

Women Writing Women: Re-Defining the Identity of African Women in African Literary Texts

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Abstract

Due to the several years of misrepresentation and malignment by misogynist male writers, feminist writers have endeavored to reconstruct and redefine the identity of the African woman in African literature. African women's writings can therefore be viewed as an objection to patriarchal supremacy with the aim to uncover the injustices inflicted on women by the patriarchal African tradition. Drawing from Gayatri Spivak's Subaltern concept along with Helene Cixous's concept of women's writing, this study examines how African female writers represent the atrocities of female characters to tell the stories of African women from women's perspective. The study focuses on four selected African texts: Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, Amma Darko's *Beyond the Horizon* and *Faceless*. The study revealed that female authors do not only expose and lampoon the inhumane treatment of African women in marriage, but they also provide avenues for these women to triumph. The two main ways by which women are exploited in the texts are commodification of women and sexual abuse. The authors made strong appeal to African women to embrace assertiveness and sisterhood harmony in order to emancipate themselves from the burden of patriarchal subjugation. The findings of this study have implications for redefining women's identity in Africa, point to the effectiveness of sisterhood, and invite the active involvement of all women in the struggle to end patriarchal oppression.

Keywords

African Women Writers, Exploitation of Women, Women's Solidarity, Women's Writing, Misrepresentation, Redefine

1. Introduction

In some pre-colonial African societies, women had the opportunity to exhibit bravery, enjoy power, and exercise authority which under the stringent masculine designation, will be the sole prerogative of men. In Ghana, for instance, the likes of Yaa Asantewaa and several other queen mothers were influential and wielded power in their societies. However, according to [Nnaemeka \(2004\)](#), with the onset of colonial education which remained a preserve for men, women were double jeopardized and relegated to the status of the shadows of their men. In the pursuit of education, men were certainly favored over women, a system which was supported by the progressive change of traditional structures with colonial administrative structures which inevitably led to male dominance ([Nnaemeka, 2004](#)). Consequently, men easily controlled authority and wealth while women wallowed in poverty, depending absolutely on men for survival. [Cixous \(1976\)](#) noted that with their easy access to education, men have over the years dominated the literary world and misrepresented women in their works. According to [Kolawole \(1997\)](#), the early stage of African literature was characterized by the misrepresentation of women by male writers resulting in most women occupying the periphery of the plot. Similarly, [Ogundipe-Leslie \(1987\)](#) posited that male writers falsely represented women to maintain their conservatism and craving for a pre-colonial patriarchal past where they were kings as husbands and fathers.

Since the 1960s, African women have gained access to education which generated the awareness in them to strive for equal access to opportunities and recognition. Consequently, the number and quality of works produced by female writers have increased tremendously. This led to the rise of pioneering African female writers, such as Efua Sutherland, Flora Nwapa, Bessie Head, Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta, Tsitsi Dangaremba and the famous Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie whose writings sought to annihilate women's marginal position(s) and re-examine the position of women as instituted by men in the pretext of tradition and culture. These writings protest patriarchal ascendancy while trying to unearth the injustices and inequalities perpetrated on women by patriarchy. In "The Female Writer and Her Commitment", [Ogundipe-Leslie \(1987\)](#) inspires women to openly react to wrong male representations rather than being apologetic. She argues:

Male ridicule, aggression, and backlash have resulted in making women apologetic and have given the term "feminist" a bad name. Yet, nothing could be more feminist than the writings of these women writers, in their concern for and deep understanding of the experiences and fates of women in society ([Ogundipe-Leslie, 1987: p. 14](#)).

One notable contemporary feminist writer, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, in her [TEDx Talk \(2013\)](#) video, "We should all be feminist", bravely embraced the chore of being feminist and enjoined fellow women to also embrace this precursor of female emancipation openly. Adichie asserts:

I am a feminist. I am a happy feminist. Women are marginalized and we need to right it. I have always said that sometimes it is the women themselves who have been brainwashed to hold themselves down, and the only way we can get away from this is through feminism. I think women should be educated on what it means to be a feminist, that we should help other women. I think my work is very feminist (Adichie, 2003).

According to Gachari (2020), African female writers have taken the obligation of redressing gender inequalities and re-defining the true value of African women. According to Gachari, re-defining the identity of women in African literature is a crucial endeavor since modern women are relentlessly breaking out of the “glass ceiling” to cultivate their new identities on daily basis. Ogundipe-Leslie (1987) points out two key concerns of the African feminist writer: First, to speak about being born a woman; and second, to describe the reality of women from the woman’s perspective. Uko (2006) posited that while contemporary African women writers seek to construct the “new” woman who has the ability to love and express love, these writers also erase wrong and chauvinist representations of women. Some men are actively involved in the idea to tackle problem of oppressing women. Telling such truth involves significant risk and responsibility, thus, such novels are noteworthy for their honest portrayals of women’s starvations and suffering (Dubek, 2001). African feminism is accommodative and complementary rather than pessimistic and exclusive (Chukwuma, 1994). However, Ugwanyi (2017) holds the view that female feminist writers are equally culpable of the same falsification for which they fault male writers. According to Ugwanyi, female writers see nothing good in their male characters and are therefore merely attempting to vent out sentiments and reconstruct the gender narratives to their advantage.

2. Aim of the Study

Some researchers such as Chukwuma (2006), Ohale (2010), Asempasah and Sam (2016), Ugwanyi (2017), Hidayati, Darma and Mustofa (2017), Ofofu (2013), and Gachari (2020) have explored thematic issues in African novels. However, less attention has been paid to how African female writers tell their stories profoundly reinforced by the zeal of the writers to write “women”. In addition, studies on African female writing which tackles and critiques pressing social problems like the injustices of patriarchal society and the concept of the woman as a subaltern subject because of the dominance of patriarchy remain under-researched. Considering the ongoing academic and social interest in the concept of women’s writing, this study attempts to examine how the voice of the gendered subaltern reflect issues of gender as an ideological social construct while at the same time the subaltern writes herself as recommended by Helen Cixous. Focusing on four selected texts comprising Nawal El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero*, Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter*, Amma Darko’s *Beyond the Horizon* and *Faceless*, this study aims to answer the following questions:

- 1) What socio-cultural challenges do women face in the selected female-

authored texts?

2) How do the female authors liberate female characters from the socio-cultural challenges?

3. Theoretical Perspectives

3.1. Women's Writing

The terminology, *Écritureféminine*, which means “woman’s writing or feminine writing” is a critical literary theory first introduced by French feminist and writer [Helene Cixous \(1976\)](#) in her seminal essay “The Laugh of the Medusa”. Along with colleague French feminists (Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray), she examines the domains of women’s writing from a woman’s perspective and experience. This critical literary theory views Western thought as being constructed on the structural absence of women’s experiences and as such feels the need for a revaluation of society to recognize the existence of a female discourse. Cixous uses the Medusa image as a metaphor that illustrates woman’s multiplicity to liberate the female voice and body from the suppression and restriction that hierarchical rules in masculine rhetoric have imposed. Just like Medusa’s image which has several serpents writhing on her head, a woman’s sexuality is multifaceted. So, in language, feminine desire cannot be inhibited by sexual, historical, or linguistic roles that denigrate her. Cixous argues for the sexual differences between men and women as rather than creating hierarchies and forcing women into inferior positions, creating differences in expression unrestricted by any fixed order. This is Cixous’ rhetorical technique which seems to be ignored by her critics, employing convention to deconstruct it.

Cixous thus proclaims, “women should break out of the snare of silence” ([Cixous, 1976](#): p. 881). Women like Cixous and Awa Thiam have been instrumental in influencing women to write. Cixous states categorically:

I shall speak about women’s writing: about what it will do. Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies, for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text as into the world and into history by her own movement ([Cixous, 1976](#): p. 875).

For Cixous, then, it is high time women carved a niche for themselves in the literary world by writing, an activity woman has been driven away from by men, to serve a fatal goal. This is an act she refuses to condone, so women should write to describe their history and experiences and not continue to leave that all-important responsibility to men to keep on misrepresenting women as they have continually done to benefit themselves. She passionately and unequivocally urges: “write, let no one hold you back, let no one stop you; not man... woman must write woman. And man, man” ([Cixous, 1976](#): p. 877). With these words, Cixous argued that women are the only people who can write about women and their lived experiences from a woman’s perspective better.

3.2. Subaltern Theory

The Indian American feminist critic Gayatri Spivak proposed the subaltern theory in her 1988 seminal article “Can the Subaltern Speak?”. She used the term “subaltern”, as borrowed from Gramsci, refers to the unrepresented group and oppressed group of people. Spivak contended that “in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (Spivak, 1988; p. 287). In an interview, Spivak explained the statement “the subaltern cannot speak” as: “It means that even when the subaltern makes an effort to the death to speak, she is not able to be heard and speaking and hearing complete the speech act” (Spivak, 1996: p. 292). Spivak’s concept of subalternity does not necessarily mean that the subaltern cannot speak but that what the subaltern speaks is not given a listening ear.

Spivak argues that the subaltern subject has no space to speak, and McLeod (2020) agrees that the silence that the female subaltern is subjected to stems from the fact that the listening audience is unwilling to interpret her but not because she cannot speak. Spivak’s concept of subalternity will underpin this study because it focuses on the subaltern female and subaltern voice by explaining and justifying the actions of the central female characters in the selected female authored texts. Again, this theory is relevant to the current study by espousing Cixous’ claim that when women write, it is act that is marked as women grabbing the opportunity to speak for themselves. The selected texts are not only female authored but clear instances of women speaking for and on behalf of women.

4. Results/Discussion

The bane of gender discrimination and violence against women continues to be the top concern in the discourses of African women’s writings. The authors explore the different forms of oppression and present independent female characters who strive to subvert patriarchy, fight for their space, and sustain healthy environment for the survival African women. The analysis of the texts, Nawal El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero*, Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter*, Amma Darko’s *Beyond the Horizon* and *Faceless* will be guided by the theoretical perspectives of Helene Cixous (1976) and Gayatri Spivak’s (1988).

4.1. Exploitation of Women

The authors create female characters in order to describe reality from a gendered perspective, assessing the damage of oppressive cultural institutions such as parenthood and marriage by exposing their disastrous effects on individual women. Perpetrators take advantage of such cultural institutions to exploit women and children in the African society. African women writers therefore employ different mechanisms to represent these barbaric acts in their writings. The discussion below examines how female characters are exploited in the texts:

1) Commodification of women

In *Beyond the Horizon*, the story is told from first-person narrative point of

view of Mara, the female protagonist of the novel. Mara's experiences are portrayed as a caution to African women who still live in the deceptions designed by the machinations of men. The author presented Mara's experiences in an unattractive way such that any reader would detest to her. Darko condemns marriage by arrangement, the traditional way of parents (mostly fathers) trading their girls out as possessions to men who are willing to pay. This is the situation of Mara whose ambitions are eventually destroyed as she goes through the harsh realities. Mara narrates how her family "sold" her out in marriage:

...but that was before I was given away to this man who paid two white cows, four healthy goats, four lengths of cloth, beads, jewelry, and two bottles of London Dry Gin to my family, and took me off as his wife from my little African village, Naka, to him in the city (Darko, 1995: p. 3).

By their decision to trade Mara for some material goods, Mara's parents had compromised her prospects of happy and successful marriage. Neither does Mara know nor love the man she is forced to marry. She states:

I don't know what it is to love a man. I never learned it because I wasn't taught. I never experienced it because I never got the chance to love before this marriage was arranged with Akobi (Darko, 1995: p. 86).

Darko would rather women decide whom they want to marry. If the family had consulted or given Mara the chance to choose, perhaps she would not have married Akobi. Without informing his wife, Mara's father had negotiated the terms and conditions of the marriage with Akobi's parents who are rich. Her father even used the goats and cows to remarry a young hot-blooded widow. It is not only Mara's father who used her body as a commodity in exchange for money. Her husband, Akobi, tricked her into prostitution and pornography under the influence of alcohol. One night, Akobi took Mara to a sex club and tricked her into sexual activities involving several men. Mara recount events at the sex club:

Then suddenly the room was filled with people, all men, and they were talking and laughing and drinking. And they were completely naked! There must have been at least twenty images. Then they were all around me, many hairy bodies, and they were stripping me, fondling me, playing with my body, pushing my legs apart, wide, wide apart. As for the rest of the story, I hope that the gods of Naka didn't witness it. (Darko, 1995: p. 111)

While Mara suffers the rippling effects of the physical and sexual abuse (along with psychological and mental abuse), Akobi gets paid for the harm caused to Mara. In addition to the numerous inhumane treatments that she suffers at the hands of Akobi, one can say, convincingly, that Akobi only sees Mara as a commodity that can be traded for his personal interest.

Mara's situation is like Firdaus's in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*. Just for the money they would get from the marriage, Firdaus's parents traded her out to a man who was a widower, deformed, and almost thrice her age. Similarly,

young Binetou, in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, is forced into marriage with Ramatoulay's husband her "sugar daddy" (Modou) because her poor mother wanted to live a luxurious life. Daba, the daughter of Ramatoulaye recounts:

"Mum! Binetou is heartbroken. She is going to marry her sugar-daddy. Her mother cried so much. She begged her daughter to give her life a happy end, in a proper house, as the man has promised them. So she accepted." (Ba, 1980: p. 36)

Finally, young Binetou is forced out of school to marry Modou to enable her parents to benefit from the gargantuan promises. Modou paid for Binetou's parents to visit the holy city of Mecca and acquire the titles of "Alhaja" and "Alhaji" respectively. By acquiring these titles, they believe their social class has increased to a new level. Ramatoulaye reports:

And then, having withdrawn Binetou from school, he paid her a monthly allowance of fifty thousand francs, just like a salary due to her. The young girl, who was very gifted, wanted to continue her studies, ... He therefore gave in to all the conditions of the grasping Lady Mother-in-Law and even signed a paper committing himself to paying the said amount. Lady Mother-in-Law brandished the paper, for she firmly believed that the payments would continue, even after Modou's death... (Ba, 1980: p. 10)

Though the woman is seen as a commodity to be traded in marriage, she is neither a party in the negotiation process nor does she benefit from the outcome of the negotiation. Unfortunately, she is left to suffer the rippling consequences of decisions and actions she did not partake in. In most cases, the victim is a young adolescent who is not up to the age of marriage.

Another interesting perspective to discuss the commodification of women is the issue of prostitution. Prostitution is usually defined as engaging in sexual activities with another person for money. *L'Espérance* (1979) argued that earliest male writers presented prostitution as a social problem to be eradicated rather than a necessity to be regulated. The prostitute in her extreme exploitation exemplified the injustices and humiliation to which women are subjected to. In this context of prostitution, women are "objectified" and their bodies are "commercialized". It damages the respect, independence, and assertiveness that feminism stands for. In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus was so innocent that Bayoumi uses her for prostitution. Every night, someone comes in the dark and has sex with her while Bayoumi takes the money. Firdaus also worked for Sharifa as a professional prostitute. She narrates: "Day and night, I lay on the bed, crucified, and every hour a man would come in" (El Saadawi, 1989: p. 4). Marzuk, a very dangerous pimp who is a typical patriarchal architect tells Firdaus: "I'm in business. My capital is women's bodies and I don't mix work and love together" (El Saadawi, 1989: p. 101). No wonder Firdaus kills this wicked man at the end. In whatever form, the authors demonstrate that prostitution is derogatory and leaves a negative impact on the woman. In *Beyond the Horizon*, though Mara survives from prostitution,

she loses her beauty and integrity as a proud African woman and mother. According to Dubek (2001), telling these stories is crucial since the authors contribute to a chorus of black women writers that dominated modern literature and challenged the existing stereotypes of womanhood in male-authored African texts.

2) Sexual molestation/abuse

Sexual abuse is also a major concern for female writers as represented in the texts. Undoing this menace is a major feminist aspiration for contemporary African writers. Darko illustrates the inhumane sexual experiences women go through at the hands of men. In Darko's *Faceless*, Baby T is incapable of surviving the bane of men in her mother's life. For instance, Onko, a man she sees as a father, rapes and defiles her when she is barely twelve years. Again, she is raped by Maa Tsuru's surviving husband, Kpakpo. Narrator says:

Baby "T" lay there motionless, crying. The pain was distinct in her eyes. The trauma she had suffered had left its prints on her very person and her soul. She was in great physical and even greater mental pain. If the good Lord gave her long life, it was obvious she was going to require lots of strength and love to rebuild her dignity, herself love and trust (Darko, 2003: p. 166).

In Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*, Akobi uses Mara as sex machine which could be used whenever he pleases. He does not even use her with pleasure but revulsion. He requests Mara in and out of his bed as he desires. Mara reports:

He was lying on the mattress, face up, looking thoughtfully at the ceiling when I entered. Cool, composed and authoritative, he indicated with a pat of his hand on the space beside him that I should lie down beside him. I did so, more out of apprehension of starting another fight than anything else. Wordlessly, he stripped off my clothes, stripped off his trousers, turned my back to him and entered me. Then he ordered me off the mattress to go and layout my mat because he wanted to sleep alone (Darko, 1995: p. 22).

Mara is not the only obvious target of a heartless marriage. Firdaus in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* also suffers a loveless marriage. Firdaus's husband has sexual intercourse with her without caring about her feelings. Firdaus goes through a series of sexual exploitations beginning with her experiences of being touched by her uncle during childhood. She relates how her uncle's hand moved "slowly from behind the book he was reading to touch my legs" (El Saadawi, 1989: p. 10). Firdaus's sexual relationship with her husband is quite tormenting because her husband views sexual pleasure as his solitary right. She endures what Ama Ata Aidoo in *Changes* refers to as "marital rape". She narrates, "He leapt on me like a mad dog... I surrendered my face to his face and my body to his body, passively, without any resistance, without a movement..." (Aidoo, 1977, p. 14). Firdaus experienced more sexual abuse in the public sphere when she decided to escape her husband's molestation. When she finally resolves to the street for protection, her decision brings her more misery. When she decided to live in Bayoumi's house, she was sexually abused by Bayoumi: "I felt the sudden touch of

him, like a dream remembered from the distant past, or some memory that began with life” (El Saadawi, 1989: p. 10). At one point, Bayoumi allowed his friend to have sex with her body without her knowledge. When she asked, “Who are you? ... You are not Bayoumi...”, the response she got is “What difference does it make? ... do you feel pleasure?” (El Saadawi, 1989: p. 10).

4.2. Liberation of Women

African women writers do not only portray the atrocities of the African woman, but they also depict energetic, independent female characters who rise to fight for their liberation and empowerment. Attempting to positively represent women fulfills what Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie (1987) identifies as part of the African female writer’s commitment: to correct false images of the woman in Africa by telling the positive truth of women’s lives. The mechanisms employed by the authors are discussed below:

1) Assertiveness

Establishing awareness of the concerns of contemporary African women is a key step towards finding solutions to them. It is imperative that female writers not only inform about what is wrong but also offer an idea of what the right thing should be. Assertiveness is used by the authors as a tool for liberating women. As a result of the persistent subjugation female characters go through at the hands of men, the natural consequence is that women become more assertive and aggressive in attempt to liberate themselves. Nonetheless, some characters remain passive throughout the stories. For instance, Maa Tsuru and Baby T in *Faceless* denote the passive inarticulate women while women such as Naa Yomo, Fofu, Odarley, and the MUTE ladies represent the assertive women. The literary significance is that through the representation of the passive female characters, readers see the ruthlessness of men and understand the vulnerability of women. While the passive women suffer the atrocities of men, the assertive women blossom in freedom. Darko adopts this strategy to encourage women to employ assertiveness as a tool to avert their miseries caused by patriarchy.

In Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter*, Aissatou is a perfect character who rejects polygamy and decides to divorce the husband and travels to the U.S. Though Ramatoulaye stays in a polygamous marriage with Modou, her decision to reject Daouda Dieng’s offer of marriage (after Modou’s death) is her definitive denunciation of polygamy and culmination of her revolution from a helpless victim to a strong powerful woman. She writes to Daouda Dieng in a letter:

My conscience is not accommodating enough to enable me to marry you, when only esteem, justified by your many qualities, pulls me towards you. I can offer you nothing else, even though you deserve everything. Esteem is not enough for marriage... And then the existence of your wife and children further complicates the situation ... I am sure you are motivated by love, a love that existed well before your marriage and that fate has not been able to satisfy, it is with infinite sadness and tear-filled eyes that I offer you my

friendship (Ba, 1980: p. 68).

In *Woman at Point Zero*, women's resistance against violence is portrayed by Firdaus through her energetic decisions to leave her cruel husband and others who took advantage of her body, and eventually killing a pimp. As Firdaus cannot cope with the perpetual abuses, she resolves to killing Marzuk, a dangerous Pimp, in retribution. As the police arrest her, Firdaus boldly exclaims:

I am a killer, but I've committed no crime. Like you, I kill only criminals... No woman can be a criminal. To be a criminal one must be a man. I am saying that you are all criminals, all of you: the fathers, the uncles, the husbands, the pimps, the lawyers, the doctors, the journalists, and all men of all professions (El Saadawi, 1989: p. 109).

In the end, Firdaus is hanged for killing a man who tormented her life. The Firdaus's traumatic experiences serve as concrete illustrations of the incessant sufferings that women go through in the patriarchal African society.

2) Sisterhood solidarity/female bonding

To capture the essence of friendship, empathy, and care for among women, feminists and critics use terminologies such as sisterhood solidarity, female bonding, female friendship, and female solidarity. In this study, I use the terms interchangeably since the fundamental meaning is fostering mutual friendship and encouraging women to help each other fight against oppression and subjugation. The authors stress the necessity of solidarity among women as a strategy to overcome their nemesis and accomplish their feminist aspirations (Dubek, 2001). In Darko's *Beyond the Horizon*, Mara begins to enjoy her city life only through her friendship with Mama Kiosk. Mara states, "Between Mama Kiosk and me now existed a mother-daughter relationship. I had grown to trust her and to talk openly with her about everything..." (Darko, 1995: p. 23). Mama Kiosk supports Mara so much and cautions her not to allow her wicked husband to ruin her life. She cautions Mara to see "red with her eyes", a typical Mama Kiosk way of telling women not to trust men. Mama Kiosk tells:

"This your ministries man, he is not only a bad man and a bad husband, he has also got something inside his head. I only hope that he won't destroy you with it before you too start seeing red with your eyes like I do" (Darko, 1995: p. 24).

In Germany, when Mara is stripped of every sense of respect, pride, and dignity, she lives an identity as a whore. Akobi and Osey trick her into prostitution and own the money which comes out of it. Here too, Darko inspires the need for friendship amongst women through Mara's relationship with Kaye, her manager's wife. By this solidarity, Mara is finally able to fight and liberate herself from Akobi and his accomplices. Rather than allowing Akobi to own her money, Kaye urges Mara to claim ownership of the money she earns from prostitution. Through a detective she contracts, Mara later recognizes that Akobi cares for Comfort, another wife he brought to Germany, using the money he earns from Mara's

prostitution. She also realizes that Akobi has married Gitte to get a residency permit in Germany. Contrary to what Gitte thinks, Akobi is not constructing any house for them in Africa. In the end, Mara instigates the arrest and imprisonment of Akobi as she finds a new pimp to work with. Accepting her current status, Mara decides to work as full-time prostitute and earns enough money to take care of her children. Mara speaks:

I am no longer green and you know it. As for the morals of life my mother brought me up by, I have cemented them with coal tar in my conscience. If the gods of Naka intended me to live by them, they should have made sure I was married to a man who loved me and who appreciated the values I was brought up with. I lived by these values until I could no longer do so. The rot has gotten too deep for me to return to the old me. That is why, Kaye, I am going to do the films and the stage shows and all there is to it. But I want every pfennig of what I make to come to me! (Darko, 1995: p. 217).

The implication is that Mara takes a step toward “exploiting the exploiter” when she decided to take full control of her life, body, and finances. Since “the rot has gotten too deep” for her, Mara accepts her present self as a prostitute and decides to take control of her body. When Mara decides to pay Kaye for offering help her out of her predicaments, Kaye refuses the money. According to Kaye, everything she did to help Mara is “sisterhood solidarity”.

In Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter*, the relationship between Ramatoulaye and Aissatou presents another interesting perspective to female solidarity in Africa. According to Cherekah (2014), the success of female friendship, which seeks to emancipate women from the burden of oppression and provides them an opportunity to inspire each other, is emphasized in this novel. Ramatoulaye and Aissatou are childhood friends whose friendship is based on equality and mutual respect. As friends from childhood, they both suffer betrayal from their husbands who decide to marry second wives. However, they take different decisions towards their misfortune and face different consequences. While Aissatou decides to divorce her husband and starts a new life as a single mother abroad, Ramatoulaye accepts to stay and face the flaming predicaments of polygamy. Aissatou understands her friend’s situation and empathizes by supporting her. While in the U.S., Aissatou seals their mutual friendship by sending her a car as a gift. Ramatoulaye recounts her joy after taking the car: “I shall never forget your response, my sister, nor my joy and surprise when I was called to the Fiat agency and was to choose a car which you had paid for, in full” (Ba, 1980: p. 53).

Ramatoulaye’s possession of her own car is symbolic of the independence and freedom that she gets from the oppressive society. After the death of Ramatoulaye’s husband, Aissatou’s concern for her friend pushes her to travel back home to offer her support and condolences to her friend. Ramatoulaye reflects on their friendship and her friend’s return. She says:

The essential thing is the content of our hearts, which animates us; the essential thing is the quality of the sap that flows through us. You have often

proved to me the superiority of friendship over love. Time, distance, as well as mutual memories have consolidated our ties and made our children brothers and sisters. Reunited, will we draw up a detailed account of our faded bloom, or will we sow new seeds for new harvests? (Ba, 1980: p. 72)

In several instances of the text, Ramatoulaye demonstrates sisterhood solidarity. For instance, she expresses concern for her Ivorian friend, Jacqueline, who struggles to adapt to the Senegalese culture and eventually becomes sick. Ramatoulaye also refuses to marry Daouda Dieng because she does not want his wives to go through what she (Ramatoulaye) experienced. With the support of Aissatou, Ramatoulaye begins to redefine and strengthen her relationships with her daughters. When one of them (Aissatou) becomes pregnant, Ramatoulaye decides not to reprimand or intimidate her (as custom demands), but to help and support her. Ramatoulaye summarizes her sisterhood concern as: “My heart rejoices each time a woman emerges from the shadows. I know that the field of our gains is unstable, the retention of conquest difficult: social constraints are ever-present and male egoism resists” (Ba, 1980: p. 88).

5. Conclusion

Between 1960 and 2020, African female writers have responded tremendously to earlier misrepresentation and malignment by their male counterparts whose writings have relegated the woman to the peripheral. These feminist writers have attempted to re-define and re-construct the identity of the woman in African literature. In the texts discussed, the authors do not only reveal the predicaments of the African woman, but they also present the perpetrators in barbaric and unpleasant ways. African women’s writings can therefore be viewed as an objection to patriarchal supremacy with the aim to uncover the injustices inflicted on women by the patriarchal African tradition. The study revealed two main ways by which women are exploited in the texts: First, women are commodified, and their bodies are exchanged or traded out as possessions to men who are willing to pay. Second, women also go through several inhumane sexual experiences at the hands of men. Marriage appeared to be a fertile ground where sexual abuse flourishes. Unlike their male counterparts, feminist writers do not only expose and lampoon the inhumane treatment of African women, but they also provide avenues for these women to triumph. The authors made strong appeal to African women by presenting independent assertive female characters who strive for space not only to own but use the space. The authors also portrayed female solidarity as a major tool to facilitate the emancipation of women from the burden of patriarchal subjugation. They invited all women (including ordinary women) to actively embrace sisterhood harmony and seek financial freedom to emancipate themselves from the burden of exploitation. Now than ever, re-defining and re-constructing the identity of women in African literature is a necessary undertaking since women are persistently escaping their prescribed social roles to create new identities for themselves.

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