Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's 'Snail Sense Feminism' were used in the analysis of the selected texts.

Literary texts were used in the analysis because literature mirrors society. Ezeigbo (2019) rightly asserts that the relationship between literature and reality is that literature 'gives reality through the formal imaginative pattern of work of art' (15). Therefore, these selected literary texts were created as a direct result of women's experiences of gender-based violence in society.

Women's Loss of Self Due to Violence in Patriarchal Black African Societies

There are many forms of violence against women in and across the globe like cultural violence, physical violence, economic violence, sexual violence and others. These forms of violence abound due to the patriarchal attitudes entrenched in many societies. In African societies, these forms of violence against women are contexts of discourse. Culture is not to be static, therefore, feminist writers have not only incorporated violence against women as the major part of their discourse but have also conceptualized images of assertive women that have stood out to combat the traditions and norms mapped out by the society against women. This change is inevitable for the development of society. Some of these forms of cultural violence against women are presented in the form of cultural inhibitions on women's self-assertion and self-realization. The *Osu* caste system in the Eastern part of Nigeria promotes the act of violence being perpetrated on women. This is portrayed by Chinua Achebe in *No Longer at Ease* (1960). Even the acclaimed novelist, Chinua Achebe, could not muster the courage to confront it in the marriage between Obi Okonkwo and Clara. The harrowing effect of this obnoxious tradition is also the subject of Jude Ogu's *The Secrets of Nothing* (1993) and Buchi Emecheta's *The Bride Price* (1976). Many women have suffered great psychological torture from parents or lovers just because men and the tradition have refused not to see them as subhuman. Okonkwo's family kicks against Akunna, the protagonist of *The Bride Price* marriage to Chike Ofulue because it is forbidden for a free-born to marry an *osu*, a slave. The family prefers Akunna to marry Okoboshi whose family has to kidnap Akunna and force her to be Okoboshi's wife. This is the predicament of a woman in a society where taking a girl by force is an acceptable way of making her become a man's wife. Okonkwo refuses to accept Akunna's bride price from Chike Ofulue even when it is crystal clear that the couple is happily living together. This is because Okonkwo wants Akunna to die a cursed woman for being pregnant for a slave.

Another form of cultural violence against women is embedded in the issues of traditional or customary rights of inheritance in most parts of African society. This is used as a veritable ground for violence against women in many African texts. Idu in Flora Nwapa's *Idu* (1970), even though fulfilled in motherhood, and pregnant with a second baby was suddenly widowed. However according to tradition the brother of her deceased

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husband is entitled to take over her. This highlights how culturally, the marriage institution has imposed a lot of violence against women in African culture. Orjinta (2013) confirms that levirate, sororate, Ghost, polygamy, endogamy and child marriages are forms of cultural violence against women. In sororate marriage, a girl is given to the husband of her dead sister as her replacement. This is practised in many parts of Igboland with a claim that the girl will be in the right position to take care of her deceased sister's children. Ghost marriage is also practised in Igbo culture when a girl is married to a dead man to raise children to inherit the dead man's property and continue his lineage. In endogamous marriage, a girl is allowed to be married within her kin group and this is mostly practised where the *osu* caste system is practised. The practise of polygamous marriage has encouraged the marginalization of women especially when the man is so lazy that he cannot provide for a large family. This is portrayed in Isidore Okpewho's *The Victims* (1971) and Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979). Most of such men turn to drunks leaving the responsibility of providing for the family to their wives. Child marriage implies exposing underage children to sexual abuse and a lot of health hazards.

There is also a lot of domestic violence against women in failed marriages. This is explored in Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* (1974) where Francis batters Ada, his wife to the extent that if not that their landlady called the Police, he has the intention to kill her. In Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (2006), Eugene's brutality to Beatrice, his wife is also terrible. She loses her pregnancies on two occasions she is battered by Eugene. Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) also presents Okonkwo who beats up his wives at any slightest provocation and Uzowulu who beat his wife, Mgbafo, till she miscarried. In *Arrow of God* (1964) Achebe also presents Ibe, Akueke's husband, who turns her into a punching bag, and she even miscarries during one of those times he beat her up.

Childlessness also provides a veritable ground for violence against women. The blame for childlessness in a marriage is solely placed on the woman. Men are usually exempted from all the blames. The woman would be ridiculed by members of her husband's family and the entire society even when the husband is culpable for their childlessness. This is the subject matter in Ifeoma Okoye's *Behind the Clouds* (1982). Ije, the

protagonist of the novel suffers all sorts of traumatic experiences while it is Dozie, her husband who has a blockage in his reproductive organ. Childlessness gives mother-in-law's opportunity to form an alliance with their sons against their wives. Thus, mothers-in-law have been thorns in their daughter-in-laws' flesh. This is portrayed in *Behind the Clouds* in Dozie's mother, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullet* (2011) in the character of Eloka's mother and the tyranny of Obiora's mother toward Amaka in Nwapa's *One is Enough*.

Cultural inhibitions that make the girl child not to speak out is another form of cultural violence against women. This prevents women from growth towards selfhood and is portrayed in Ama Ata Aidoo's *The Girl Who Can and Other Stories* (1997) and Jamaica Kincaid's *At the Bottom of the River* (1983). Women are trained from childhood to be submissive to men. They are taught how to be of good behaviour so that they would not be regarded as sluts in society. This is just a culturally constructed norm to bring the female child down. This leads to another form of violence against women which is that they are not expected to enjoy sex. For instance, a woman who expresses sexual pleasure in Igbo culture is taken as a prostitute who has no shame. Urama (2019) rightly asserts that traditionally in Igboland women are forbidden from expressing sexual pleasure. Acholonu (1988) puts it that 'the African woman is trapped in the claws of taboo and restriction that help to propel male chauvinism' (217). According to Nnorom (2007), this is the major reason why women's reproductive organs are mutilated, or they are circumcised to minimize their sexual pleasure. It is a culturally constructed norm to keep many women under one man as their husband, yet men's infidelity in wedlock abounds. Urama (2019) also affirms that a woman is made to pass through psychological torture if she commits adultery but a married man is allowed to have as many mistresses as he pleases. Some wicked men even abandon their wives for their mistress and society would not talk about it while in some parts of African society women who commit adultery are chased out of their husbands' homes. Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* highlights the traumatic experiences of women due to the infidelity of men in Islamic culture. Jacqueline is always in and out of the hospital due to the depression she suffers from her husband's infidelity.

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Widowhood is another form of cultural violence against women because wives pass through lots of misery and torture when they lose their husbands. For instance, in Igboland of Eastern Nigeria, culture and tradition expose widows to some kind of practices that devalue women. The worst is the case if the widow is also childless. This is portrayed in Nwapa's *Idu*, Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, and *The Pride Price*.

Another form of violence against women is the economic exploitation of women by men. This is portrayed in Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* where Francis and his family wants Adah to stay back in Nigeria and be working to pay for Francis' school fees and his upkeep in London as well as provide for Francis father's family in Lagos. This is also seen in Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) where Efuru works very hard to pay her bride price which her husband Adizua could not pay. Denying a girl child the opportunity to gain western education on another platform enhances violence against women in Africa. A good example is Adah in Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen* (1976) who is denied western education so that her junior brother, Boy would be trained in school. Adah has to be married off so early so that her pride price would be used to pay her brother's school fees. This is because traditionally in Africa, it is believed that sending a girl child to school is training another man's wife. Therefore, with less worth placed on women, they are prepared early in life for marriage.

Sexual exploitation due to economic/survival reasons remains a dominant feature in the violence against women. Obofun, Queen's husband in Festus Iyayi's *Violence* (1979) unleashed it on hapless Adisa, wife of Idemudia. This is also echoed in Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross* (1982) between Waringa and her boss, and Firdaus' experience in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*. The exploitation of the female gender for economic gains (trafficking, peer pressure, exposure to drugs) is on the increase in contemporary African society and assuming an alarming dimension. This is portrayed in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *Trafficked* (2008) and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters Street* (2010) where young women are lured to Europe by traffickers and their agents and used as sex slaves to make money for the trafficking Barons and Cartels.

Black men in diaspora struggling for significance after being negatively affected by the institutionalized racism in America and Caribbean Islands receive all sorts of dehumanizing tortures from the whites. This affected their sense of reasoning and most of them live frustrated and wasted lives. Black women had to work so hard to sustain their families and this makes life quite tough for them. Yet black men after being placed as second class citizens by whites go back home to unleash their anger on their women. Following Orjinta's (2013) assertion that 'feminism aims at ensuring the stability, survival and identity of the female gender', this transferred aggression leads to more violence against the black women by the black men who also want to show their masculinity too. Alice Walker and Toni Morrison being gender-sensitive and blacks write not only to protest the maltreatment of the black woman by the whites but to protest against rape or sexual harassment on the black women by the black men. This is the major thematic preoccupation of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) which is based on her assertion that a woman can love another woman sexually. Kolawole (1997) in rejection of Walker's approval of Lesbian love argues that:

To the majority of ordinary Africans, lesbianism is a non-existent issue because it is a mode of self-expression that is completely strange to their worldview. It is not even an option to millions of African women and can therefore not be the solution ... (Kolawole 1997, 15).

Being sensitive to the suffering of women of her race and how they are treated as second fiddle to men, Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) writes to portray the tragic effect of imposing whiteness as an ideal for beauty on the developing female identity of a young African American girl. In early 1940s, the belief that white features like blue eyes, blond hair and fair complexion are what would make African American young girls seen to be beautiful also gives way to physical, psychological and sexual violence against women in America. In examining the tragic effect of imposing whiteness ideals of beauty on the developing female identity, the novel portrays the discomfort of knowing that one is black in a country where whiteness is accepted as an ideal for beauty. Morrison feels so passionately for the blacks that accept to assimilate whiteness as the criterion for beauty by writing to show the psychological effects of whiteness on the black community. *The Bluest Eye* demonstrates the psychological devastation of a young black girl, Pecola

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Breedlove, who searches for love and acceptance in a world that denies and devalues the black woman of her race. Audre Lorde in her poetry collection *The Black Unicorn* (1978) also deals with the issues of bleaching the skin by blacks to be accepted as 'real human beings. The discomfort of a black woman knowing that she is black where whiteness is accepted as an ideal for beauty results in many black women being exposed to all sorts of abuse because it makes the black woman accept inferiority. It is an inferiority complex that results in poverty in Black homes which in turn exposes the black woman to work as domestic servants to the whites instead of struggling to acquire western education for her growth and development.

Strategies Employed by Black Women as Panacea to Subjugation and Violence

Jamaica Kincaid in her collection of short stories, *At the Bottom of the River* (1983) rightly opines that the struggle for significance selfhood is best achieved when a woman moves away physically or mentally from inhibiting forces that seek to suppress, pigeonhole or stuck self-growth. In the collection, Kincaid is a feminist that needs rapid growth, self-realization and self-actualization. Seeing that she cannot regain her true self where her natural mother and the society indoctrinate inhibiting patriarchal culture that mars a woman's growth, she runs away from Antigua to America. In the story 'Girl' she emphasizes the societal norms that hinder women's growth. In 'At the Bottom of the River,' she promotes women's liberation through self-assertion in the 'girl' finding her way out; separating herself from her natural mother to embrace her magical other mother at the bottom of the river. The mother at the bottom of the river is a true mother who nurtures her, and she regains her true self.

Also in *The Color Purple*, Celie just like the 'girl' in 'At the Bottom of the River' after experiencing sexual pleasure for the first time in her life with a woman, Shug Avery, detests the male reproductive organ that has been the major tool men used to inhibit her growth to significant selfhood. She declares that she hates the penis which she describes as 'a frog' and chooses to be herself by being a lesbian, the only way that she is made to enjoy sex. In

this Walker asserts the significance of her Womanism which emphasizes that a woman can love another woman sexually. She emphasizes:

A black feminist or feminist of colour ... A woman who loves other women sexually and/or non-sexually, appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility ... Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female (Walker 1983, xi).

Sisterhood or women bonding which is promoted by Womanism, Nego-Feminism and Snail-sense Feminism is employed in *The Color Purple*, *So Long a Letter*, *Efuru*, to foster the development of the protagonists in the novels to self-actualization. In *The Color Purple* which is an existential novel; a novel that investigates how tradition and men have relegated women to suffer as subhuman and how women help one another to struggle for self-worth. Feminist Existentialism argues that women should rise against all these oppressions for a remarkable transformation. In presenting the protagonist of the novel, Celie, a fourteen-year-old girl and victim of rape by her stepfather, Alphonso who is also constantly beaten up by her husband, Albert, Alice Walker opines that some women have been rendered worthless, totally voiceless and they are left with the belief that they cannot accomplish anything reasonable in life. Existentialism comes into play when Celie begins to come in contact with other women like Sophia and Shug Avery and gradually she begins to develop a heightened consciousness; she begins to change. She begins to have a voice, talk back to Albert whom she could not talk back to before or even mention his name. She begins to let him know that she is a human being who feels pain and not wood as she pretends to be before. She calls him by his first name Albert without the deference of Mr___; holds the bull by the horn and packs her bags and leaves. She starts her own business – quilt making – showing that she now believes in herself, that she can do something meaningful for her living. There is an incredible or remarkable transformation because Celie achieves self-transcendence and she becomes a fulfilled human being. Ezeigbo (1996) also encourages women to carry their less fortunate 'sisters' along with them by encouraging and fostering genuine and positive 'bonding' and by supporting one another because 'it is in women's interest' (59-60).

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Western education as a source of empowerment for the girl child is also another survival strategy employed in the texts. Education assures better life and opportunities for the woman; for instance, Beatrice in *Anthills of the Savannah* (1988), Li in *The Stillborn* (1984), Adah in *Second Class Citizen* and the 'girl' in *At the Bottom of the River*. Education gives the girl child courage and assertiveness; for instance, Amaka in *One is Enough* (1984), Aissatou in *So Long a Letter* (1981). The significance of education cannot be over-stated. As Okereke (2001) observes, 'formal Western education, a colonial heritage, has been a positive, liberating influence for Nigerian women. It has equipped them for self-definition by raising their consciousness to their subjugation in a male-dominated society' (113). Adaku in *The Joys of Motherhood* understands the importance of educating the girl child and even goes into prostitution to be able to give her daughter quality education. Also, in *Efuru* (1966), *The Last of the Strong Ones* (1996) and *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) Nwapa, Adimora-Ezeigbo and Adichie invent the images of African women who confront men openly and abuse them for their evil acts against innocent women in the characters of Ajanupu, Onyekoruru and Kainene respectively.

Another survival strategy employed by African women for survival is complementarity as proposed in Womanism, Nego Feminism and Snail-sense feminism. Okonjo-Ogunyemi (1996) emphasizes that her variant of the feminist theory called *African Womanism* advocates for gender balance in every aspect of life through what she refers to as the 4 Cs – collaboration, conciliation, consensus and complementarity (65). Orjinta (2013) rightly opines that 'the womanism invites the African woman to complement her efforts with those of her men for the good of the family, and for the development of the entire community (9). Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter* highlights the importance of complementarity by emphasizing through this quotation: 'I remain persuaded of the inevitable and necessary complementarity of man and woman, Love, imperfect as it may be in its content and expression; remain the natural link between these two beings. To love one another! If only each partner could move sincerely towards the other' (Ba 1981, 88). She praises Aissatou for her self-assertion; for being able to do what she Ramatoulaye could not because she tries to be loyal to culture, religion and love. Yet, seeing the traumatic experiences she has passed through due to her abandonment by her husband,

she prays for a world where the complementarity of men and women would be practised in the family.

Conclusion

The major conclusion drawn from the analysis is that women did not fold their arms and accept the position violence against them has mapped for them in society. They struggled for their emancipation and improved their self-worth through self-assertion and self-actualization in the selected texts. If they apply the same survival strategies as explored in the texts analysed in this study, they will be able to overcome the violence they are facing in these contemporary societies.

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