

Feminist Literature:  
Unpacking The Emancipatory Paradigm In Feminist Writings

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**ABSTRACT**

*Feminist literature presents female characters as agents of feminism. The stories in Feminist literature presents women as completely realised characters' faculties, wishes, aggressions, desires and struggles. Feminist literature has been labelled dangerous to different African societies, the assumption being that the themes that are portrayed in the feminist literary show radicalism in women. However, the themes that are articulated in these literary texts are an eye opener to both men and women in different societies. The themes portrayed in these texts conscientise society on the inequalities that exist in different African societies in as far as women and men issues are concerned. However, feminist literary texts have been associated with radicalism because literary texts in the feminist mode look at women's situations and give alternatives. The feminist authors do not just describe the women's plight and leave the situation like that, rather they give alternatives. Their heroines and some female characters are strong women who defy societal norms and values to liberate themselves from patriarchal bondage. The texts are protestant in that they voice out the voice of the voiceless woman. Therefore, this should not be taken as radicalism. This paper focuses on unpacking the emancipatory aspects in feminist literary texts written by female authors and this done through the feminist lens. The paper recommends that feminist literary texts be introduced in institutions of higher learning in Africa. These young people can help conscientise society on the plight of women and girls in different African societies.*

## Introduction

Historically, the writing canon was a preserve for men. It was very difficult for women writers to publish their works. Their works were considered not suitable to be read by the public. Walters (2005) posits that their works of art were criticised by both men and women and they were never appreciated. However, some daring women authors had to publish their works using male pseudonyms. An example is that of Mary Ann Evans who used the pseudonym, George Eliot. However, the situation has improved since Mary Ann Evans' time. Women can now publish their works using their real names. As a result, the twenty first century saw feminist writers emerging from different countries and the Sub-Saharan region has also produced its fair share of feminist writers.

Since the emerging of feminist writers in Africa, many academics have taken a keen interest in female writers' works of art. Many scholars have critically analysed these works and invariably found that these authors deal with issues that concern the condition of women and girls in society. According to Chindedza (2012), these authors often portray women who defy societal norms and values to emancipate themselves from patriarchal bondage. The authors who deal with such issues are deemed to be feminist writers. Some of these feminist literary texts are being studied at higher institutions of learning.

## Towards an emancipatory writing

Feminist literature presents female characters as agents of feminism. Feminist literature stories present women as completely realised characters' faculties, wishes, aggressions, desires and struggles (Snodgrass, 2014). Snodgrass (2014) defines feminist literature as literature grounded on the principles of feminism and refers to any literary work that centres on the struggle for women's equal opportunities and to be accepted as human beings. She further explains that not all feminist literature has been written by women but also by men who understood women beyond the roles they were anticipated to fit into and delved into their consciousness to understand their needs and wishes. Some works may be imaginary, whilst others may be non-imaginary. Snodgrass (2014) further states that writers of feminist literature are known to understand and explain the variance between sex and gender. They believe that though a person's sex is pre-set and natural, it is gender that has been created by society along with a particular awareness about gender roles. Gender roles, they believe, can be changed over time. The predominance of one gender over the other is a common notion across almost all societies and the fact that it is not in favour of women is a fundamental yet blatant characteristic of feminist women's literature. The female protagonist is self-confident and it is one clear characteristic of the feminist approach towards literature.

- Snodgrass (2014) goes further to explain that women in literature of the feminist nature are always presented as the heroines, who, more often than not, do not really take the out-dated role of women as decided by society. They are ready to make their own decision to express

this choice of individual decision making and are ready to deal with penalties of these choices, actions and decisions. Snodgrass's description of the female protagonist is a description of the female protagonists in the literary texts such as *Second-Class Citizen* (1979) *Nervous Conditions* (1988) and *So Long A Letter* (1981). The female protagonists in these texts break from tradition and set themselves free.

Snodgrass further explains that, as a mother, a daughter, a sister, or a wife, any part of feminist literature deals with a woman as a woman. It is not these interactions, roles or stereotypes that give these female characters identity. Their identity is defined by their choices and their beliefs, which are related to these roles. In modern feminist literature, the attack on a male-dominated society became more direct and straightforward, where women demanded a closer look into the patriarchal and capitalistic approach towards feminism.

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## **Feminist literary texts: oppression and emancipation**

Moyana (2006) reads feminist literary texts from a feminist perspective. She sees Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) as falling within the feminist tradition. She maintains that in *Nervous Conditions*, Tsitsi Dangarembga has portrayed women from a different standpoint from that portrayed in earlier Zimbabwean literature in English. The woman's voice here is significantly feminist, she argues, and the confirmation for this is found at the end of the novel where Tambudzai, the protagonist asserts herself with neither fear nor apology. Tambudzai is not sorry for her brother's death because her brother is an epitome of women oppression and therefore an obstacle to their emancipation. According to Tambudzai, Dangarembga's protagonist, Nhamo's death heralds her emancipation. The death had opened an opportunity for her to get the education that she was yearning for; the education that is going to lift her, her sisters and her mother from the bog of tradition.

On the other hand, Moyana (2006) affirms that female writing is that which simply designates women's experience. In most cases, such experience is made visible in alienating, deluded or demeaning ways, experience epitomised by the Mills and Boon stories. These kinds of experiences are also described by Flora Nwapa in her two novels, *Idu* (1970) and *Efuru* (1971), which tend to reinforce the belief in the universal truism of man's supremacy and superiority over the woman and the rightful place of a woman being in the kitchen. Such works are obviously not emancipatory reading for women even though they are written by women. Moyana (2006) argues that to believe that common female experience in itself gives rise to a feminist analysis of women's condition, is to be at once politically immature and theoretically naïve.

Moyana further adds that many feminists have considered the word 'feminine' as representative of *social constructs*, that is, 'patterns of sexuality and behaviour executed by cultural and social norms.' Hence, 'feminine' represents nurture and 'female' nature in this usage. She further explains that Dangarembga's novel falls within the feminist tradition. Moyana (2006) adds that the author does not simply describe women's experiences and leave them there; neither does she simply describe the socialisation of women into their roles. Rather, the feminist writer portrays some women who try to protest against their usual socially accepted roles while others engage in a debate on how they are being used or misused by the men-folk. Chief among the women who protest against their feminine roles are Tambudzai, the imaginary narrator and protagonist of the novel *Nervous Conditions*, Nyasha, her cousin, and Lucia, her aunt. Moyana discusses the gender issues in the novel and tries to show why she says its woman's voice is significantly feminist:

*It is my contention that Tambudzai, the fictive narrator of Nervous Conditions, and Nyasha protest and rebel against their gender or feminine roles, which their society normally accords female children. Lucia, on the other hand, simply acts and behaves in the way that pleases her, comments on issues that affect women and female children and knows how to use and manipulate the men in her life, namely Takesure, Jeremiah and Babamukuru, to get what she wants. In the end she escapes from poverty and illiteracy to become an emancipated woman in her own way. Right from the beginning of the story, Tambudzai categorises the women in her story: a story which is not 'about death, but about my escape and Lucia's; about my mother's and Maiguru's entrapment; and about Nyasha's rebellion — Nyasha, far-minded and isolated, my uncle's daughter, whose rebellion may not in the end have been successful (p. 1).*

Nyanhongo (2011) argues that the issue of women's oppression and empowerment has been one major theme in African literature and research in the last few decades. There is no doubt that this has been a late but necessary response to the realisation that women have been oppressed, overlooked and demeaned for a long period of time. Women suffer in this way as a result of various factors, some of which may be related to out-dated beliefs and practices in their societies. This is often interrelated with forms of racial and economic oppression. This is evident not only in African societies, but also in African literature which mirrors these features of these societies.

Nyanhongo (2011) asserts that the arrival of renowned female feminist writers such as Emecheta, Bâ and Dangarembga coupled with the liberation of African countries from colonial powers, has opened space for women to counter-balance and correct stereotyped female descriptions in African literature and post-colonial societies. These writers portray the position of women in Africa as they battle with or surrender to the various forms of traditional oppression that hinder them from achieving personal empowerment. Furthermore, these three women writers explore women's attempts to achieve self-actualisation in the changing societies they inhabit.

Their texts deal with, and often contest their twofold oppression, that is, patriarchy that preceded and continues after colonialism, that engraves the concepts of womanhood, motherhood and also, traditions such as dowry. Maiguru, in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) runs away from her home because she is not allowed to regard herself as her husband's equal, because of the bride price paid for her. But, she is entrapped between societal expectations of a decent woman and the self-will to emancipate herself, but the latter has a strong influence on her and eventually she returns to her husband, to a life of

submissiveness and subservience. Her daughter, Nyasha also suffers emotionally due to traditional patriarchal perceptions, in which women are not permitted to rebel against male dominance. In Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1981), Ramatoulaye suffers because her husband takes another wife. Ramatoulaye manages to attain self-actualisation, unlike a woman such as Nnu Ego in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) who is belittled by her husband's polygamy, but unable to surpass that which confines her. Women may also be forced into early marriages and thus also be deprived of support structures. In women's feminist wrings tradition is one key factor that may constrain some women's potential for empowerment, although on the other hand, it can sometimes contribute to their growth to self-actualisation.

However, although custom is one significant form of oppression, there are a range of others such as the extent to which gender oppression is strengthened by racial and economic oppression. Nyanhongo (2011) argues that women suffer especially because of oppressive cultural traditions, many of which still persist in modern African societies. The oppressive aspects include patriarchy, polygamy and arranged early marriages, sacrificial marriages for the benefit of male children and general relegation of women. Even today, in modern African societies, it is still widely believed that a woman ought to stay at home, provide for the family and bear children. Furthermore, many women also hope to find inner peace through childbearing.

In *The Joys of Motherhood*, set in a twentieth-century African society, it is evident that Emecheta's female protagonist initially thinks that bearing children is the highest accomplishment of her life. The problem is that, she is hit hard by the burdens of raising a family almost single-handedly, and thus she begins to doubt that she can find inner peace through childbearing. A similar example occurs in *Nervous Conditions* for Tambu's mother believes that bearing and educating a male child will benefit both her and her family, but her dreams are devastated when her son dies. Moreover, the fact that she has no say over her children's lives turns her into a sad mother.

Nyanhongo (2011) further explains that these repressive aspects of custom still exist in contemporary societies. Then, in diverse works of African literature and in various African societies everything evil including witchcraft is associated with women. Women continue to be oppressed in other areas of domestic life. Heavy expectations continue to be placed on many African women. For example, they still may be required to carry out household chores and satisfy their men's physical needs, and complement this by bearing male children. Thus, a woman was traditionally expected to submit to her husband's wishes in all these respects, and still this is often the case. Moreover, she was and sometimes is still regarded as part of her husband's property. These perceptions are reflected in African literature. For instance, in *Nervous Conditions*, Tambu's father believes it is a waste of resources to educate her as she will be married and be expected to care for her husband. This is the scenario in most African countries; the girl-child is made to suffer at the hands of patriarchy.

## **Conclusion**

Most male writings portrayed women as weak, evil, submissive and docile but feminist literature portrays a woman who is emancipated, intelligent and self-willed. The feminist writers have, and are working towards an emancipatory type of writing, where they have the freedom to say out the problems of the many voiceless African women. The discussion above showed that women writers found it difficult to publish their works but as soon as they made in-roads to the publishing house, many African women writers emerged from the African continent. Their aim is to show that women are oppressed and there is need to emancipate them socially, emotionally and economically. Their works of art work towards the emancipation of the women-folk.

## **Recommendations**

The publication of women writings has been accepted in the literature canon; therefore, women need to take this opportunity to articulate their problems. Women's problems are best presented by women themselves, so more women writers are encouraged to take pen and paper to articulate their problems. Women and girls' emancipation from patriarchal bondage can be achieved through writing. Since most women's writings depict women oppression, more literary texts of this nature ought to be written and published.

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