
Transcending Moral Boundaries in Contemporary African Women's Writings: Feminism and the Disillusionment of the Sexually Autonomous

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Abstract

This paper articulates women's unwise resolve to exceed the limits of acceptable moral and sexual behaviour in our society, as reflected in contemporary African fiction. The purpose of this paper is, thus, to re-examine feminist ideologies of old and to give fresh insights on issues of immorality, gender and sexuality in African women's writings in a world so promiscuous that it has created a disillusioned generation. The paper also focuses on the disillusionment experienced by the sexually autonomous female in African women's creative narratives, whose radical decisions and immoral choices made in desperate attempts to overcome patriarchal oppression and sexual objectification have led her into a quagmire and into absolute ridicule. It is on feminist theory that this paper is underpinned. This paper concludes, therefore, that ancient and modern feminist ideologies are threatening to derail the feminist train on a global scale, unless urgent steps are taken to avert the cataclysmic end towards which feminism is headed.

Keywords: Feminism, Immorality, Gender and Sexual Autonomy, Disillusionment, Contemporary Women's Writings.

Introduction

The historical impression made of women in many African novels, and especially in male-authored texts, is that they are a people completely devoid of logical thinking - a people considered to have a heart and some degree of beauty but to be totally bereft of sound brains. Women in the classical, mediaeval times and even in the 19th century were also perceived, in several instances, as 'sexual objects' made by God to satisfy men, to keep them company and to cater to their every whim. In African literature, especially in works authored by men, women are still presented in a bad light. They are ascribed stereotypical roles and are portrayed as garrulous, ignorant, troublesome and docile, as subservient mules or donkeys, who can be duplicitous and rapaciously greedy (Banham *et al*, xiii).' Similarly, Helen Chukwuma asserts:

The female character in African fiction...is a facile lack lustre human being, the quiet member of a household, content only to bear children, unfulfilled if she does not, and handicapped if she bears only daughters.... Docility and complete submission of will are demanded and enacted from her.... Images of women as indeterminate human beings, dependent, gullible and voiceless (people) have stuck (131).

It is, therefore not news that for years women's history has been that of docility and sheer domesticity (Azuike 81). It is also not news that in African fiction, female characters have had their identities subsumed or recognizable only through those of their husbands. Worse still, many mythical stereotypes about women abound in African literature, and these stereotypes have greatly supported male dominance and the general devaluation of women. These mythical stereotypes have also included the views that recognize women only in terms of sexuality and reproduction. One of these views is that the woman as 'a beast of burden,' must bear the greater stress of responsibility for propagation and for nurturance. In addition to this, she must shoulder greater responsibility for sexual immorality or for services rendered anytime to men. Mythologizing the woman as the 'inferior being' has cut across cultural as well as geographical boundaries. In Greek civilization, for instance, the woman was regarded as a bad omen. She was painted in the image of the Pandora: the originator of evil. The woman was not known to be better than an imbecile (Azuike 48). The plight of women, specifically those in marriage, is aptly captured in Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*. The author tells us:

Every woman, whether slave or free must marry. All her life a woman always belonged to some male. At birth a woman was owned by...people, and when she was sold...belonged to a new master, when she was grown up, her master who had paid something ... would control her (137). [Emphasis, mine].

According to Azuike (53), African women have considered marriage as the greatest source of losing their identity to men because women in African fiction have been portrayed as having no established line of authority. However, a brief examination of the feminist movement of old would reveal where the trouble with women originally stemmed from. The brief, historical, overview of feminism given below will also reveal the difficulty to 'fashion out a single universally accepted definition of feminism owing to cultural differences of adherents and theorists (Azeez Sesan 144).'

The Feminist Movement in Brief

Feminism developed in the late 19th century as a movement geared towards the alleviation of the plight of women and as a movement for the advocacy for the conferring of equal rights on both sexes. The improvement of the lot of women was high on the feminist agenda. The movement also aimed to uplift women from their socio-economic repression and oppression and to ensure equity and justice for all. Feminism was first notable in France and the word 'feminism' was coined from the French word 'feministe.' Charles Fourier, a Frenchman is said to have coined and used the word in 1830 for the first time. It is worthy of note that many feminists are women but not all feminists are women. Men who are sympathetic to the plight of women or to issues concerning women and who believe that patriarchy is oppressive to women are also referred to as feminists. The feminist movement, furthermore, began as an institution with the Women's Suffrage Movement; a movement started by a group of liberal white women whose concerns were to gain the vote for women at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The reasons for the development of feminism in Europe and America were similar to those of Africa, even though feminism in Africa, in Nigeria specifically, could be seen as a reaction to or a criticism of Western feminism. Furthermore, African women did not accept the fact that the status of women in African societies could compare with that of their western counterparts. This, in effect, lent credence to the fact that there were different levels of subordination of women to be found in Africa compared to the western world. While African feminism focused on socio-cultural existence or relations, Western feminism incorporated issues concerning sexuality, lesbianism and homosexuality. These aforementioned experiences were considered as being totally outside African women's experience.

Studies have revealed that many women in Africa, indeed in Nigeria, have found the feminist label too strong a tag to bear (Azuike 2). The reasons for this are as multifarious as the contradictory ideologies and the different names given to the feminist liberation movement of old, which its practitioners have peddled. These multifarious names include, for instance: liberal feminism, radical feminism, socialist and marxist feminism etc., and variants of the term feminism in Africa include: womanism, Africana womanism, motherism, stiwanism and negofeminism; each peddling its different beliefs which critics have found confusing and downright contradictory. In the western world, the first - wave of feminism developed in the late 19th century and early 20th century with emphasis on the struggle for women to attain full citizenship and legal and equal rights with men. The second - wave took place from the 1960s to 1990s, wrestling against women's sexual debasement, oppression and 'sex-ploitation,'

while the third - wave feminism began in the mid 1990s and 'has been used as an umbrella term to describe a new era of feminine thinking (O'Shaughnessy & Stadler 333).' The efforts of early western feminists, such as Mary Wollstonecraft, author of the world acclaimed book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), George Eliot (real name, Mary Ann Evans), Elizabeth Blackwell, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Simone de Beauvoir, author of the controversial book entitled *The Second Sex* (1949), and Virginia Woolf, among others, included advocacy for the total emancipation of women. Simone de Beauvoir had presented a most radical critique of the age-long mythologizing of the woman as an 'inferior object' or as 'the other' in her book: *The Second Sex*. Her argument was that it was erroneous to assume that only the male could make choices capable of altering his future. De Beauvoir's book also attacked the 'married woman syndrome' with its accompanied notions of women being reproducers of the future labour force and nothing more; or of women being the providers of unpaid (sexual) services in return for protection etc.

Furthermore, marriage to de Beauvoir was considered destructive. She considered it an experience that mutilated women and doomed them for life. As a matter of fact, the African-American feminist theorist, Bell Hooks, who was a notable figure in the second wave of the feminist movement, had also insisted that 'feminism **should be opposed** to all systems of domination (including oppression on the basis of race, class, or sexuality as well as gender (qtd. in O'Shaughnessy & Stadler 333). It is, however, important to mention here that feminists particularly appeared confused in the conveyance of the various feminist ideologies which they peddled. The fact that women found the label 'feminist' too strong a tag to bear and mostly due to fear of societal ostracism, made African feminist writers like Emecheta and the late Nwapa to refer to themselves as "feminists with a small 'f.'" The reading world was speechless at the time. However many female writers in Africa have been inspired by the works of pioneers of African feminist literature like Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, Ifeoma Okoye, Zaynab Alkali, Akachi Ezeigbo and lately, Chimamanda Adichie (all Nigerians); Nawal El Saadawi (Egyptian), Bessie Head (South African), Mariama Ba and Aminata Sow Fall (Senegalese), Tsitsi Dangarembga (Zimbabwean) and Doreen Baingana (Ugandan), to mention a few. The aforementioned writers' treatment of women's issues in their texts; especially their handling of female oppression, has classified them as feminists. However, their acid attack on patriarchy as being nothing other than slavish and tormenting for women has also earned them the tag of 'radical feminists.'

New Feminism

The above mentioned is among the newest brands of feminism and it seeks a practical solution to the ideological quagmire in which the 1960s feminism has found itself enmeshed. The term, 'new feminist' was initially coined and used in Britain in the 1920s in order to differentiate between its beliefs and the ideologies of old feminism. In other words, new feminists are strongly resistant to early feminist ideologies and codes of conduct. The practitioners of New Feminism have proposed new ways of helping women to find fulfillment and more acceptability in their lives, in ways where older feminism has failed them. New feminism has embarked on what can only best be termed 'a sexual revolution,' among its many other ventures. The practitioners of new feminism have also questioned the increasing separation of women from their homes (as radical feminists of old had proposed), from marital institutions or from child procreation. The rejection of the family and the home, as particularly supported by the radical feminist, Simone de Beauvoir, has been observed to bring the practitioners of the old type of feminism more disillusionment, more frustration in life and a terrible alienation from society and friends. Simone de Beauvoir, who had rejected the family, had claimed that the institution of marriage which mandated women to raise children had also encouraged the sexual exploitation of women. The New Feminists have proposed that the 1960s feminist movement has failed woefully to prevent the preponderance in the increase in women's divorce rates, in abortions committed worldwide, in separated couples and in the alarming rise of female abuse in polygamous marriages.

New Feminism has also argued that the old feminist movement which had initially set out, as Omotoso (96) has explained, 'to curb the social imbalance which negatively affects women has, hitherto, done very little to prevent the self-destruction which sexual autonomy has bestowed upon women. Omotoso further opines that 'recent trends in feminism tend to pose some mind-boggling ontological, epistemological and moral problems which can lead to an implosion of feminist struggle (96). In addition, New feminism has argued that 'true feminism is not just about women, it is about the family - both individually and collectively...and that marriage is a reciprocal, self -giving of persons in free, total, faithful and fruitful communion.'

The Downward Trend of the Feminist Movement

It is useful at this point to, briefly, examine a few of the criticisms leveled against the feminist movement of old, especially in the postulation that the liberation movement has derailed in its course and has caused women untold hardship - particularly in their sexual orientation. The feminist movement, has in

recent times, received an angry backlash from critics who have postulated that the images painted of women in contemporary African Literature have taken a downturn. Recent critics of feminism have deconstructed the word 'feminist' as being 'laden with negative baggage (Adichie 11)' and have postulated that the feminist movement is headed towards self-destruction...and towards an implosion (Omotoso 95-96), if nothing is done to prevent it. Charles Nnolim, a foremost critic and authority on African Literature, has proposed that the downfall of feminism is in its many ideologies. According to Nnolim, 'men and women could have lived comfortably with feminist ideology if restless feminists did not invent more confusing ideologies (196)' which now threaten to derail the course of the Liberation Movement. Clearly opposed to its multifarious nomenclatures which are known around the world, Nnolim propounds that feminism in Africa currently 'treads on scandalous path (195), and will suffer an implosion (Omotoso 95-96) if nothing is urgently done to forestall it. Charles Nnolim further laments that, 'the contours of the landscape of recent movements of African feminism are 'uneven, zig-zaggy...and apparently in a seesaw of confusions (195). An additional criticism of the Liberation Movement by him is one that describes it as 'a mish-mash and a conflation of undigested ideas about feminism in the first place (195). To Nnolim and to Omotoso, African feminist writers are mostly 'radical practitioners of heretical and dangerous ideas, especially propagated in their literary and creative works (Nnolim 198).

This leads the critical minds and thinkers to ask the question: 'have feminists been self-deceived' all along? Mary Ann Glendon in the introductory pages to Gloria Conde's *New Woman* (2002), has unequivocally questioned the Female Liberation Movement - especially the kind 'that stunts the intellectual and spiritual development of many women and girls and brings them so much disease, poverty, abortion and single parenthood (6).' It has been observed from African literary texts that the mismanagement of the laudable ventures of the feminist movement of old has caused women to wallow deeper into disillusionment and into greater despondency in recent climes. Mary Ann Glendon states categorically that:

Many of the 'victories' of 1970s feminism seem hollow. We now live in a time when women have more legal rights than ever before in history, yet their dignity, their intrinsic worth as human beings, is jeopardized in a number of ways that are distinctively modern. Having gained 'reproductive rights', women are increasingly left to bear sole responsibility for the consequences of exercising those rights unwisely (Glendon as qtd in Conde 6).

For starters, many women are still hugely discriminated upon in many spheres of life, including politics, work places, businesses and the academia. Though women have more legal rights, now, than in yester years, many are still marginalized or derided for being bold enough to demand equal salaries as the men for the same job done. As a matter of fact, women are still denied maternity leave in some sectors or made to renounce having children as a condition for taking up a full time job; especially in some banking sectors. In this guise, feminism fails to secure for such women, equality at the work place or working conditions that are similar to those of men. A definition of sexual autonomy, at this point, will shed more light on the fact that some feminist rights may have brought women even more drastic consequences than they bargained for, or originally agitated for.

Sexual Autonomy

This is here defined as the freedom to make a sexual choice by an individual, in compliance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which shares certain ideologies with the Feminist movement. The Scottish philosopher, John Locke (1632 - 1704) has defined rights as '...absolute moral claims or entitlements to life, liberty, and property.' And Maurice Cranston has held that Human Rights are matters of 'paramount importance' and their violation 'a grave affront to justice' (Cranston 1967). Hence, women the world over, have come a long way in their aspiration for fulfillment and for acceptability. Their agitation for absolute freedom also initiated that sexual autonomy should be bestowed upon women. Sexual Autonomy is further explained as 'sexual independence', of which feminists have understood as the right of the individual to decide the 'where, with whom, when and how' sexual intimacy can occur.

Sexual autonomy is good, provided that it leads to greater and healthier sexual relationships between couples in marriage. Sexual autonomy should not however condone prostitution, the legalization of which by the liberal feminists has brought women untold dissatisfaction in their sex lives. Ironically, the sexually autonomous women in African feminist texts have exhibited very little or absolutely no control over their sex lives because their sex lives have taken control of them in reverse. For instance, Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* explicitly details the intense frustrations of the sexually autonomous African woman, resident in America, who jumps from one bed to another in the name of sexual freedom. Adichie draws our attention to her female protagonist, Ifemelu, in a manner so shameful as to elicit our disgust. At the end of her bed hopping, Ifemelu is emotionally drained, thoroughly disillusioned, without a husband and gravely depressed. Not even one of the men who ravish her

sexually has proposed marriage to her. The experience leaves her psychologically traumatized. Her sexual meanderings in the United States also do not bring her a satisfying job until she relocates to her home country, Nigeria. Our next discussion will help us to put our lecture into a proper perspective.

Hypersexualization, Masculinity and Rape Culture

Men and women are sexualized and socialized differently without a doubt. Many arguments have been typically advanced to suggest or to explain the difference between the male and the female genders. One of such arguments is the biological factor which proposes that there are inborn and sexual differences between men and women. These differences are used to reinforce the argument that women are to conceive, nurse or nurture babies 'which uniquely dictates that they should stay at home all day and shun serious outside commitment (Diane Gersoni-Stavn, 15)' whereas, the male can and should be more daring, more outspoken, more outgoing, more sexually adventurous and more productive. Consequently, men are portrayed in African literary texts as human beings who are more sexually active than women. Women, on the other hand, are depicted as a people, more sexually repressed than men. Invariably, the women who fail to protect themselves from men's libidinous demands or raging hormones are in African literature blamed for the consequences of their sexual misconduct with men.

Hyper-sexuality on men's part tends to undermine female sexual autonomy. It sends the wrong signal that women or girls are sexual objects without a right to pleasure. Therefore, men are socialized to believe that, when a sexual encounter occurs between them and women, it is wholly for their pleasure and not for that of the women. This is why a man sleeps with a young woman in Baingana's *Tropical Fish* and feels no need to sexually satisfy her. The sexual encounter between Christine (20 years) and Peter (35 years) leaves the former extremely frustrated and dissatisfied. Let us hear Christine:

I lay on the bed in my clothes. Peter took off his clothes and draped them neatly over a chair, pointing two small pale buttocks towards me as he leaned over. Then he took my blouse and pants off ...lay down and stroked me for a few ...minutes, put on a condom, opened my legs, and stuck his penis in.... one thought was constant in my head like a newspaper headline: I am having sex with a white man. It was strange because it wasn't strange. He was done in a few minutes. He tucked me under his arm like an old habit, and we sank into sleep (94).

Much later in the same *Tropical Fish*, Christine's 'sexual escapades' with Peter causes her to miss her period. She refuses to bother Peter with her diagnosed pregnancy. Instead, she decides to abort the baby because according to her, 'it was personal and ...didn't seem to be his problem (98)'...also because they had 'a silent sex pact (98),' which no one must know about. She merely laments before terminating the pregnancy:

I found out I was pregnant. We used condoms most of the time. I didn't say anything when we didn't.... Miriam's sister, Margaret, a nurse, worked at a private clinic in the city. Nobody stopped me...it had to be done.... The doctor was cream-gloved, efficient, and kind. Why did I always seem to have my legs spread open before...men poking things into me? I let them(98). [Emphasis mine].

The question which Christine asks herself in the above textual citation is rhetorical, yet deeply disturbing. Here, we can see how the sexual liberation that causes a young woman to wilfully terminate a pregnancy has gone bad. Of what use, then, is a sexual autonomy of which the consequences for illicit sex are only grave for the woman? Conde opines:

Feminism has neither made woman happy nor left her fulfilled because instead of becoming the agent of change, she has been turned into an instrument in the hands of those who wish to see her oppressed (87).

Feminist reformers have proposed the celebration of women's autonomy. Rape, to them, translates to physically harming the woman and subordinating her sexuality or causing women physical as well as mental injury, hence adjudged a criminal offence. Thus, any form of forceful or violent coitus, sexual abuse or non-consent is considered rape. However, can the criminal law recognize the sexual bargaining with men (especially the type which goes bad) on the part of women as rape too? Can any sexual coercion which is not defined by bruises or use of weapons be termed rape? In Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, a woman's existence means absolutely nothing to a man. The author presents sexual assault as privileging men in the text. Similarly, in J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, women are gang-raped and no one does anything about it, not even the raped victims. In fact, in Coetzee's *Disgrace*, the female character, Lucy, keeps the resultant pregnancy rather than help to convict her rapists. She allows her sexual offenders to escape by refusing to disclose their identities to the police. In *Woman at Point Zero* too women are raped daily by their husbands in the name of marriage and

nothing is done; just as beating women daily is considered 'an act of love' in marriage, of which no punitive measure is meted out to the abuser. And because the men who rape their women in contemporary African texts, especially in *Woman at Point Zero* are not convicted for their violent deeds or brought to book, some protagonists take drastic actions to protect themselves. Therefore, for violating her sexual right and for extorting money from her, Firdaus, takes the law into her hands by killing her pimp, Marzouk. It is only then that the law reacts by jailing her at first and then by subsequently snuffing life out of her. By this, the author of *Woman at Point Zero*, Nawal El Saadawi, seems to testify to the fact that rape laws only protect men in the Islamic religion. The fact that sexual mythology defines women as sexual objects and the men as their predators cannot be over-emphasized in this text. It should be noted, however, that the sexual autonomy which fails to seek liberation for women from all conditions of subordination has woefully failed. On the other hand, if a woman is morally loose and invites or consents to sex due to her voracious sexual appetite and in the name of sexual freedom, such a woman should not cry wolf when her body is violated!

When a woman also acts the part of a Jezebel with her voracious or uncontrolled sexual desires, the licentious man around her should not be blamed for raping her! In the western world, white men sexually exploited black women during and after the Slave Trade as a means of subjugating the black race. White men considered the enslaved women as sexual toys and exploited them regularly. The scenario is set accordingly in *Tropical Fish* where Peter (a white exporter of exotic fish) sexually exploits Christine (a Ugandan) and deems it his right to do so. The young woman in question, keys into her own sexual enslavement by thinking it the best thing in the world to be sexually ravished and taken advantage of by a white man. Therefore, in feminist works like Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, Doreen Baingana's *Tropical Fish*, Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Americanah* as well as in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, the writers fail to confront the sexual and violent humiliation of black women by making the women take the entire blame for their violent and sexual assault by men. Feminists have either exonerated or vindicated the guilty men in the aforementioned texts and blamed instead the injured women. Once again, sexual autonomy goes awry. The following discussions will further reveal that contemporary African women writers are guilty of glamorizing sexual misconduct in males and females and are creating a sexually monstrous and promiscuous generation.

Contemporary African Literature and the Sexually Promiscuous Generation

The artistic presentation of women in contemporary African literary texts calls for a serious rethinking. The reason is that hitherto the works of feminist writers have been replete with the images of devalued womanhood. The portrayals of successful mothers and home makers need to urgently replace the many perverted images of women in African Literature in order for feminism to be taken seriously. Unfortunately, the practice of sexual autonomy has brought female practitioners an outright condemnation and a loss of dignity. 'The task of feminists should be to deconstruct and reconstruct, as well as debunk the debilitating myths about African womanhood (Acholonu 56)' and to promote positive images of female sexuality. Instead, contemporary female writers have indulged in making things worse.

Nawal el Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, Doreen Baingana's *Tropical Fish*, Bessie Head's *A Collector of Treasures*, Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* are all creative publications by women in which female characters are adjudged 'free prostitutes' and are treated as objects of universal derision. In Nawal el Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* and in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* in particular, the sexually autonomous females are seen dabbling into the degrading and dehumanizing acts of sexual mercantilism of their own volition and without any control. Saadawi, a leading Egyptian, sociologist, combatant writer and Muslim feminist, writes on Arab women's problems. She tells us, without mincing words in *Woman at Point Zero*, the reason behind her character's sexual merchandising:

Women...sell their bodies at a price, and the lowest paid body is that of a wife. All women are prostitutes of one kind or another. Because I [Firdaus] was intelligent I preferred to be a free prostitute, rather than an enslaved wife. Every time I gave my body I charged the highest price. I could employ any number of servants to wash my clothes and clean my shoes, hire a lawyer...and...pay a doctor for an abortion...(99).

The theme of female degradation is most exemplified here. Clearly, Firdaus is not remorseful and is quite uncaring of any social stigma attached to the prostitution business. She completes her own degradation when she tells us:

A woman's life is always miserable. A prostitute, however, is a little better off. I was able to convince myself that I had chosen this

life of my own free will..., my insistence on remaining a prostitute, proved to me this was my choice and I had some freedom, at least in the freedom to live in a situation better than that of other women (97). [Emphasis mine].

It is true that women have been oppressed and degraded for years. However, the flagrant disregard of decorum and moral etiquette by women for the proposal of sexual habits that would cause them more degradation in life, is totally abysmal and unthinkable, to say the least. One is even more shocked when one finds that Firdaus' sexual autonomy neither brings her the total liberation which she seeks from amorous men who gang-rape her later in the text, nor free her from the shackles of patriarchy and archaic customs in the novella. Feminism in Saadawi's novella visibly takes a 'criminal and murderous' dimension, just as Nnolim has adjudged it. This is also the case in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and in Head's short story, *The Collector of Treasures*. When the protagonists of the above mentioned texts resort to killing the men in their lives who pose as 'obstacles' to them, their sense of freedom becomes as frightening as Nnolim has also proclaimed (202). Of course the penalty for murder is imprisonment, even death in some cases, as the three women in the cited texts soon find out.

In Doreen Baingana's *Tropical Fish*, and in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*, the female protagonists tend to transcend their sexual boundaries and degenerate into self annihilation. Their series of uncontrolled sexual escapades are captured as sickening and utterly condemnable! Everything falls apart when a bunch of girls in Baingana's *Tropical Fish* engage in a deadly sexual adventure in order to pass time. In the aforementioned text, young African women throw all caution to the wind as they willingly partake in a sexual orgy. The young women in question have erroneously believed that their sexual freedom with numerous men will reward them with lasting relationships or bring them unconditional love. And so, they 'deliberately entice the men...swaying their hips to catch their attention...wearing jeans which hugged their buttocks so tightly that the men turned to watch and whistle (75).' Afterwards, they engage in long hours of group sex with the men until 'a slow death is born (76),' we are told - and so much pain is unleashed. We soon hear one of the girls, Rosa, crying out for help:

'I am going to die soon' (76) 'I'm dying because...we overdid it, trying to pass the point of need, to exhaust desire....' (76).

Later in the text, she confesses her excesses to others in the following manner:

'The neighbour's son shouldn't have put his finger up into me when I was ten (76).'

And when she contracts the HIV and AIDS' disease, she laments as follows:

'Skin that was praised for its smooth brown softness is now patterned with scattered rash, sores that won't heal, yellow pus, itching that is no longer pleasurable to scratch... (77).'

Baingana graphically captures Rosa's frustrations in her description of Rosa's final days:

Lungs sound harsh and shake ...with dry coughs...organs, still so young, fail...one after another...the liver failure, kidney failure, mysterious tumours, and of course, always, the streamy splatter of diarrhoea...anus will never again feel the pleasure of firm feces slowly moving out (77).'

The above situation would have been avoidable if the young people in question had abstained from sexual immorality and had faced their studies. Group orgy, lesbianism, same-sex marriage and homosexuality are particularly considered an anathema to African custom. Contemporary African writers have glamorized the aforementioned sexual habits in their texts, much to the detriment of the teenage populace. New (African) Feminists have pointed out the fact that the above named sexual habits will eventually destroy feminist ideology in Africa and equally destroy the practitioners. The point must be made as well that radical feminism of old had paved the way for the unbridled quest for sexual freedom and homosexuality. Currently, the sexual trends have gained ground so rapidly in the world that it is not only the new feminists that have begun to question them.

The greatest irony of the loss of lives to the HIV and AIDS pandemic in *Tropical Fish* is that the young men and women who have contracted the disease are university undergraduates. Baingana tells us that they were *'...intelligent, read books...spoke proper English...ate with forks and not fingers...and had dreams to work in Southern Africa, or go to Europe or America for further studies (80).'* Those dreams will never be realized, thanks to sexual immorality. Female sexual autonomy takes an even more horrifying and more repulsive dimension in Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, where the sexually promiscuous ones are the women in marriage. Shoneyin's novel, to borrow the words of Kolawole Gboyega *et al* (viii), 'conveys and examines

women's multifaceted, conflicting and conflicted experience in patriarchal culture.' The women are sexually and morally depraved in that they have no qualms with begetting children outside wedlock. Ishola Alao, aka Baba Segi, is an impotent husband, whose three wives, except Bolanle the fourth wife, dabble into peddling their bodies to the highest bidder. Shoneyin's portrayal of the three adulterous wives (Iya Segi, Iya Tope and Iya Femi) is not really different from the usual mythology of women as the 'mindless, sexual objects,' created to erotically please the men. In this text, the aforementioned women take turns to sleep with men outside their marriage in order to bear children. Since Baba Segi is sexually incapacitated, the women resort to making him a cuckold.

In the novel, Iya Segi's aged mother tells her daughter, for instance, that an incomplete woman is one without a child. According to the aged mother, 'it is every woman's life purpose to bear children...' else she becomes 'a ghost in the world of the living... (101).' Iya Segi herself reiterates that 'a million slaves and a thousand servants cannot equal the value of a child (203).' Hence, the African society is shown in the text as one which cherishes and respects married women who have borne children, especially male children. And because the African society is also made up of extremely depraved individuals who lead debased and morally promiscuous lives, the desperate attempts made by the wives of Ishola Alao to beget children out of wedlock are revealed to us, as follows, as the wives take turns to confess their adulterous lifestyle:

'I will not mention the name of the man I met.... All I'll say is that he was the meat-seller.... (84). He made me howl when he bent me over; he made me whimper when he sat me on his belly. And when he took me standing up, it was as if there was a frog inside me, puffing.... (85). _Iya Tope (2nd wife)_

Another adulterous wife confesses her sexual escapades as follows:

It was Tunde, Grandma's only son, who first climbed between my legs.... I was twenty-one years old at the time.... (124). It was good to have him...between my thighs, especially after two nights with Baba Segi, whose penis was so big that two men could share it and still be well endowed. Where he used his (penis) gbam - gbam - gbam, like a hammer, Tunde used his like a forefinger; he bent and turned until it stroked all the right places... (132). _ Iya Femi (3rd wife) _

And the first wife, Iya Segi, whose two children are fathered by her husband's driver, also confesses her adulterous life as she laments thus:

'I misled them.... But you see, they were so desperate to be fruitful.... They knew that my husband valued children above all

things so when I saw their desperation, I took pity on them and shared my secret.... (216).' 'So you are saying none of Mr Alao's children are his? (216)' 'Dr Usman asked. 'Not one of them, (216). _ Iya Segi (1st wife) _

It is true that in the novel, their husband is impotent. It is also true that the three wives of Ishola Alao have experienced an unimaginable sexual awakening by sleeping with younger men, outside wedlock, but the question to ask is 'at what cost do they enjoy the said sexual awakening? For starters, the peace of mind which the wives have hitherto enjoyed in their polygamous home is immediately destroyed. Ishola Alao loses his trust in them and puts them under permanent suspicion. Soon, nemesis is visited on the adulterous wives when their hatched plan to kill Bolanle the fourth wife backfires, leaving the chief architect of the plan, Iya Segi's daughter dead. As depraved as their behaviour might seem, the women in Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, according to Otu (qtd in Kolawole Gboyega et al 38), have shown 'a classic example of how marriage reduces women to sex objects and prostitutes.'

In Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, female sexual autonomy again goes awry! In the narrative, African women are objectified and they are made to engage in transcontinental prostitution. It is ironic that the freedom and independence that four women seek to enjoy in Europe turn into a delusion after they are trafficked from Nigeria. Unigwe's novel paints a graphic but highly disturbing picture of the deadly 'sexual escapades' which are engaged in by the young women in Antwerp, Belgium. For the women in question, the escape from the harsh realities of Nigeria in pursuit of a better life in Europe turns into a mirage. They are sexually enslaved in Antwerp where they experience a series of beating, rape and even death and they have their dreams of leading meaningful lives destroyed.

A fellow woman, simply called 'Madam' in Unigwe's novel, reduces the young girls to commercial goods and to sex hawkers. The degradation of Sisi, Efe, Ama and Joyce is made complete when they are 'displayed in a glass showcase' through which their customers can browse and choose any of them for sex. Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, therefore portrays women as 'pepper soup' and as only good for eating or 'sampling' by the men. Prostitution is an act that robs women of their dignity, respect, social status and true identity in life, yet female economic power is limited to it. In all the texts so far discussed, especially in Shoneyin's *Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, female economic powers are also limited to promiscuity, adultery and marital infidelity. The continued portrayal

of women as prostitutes in African women's writing would make our present generation of young women think, indeed, that they are truly 'objects of sex, designed for men's pleasure' and for nothing more. It is good to capture the truth about women and the realities they face in our current generation, but for feminists to constantly 'perpetuate the negative image of women (Otu 49) and sexually degrade them in our contemporary African literary texts is anti-feminist.

Among the stories whose authors strive to uplift women from the shackles of male oppression and repression are Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel, entitled *Nervous Conditions*, and Amaka Azuike's short story entitled *Nanret*. In *Nervous Conditions*, Tambuzai's father, a known misogynist, does everything possible to repress his daughter and to bungle her education to no avail. The more he oppresses her, the more Tambuzai is rebellious and stubbornly determined to receive an education. In her society, the education of a female child is unheard of and also considered a waste of money and time. Therefore, education is exclusively reserved for the male children. Women who are successful in the sexist world, or who aspire to be well educated are either tagged rebellious or are said to use what is termed 'bottom power' in Nigerian parlance to attain their goals. According to Adichie (44-45), 'bottom power...is a Nigerian expression for a woman who uses her sexuality to get things from men.' However, Adichie aptly cautions that:

Bottom power is not power at all, because the woman with bottom power is actually not powerful; she just has a ...route to tap another person's power. And then what happens if the man (in question) is in a bad mood or sick or temporarily impotent? (45).

From the reading of Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*, it is deduced that patriarchal societies neither support the schooling of female children nor accept the economic independence of the women. The patriarchal society quite prefers the docile woman who purrs and who is silent, subservient or passive. In some African cultures which *Nervous Conditions* represents, it is a misnomer for women to defy male authority (like Tambuzai does) and speak upon issues concerning their femininity and feminine identity. Such women are labelled acultural or odd. However, Tambuzai and Nyasha (who both rebel against patriarchal oppression) tend to beat the odds by categorically demanding to be 'seen and loudly heard' - especially in matters that concern their education.

In Amaka Azuike's autobiographical short story *Nanret*, the eponymous character does not have to dabble into sexual merchandising in order to forge

ahead in life - just like Tambuzai and Nyasha do not have to in *Nervous Conditions*. The short story *Nanret*, portrays a remarkably strong, competent, courageous, and highly educated female whose depressing marriage to a cheating husband, Iyke, does not cause her to loathe motherhood or to abandon her four children in search of frivolities. On women's experiences in a sexist society, Nanret knows that it is a tough world. However, she is determined not to let the ill luck of marrying a cheat and a physically abusive man to deter her from shaping her children into respectable and responsible citizens of Nigeria. Amaka Azuike's short story on a deeper interpretation seeks a fundamental change in the treatment of women in a world in which women are denied the chance to realize their full potential

Scatological Use of Language in Contemporary African Feminist Writers

The language use of the feminist authors discussed in this paper is considered scatological or electroconvulsive in nature. Scatology, in the literary sense means 'repeated reference to excrement and related rotten matters (Baldick 1990).' Its most common purpose is satire. Scatological or electroconvulsive language is vulgar and is used to describe situations that are terribly repulsive. In other words, the authors' descriptions of female sexual acts and illicit affairs in their works leave nothing to the readers' imagination. African feminist writers' use of vulgar language is intended to shock the reading public into stupefaction or to stir a rebellious change in them. Therefore, in each of the texts examined, the writer deliberately chooses very repugnant words that best describe the promiscuous behavior of the characters, especially the females. It is believed that when writers use the scatological or electroconvulsive language, they wish for readers to see the magnitude of the decadence in the society in addition to seeing the depravity and the deterioration of moral standards in the characters that populate such society.

It is proposed in this paper that true autonomy should be one that permits every individual to freely seek love and be loved in return. It is also the type that allows men and women to freely celebrate and be proud of their unique differences. It is not one that dislocates the structure of the family or promotes sexual immorality or condones female prostitution. Gloria Conde (48) has aptly described the truly liberated men and women as 'persons' who are different in their sexual identity, yet complementary in their masculinity and femininity (48). Lastly, Conde submits that true autonomy is practiced when: 'the woman has the same dignity as man because she is equally human. She deserves to be recognized in her difference, in her femininity, and above all, in her capacity to be a mother (48).'

Conclusion and Recommendations

The values and ideologies of the feminist liberation movement of old have been re-examined here. This paper re-emphasizes that the feminist movement is, indeed, headed towards a cataclysmic end unless much is done to stem the downward trend of its conflicting ideologies. It has been pointed out too, that although feminism has won some victories for women, especially in securing political equality and in access to education, to a large extent the movement has not provided ample solutions for the abandonment of family and children by women, in favour of careerism. On the other hand, a married woman who chooses to beget children can truly find freedom within her dependence on her husband because both partners can sacrificially fulfil each other through mutual gift of self.

It has been observed also that female sexual autonomy will remain a mirage if it is such that dislocates the structure of the family, prohibits child-birth, condones prostitution and encourages the unbridled quest for a sexual freedom which promotes sexual immorality and which leads our current generation into self - immolation. It is also clear that the portrayal of women in contemporary African literature needs a rethinking on the part of female authors. It is strongly recommend that women writers should portray their fellow women in a positive light. This is because good wives and mothers who are also successful at their work place need to replace the perverted images of women in literature for feminism to be taken seriously. However, women's use of sexuality for mercantilism or for gaining favours is an aberrant form of behaviour which must be stopped forthwith. Furthermore, women's use of electroconvulsive or deliberately manipulated and scatological language to suite their purposes can be very offensive and off putting to the readers. The excessive use of vulgarity in contemporary African literary texts needs to be curtailed in order for feminism to be taken seriously.

This paper has also demonstrated how sexual freedom, taken to an extreme can lead a woman to complete depravity, absolute disillusionment and the total destruction of self. To be truly happy, it is recommended that one must be self-giving, especially within the structure of the family. It is also strongly recommended that the autonomous woman must be highly educated and professionally qualified in order to render invaluable help to her family and to her society. New feminism postulates, among other things, that the 'new woman' must be willing to serve as a committed agent of change and also be ready to help the current generation of young people to assume the values that will create a more morally just and more peaceful society. It is further

recommended that both men and women make wise and sexually relevant decisions in their lives because the young ones are watching and emulating their every step.

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