

## Beyond The Emancipated Woman: Revisiting Fictional Experiences In Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman At Point Zero* And Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*.

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### Abstract

Like Marxism, feminism finds its roots in the struggle against prevalent social power and ideology relations. Using enlightenment discourse as a potent tool, it stresses the idea of an independent woman, who is rational and sovereign to decide her destiny. This, feminism has been able to partially achieve, but not in all quarters. Back in Africa, feminism has landed on various fronts: political, literary, cultural, and economic among others. The clamour for the emancipated Black Woman, who should be free from traditional denigration and oppression, is almost deafening. African female novelists have championed this course with their creative writings. But then, after Black Woman has secured her much desired emancipation, what becomes of her newly acquired freedom? This paper shall examine the nature of Black Woman's emancipation as portrayed by Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*.

**Keywords:** Culture, Emancipation, Female, Oppression, Woman.

### Introduction

Simone de Beauvoir, in her groundbreaking feminist treatise, *The Second Sex* (1952), puts forward a famous formulation that has spurred and continues to spur feminist politics: One is not born, but rather, becomes a woman (301). This philosophical statement has produced various points of departures among feminist readers. One widely accepted interpretation of the above extract is its distinction between Sex and Gender. Maicionis 2010 makes a clearer distinction between the foregoing concepts. He refers to gender as the personal traits and social positions that members of a society attach to being female or male (328), while sex is portrayed as a biological distinction between males and females (188). The former is culturally determined while the latter is biologically realised. Butler, in Fallaize 1998, makes another point of departure from Beauvoir's formulation when she submits that since the female body is anatomically determined, then it appears that the female body is the arbitrary locus of the gender 'woman'. For her therefore, gender is not just culturally determined. It is not a decision by a given culture of what should or should not be expected of a woman. Neither is it, to be put in Saadawi's own words ...like a guinea pig in... a social laboratory ...to be examined, dissected, analysed, gazed at (Saadawi 1997:135). Rather, gender is interpreted by Butler to mean a personal and continuous interpretation of the body to attain cultural possibilities. Hence, the gendered individual is responsible for his or her cultural realisations and possibilities irrespective of his body anatomy. In other words, to become a woman is a purposive and appropriative set of acts, the acquisition of a skill, a 'project', to use Sartrean terms, to assume a certain corporeal style and significance (Judith, in Fallaize, 1998:31). This proposition of the 'Woman' seems to dismiss the popularly passive conception that the lives of women are phallogocentrically determined. It rather makes a call to women to actively determine their destinies and essences as it strips the body off its limitations and bestows it with culturally interpretative possibilities. Hence, the woman becomes free to decide her essence in relation to her immediate prevalent culture. But being born into a society where patriarchy is firmly rooted in its various social institutions may not appear as easy as it sounds.

Therefore, feminists have taken the Marxist angle as a suitable route through which they could reach their womanhoods. This has led to the intersection of feminism with the Marxist theory in dismantling capitalism in order to birth social, economic and political and even religious equality. For Marxist feminists, the struggle for emancipation cannot reach its actualisation if economic and political systems would remain the same. This fact they argue strongly, because a helpless and crippled woman is subservient to a man - husband or father. Just as Marxism brings to light the capitalists' 'evil' of intensifying labour, lengthening working day, and depressing labour wages to maximise profit, so are women in the family domestic structure and labour work force. The

capitalist's desire for profit drives the bourgeois class into developing the productive forces of land, labour and capital into commodity. Consequently, the working class is forced into waged labour where the thirst for maximal profits inspires capitalists into a depression of wages below the value of labour power. By so doing, the capitalists earn the wages, command power, attain high social status and enjoy prestige through their ownership of private property and the means of production. Engels, in his famous book, *The Origin Of The Family, Private Property And The State* (1942), analysed women's position in the capitalist economic system. He argues that women lose power and importance when they are denied ownership of private property or where placed in the capitalist control of economic mode of production. Men's control of private property and affluence changes the family form to a patriarchal one and subjects women to dependence, unwaged labour and the property of the father and husband.

Debates about women, class and work have also strongly intersected with Marxism. Saadawi 1997, in her book, *Women, Religion, And Literature: Bridging the Cultural Gap*, declares, '...to me, '...the problem is economic and political' 135. Dalla Costa (1974) and Federici (1975) put forward that it is sexual division of labour on productive and reproductive work that makes women unequal to men and allow capitalists to exploit women's unpaid labour. Rowbotham (1973) stressed that patriarchy operated within the capitalist economic system. Hennessy (2003) in her essay equally opines that domestic labour reproduces the labour power the worker exchanges for a wage and is in this sense an essential source of the profits the capitalist reaps. Thus, for her, class oppression is gender oppression; an adjunct to gender inequality. Certain concepts or social economic realities remain crucial to the Marxist feminist: Class- a cultural system of status which manifests in one's economic power and social standing; Exploitation- the power relations where under-waged labour rewards the capitalists with profits; Capital- a social and economic relations. These concepts, when put together paint a portrait which Marxist Feminists believe best explains the struggle against patriarchy in social structures. Ownership or possession of capital brings forth class inequality, which in turn, breeds exploitation. As such for them, class inequality is gender inequality which benefits capitalism.

Another leading Marxist feminist reading of class is the domestic labour debates. They submit that the market-place system of under-waged economy under exploitative capitalism is a strong reflection of the labour of women within the family; only that this sort is completely unwaged. Unwaged because while the market-place labour directly produces surplus value, women's household labour do not add directly but unnoticeably to surplus value and this has made this sort of labour come to be understood as women's natural role; a role they were created to act out. The Marxist feminists therefore have strongly advocated for waged domestic labour. At the post modern front, Marxist feminism has located a renewed capitalism which strengthens sexual division of labour in the economic relations of production through beliefs, values, and norms. This capitalist drift into post modernism has sparked academic enquiry into suitable ways of explaining the place of knowledge – its relationships and differences – in capitalist class relations as a potent tool of unveiling the new face of class and gender inequality; what Saadawi(1997), calls 'The Postmodern Veil'. This has given rise to a newer kind of consciousness raising, a systematic literacy formulated for empowerment of the individual; Literacy encompassing the political, human and cultural well being of an individual. Kassam (1989), quoted in *Gender, Literacy and Empowerment* (2004), describes literacy in the following words:

To be literate is to become liberated from the constraints of dependence. To be literate is to gain a voice and participate meaningfully and assertively in decisions that affect one's life. To be literate is to gain self confidence. To be literate is to become politically conscious and critically aware, and to demystify social reality (25).

This newly assumed concept of literacy aims at the total liberation of an individual from every veiled form of domination and exploitation. But this method too, appears to be no easy task because as previously stated, post modern capitalism has crept into the various beliefs and norms and values that produce knowledge and from which the world makes 'sense' to an individual. Then the question arises, what approach is the most suitable for women literacy? The concept of ideology offers help for Hennessy(2003), in her article, *Class*, submits that, 'ideology allows us to conceptualise the fact that knowledge is produced under certain conditions and that those conditions have a causal effect....'(67). In other words, ideology provides a framework within which the relationships of culture to capitalist class relations are examined. Every given society, for instance, is controlled by forces of production and the economic relations are strong enough to influence state policies, meaning-making systems, practices, and social discourses. The prevalent economic relations veil the true drive of

capitalism under the cloak of evolving modern civilisation or a New World Order or Globalisation. Workers in developed capitalist economies have erroneously believed that the 'proletariat' has disappeared because of the availability of newer access to money and luxury. But this conclusion, in its real sense stems from the creation of new consumer habits and status which do not commensurate the earned wages. In the end, workers regrettably realise at the close of their labour years, how exploited they have been when their pension funds offers little or no financial security in their old age especially most developing countries. In emerging economies, the instrument of veiling is globalisation. That is, the breakdown of national culture and economy to allow a free flow of capital, commodities, and culture where unfortunately, the more superior cultures dominate their weak counterparts. As a result of this, Third World Nations continue to experience a decline in their various national economies and cultural heritages and political sovereignties. Women, for instance, are exposed to what we might call 'global femininity' (a superior culture's conception of an ideal woman, how beautiful a woman ought to look, and her preferred material products). Through films, international magazines, television programmes, images of a globalised mentality are absorbed into the conscious and the sub conscious minds of women within these spheres. The resultant effect is a rise in the demand for international or foreign products like perfumes, powders, dresses, and foot wears, which proves to economically enrich superior capitalist cultures. The near total collapse of national boundaries to allow for a flexible free flow of capital tends to crush the moral and religious systems of emerging economies within the Third World countries. Third World nations continue to encounter pitiable decline in moral values and religious norms. Through the media, women and men find themselves standing between dual civilisations (cultures). Oftentimes in today's globalised culture, women (in most developing countries) are taught to meet the moral and religious demands of femininity (submissiveness, tenderness, and comportment), and at the same time are also taught to meet the globalised demands of femininity (assertiveness, and beauty and 'scanty' dress sense, among others) Equally, the traditional/national moral and religious systems teach men and women to be sexually disciplined and place a firm control over their personal sexuality, but global culture teaches men and women, through international high-tech films to be sexually assertive and redefine their sexualities. While the aim of this is to free men and women from perceived traditional and religious sexual subordination, inhibition and boredom, its resultant effects for the not-well-informed are enormous: rise in premarital sex and its attendant consequences of teenage pregnancies with its complications, quack abortions, spread of venereal diseases, increases in divorce rates, single parenting, to mention but a few. Both are alternatives to acculturation, and because one appears more exciting and attractive than the other, women and men have shunned the former for the latter. Both kinds of cultures – national and global, are dual means to the same end. This means that both men and women '....are bodies without a mind and should be covered or uncovered in order to suit national or international capital interests' (140), thus the need for empowering literacy. For genuine emancipation to be achieved, then women must be knowledgeable about male exploitation at home, class exploitation at workplace, and the value of economic independence. This, many female fictional writers have attempted to pursue through their literary works of art.

On the African scene, feminist writers have strove to present female characters in the middle of family exploitation. Oftentimes, these characters are born into family exploitation and economic dependence, where eventually the feminine gender becomes timid and subservient. She practically grows from a property of her father and kinsmen into the property of her husband and his kinsmen. In Buchi Emecheta's *Second Class Citizen*, Adah's birth becomes a huge disappointment to her curious 'male-expectant' parents. Her destiny is decided by her father when she is asked to drop out of school in preference for Boy, her younger brother and the preferred male child who has finally come along. Later on, when she marries Francis and reproduces children by him, she stays back at Nigeria to work and save money for Francis to finish up his academic programme in Britain and at the same time takes care of his kinsmen financially. In *Joys of Motherhood*, the tyranny of tradition (native culture) over women is overwhelmingly portrayed. Nnu-Ego, the pride of her father, is married off to her first husband, Amatokwu. But her inability to bring forth children in her marriage reduces her to the lowest depths of exploitation such that her father is glad when he returns to Amatokwu his bride price. Her father decides her fate in returning the bride price and later on, upon consultations with his close male friend about the family of Nnaife, gives out Nnu-Ego to Nnaife in marriage without seeing what Nnaife looks like nor considers what her daughter really wants.

Furthermore, in Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus the female protagonist tells of her illiterate father, who marries away his virgin daughters for a dowry at the slightest opportunity; beats his wife almost every night; who at the death of a female child, eats his supper after having his wife wash his legs, and goes to bed; but when a male child dies, he beats his wife before going to bed.

Also in *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Acidichie, Kambili is abused and dehumanised by her father Eugene when he scalds her feet with hot water because she stayed under the same roof with her 'heathen' grandfather. In the same vein, Kambili's mother is abused by her husband Eugene when he beats her after his long prayers on Sunday evening over dinner, and makes her lose a six-week pregnancy. These various female characters are presented as timid and absolving, giving supreme submission to their male characters where applicable especially under the cloak of family relations where she strives to please her father, and later on, her husband (as the case may be) and his kinsmen.

In an attempt to push knowledge and literacy down the subconscious minds of women, especially women in Africa, feminist writers have taken to creating female characters who assume responsibility, and are determined to decide their cultural possibilities, realisations and destinies in the midst of the subjugating situations they find themselves. These characters pursue economic independence, industry, and education in their various cultures where they have been located. Central to the themes in *Purple Hibiscus* is an extreme economic disparity between the rich and the poor, which sends Marxist-feminist signals of class oppression and its equivalent gender oppression. Aunt Ifeoma, a widow, a university lecturer and a younger sibling to Eugene Achike, is a victim of class oppression. Being in the employ of a dictatorial government that devalues education, and living without a husband, her wage labour is underpaid which negatively affects her standard of living. This informs her attempt to break free from the tyrannical grip of traditions as she refuses to submit to her brother's capitalist demands. She refuses to tell Eugene how much she suffers as a result of her unpaid salary, even though she desperately needs help. Boldly, she tells Beatrice, 'I want to use my gas cooker again and I want a new freezer and I want money so that I will not have to unravel the seams of Chima's trousers when he outgrows them. But I will not ask my brother to bend over so that I can lick his buttocks to get these things' (95). Aunt Ifeoma, like Akunna, in the *Bride Price*; Nkem, in *The Triumph of the Water Lily*, adopts a positivist attitude to the crises she is faced with: unpaid salaries, escalating price of commodities as a result of fuel scarcity and the antagonism of Ifediora's family. Instead of her to submit and succumb to her crises in tears of helplessness, regret and complaint, she is defensive and daring and industrious. She says to Beatrice, 'Nwunye m, things are tough, but we are not dying yet. I tell you all these things because it is you. With someone else, I would rub Vaseline on my hungry face until it shone!!!' (77). It is the same positivism that is seen in Firdaus, the central character of *Woman at Point Zero*. Against the backdrop of a pained childhood that is filled with domestic and sexual violence and abuses from her father and uncle respectively, and economic exploitation from perceived helpers, Firdaus develops a thick skin for the various crises she comes across. Having sought and secured a decent job wherein she is underpaid and falls in love for the first time ever, her life, however, takes another turn when she discovers that her lover is married. She breaks down emotionally after which she decides to begin trading her body for money. Justifying her decision, she declares that, 'a successful prostitute was better than a misled saint' (86). Her choice of livelihood transforms her from a submissive and subservient woman into a defiant, assertive and purposeful woman. Her trade becomes so successful that she is soon translated from a 'low class' citizen into an upper class citizen who could hire lawyers to defend her honour before the law, and journalists to praise her philanthropy in the magazine. We are confronted with the same enthusiasm and will when we consider Adaku, Nnu-Ego's co-wife in *Joys of Motherhood*. Her inability to produce sons for Nnaife makes her feel like an overstayed visitor in his family and amongst his kinsmen. Instead of giving in to hopelessness, she takes the responsibility of determining her destiny outside the traditional confines of the family, where success for a woman is not defined by her ability to produce sons. Hence, she takes to prostitution as a sure way of realising her individuality. For both characters - Firdaus and Adaku, emancipation is achieved through making a purposeful and positivist choice to defy the prevalent social institutions wherein they are devalued and exploited.

Male domination within the family system is so institutionalized (in most African societies) that to think otherwise would never occur to most individuals. It attempts to crush the very essence of women who are brought under it, even when the women are successful at child reproduction. Firdaus recounts the domineering attitudes of the men under whom she has lived when she narrates that, 'never in my life had any man put me first before himself, while I slept on the wooden couch. Later on, when I married, my husband ate twice as much food as I did, yet his eyes never lifted themselves from my plate' (48). Firdaus never reproduces though she stays long enough in no marriage. Her notion about the ugly male exploitation is not different from Aunt Ifeoma's notion. Having lost her husband in a ghastly motor accident, Aunt Ifeoma refuses to give herself to another marital commitment. She decides to live with her children without a husband; a decision that is frowned at by (traditional African) society. The belief that a woman ought to be protected by a man – father or husband, is a

potent tool for trapping women in the snare of male exploitation. As such, any woman who would not have a 'protector' is outrightly considered by the society as irresponsible. In a conversation with Beatrice, Auntie Ifeoma tells of six girls in her first year seminar class who are not married and yet schooling. This is in contrast to the 'usual' situation where men provide their wives with textbooks and other luxuries but in the end, 'when they graduate, their husbands own them and their degrees' (75). Defiantly, without any dread of the social stigma the society would tag her for having children without a husband, she asserts her philosophy to Beatrice when she says that, 'life begins when marriage ends' (75). Firdaus philosophises similarly when she realises that the least deluded of women was the prostitute. Marriage for her was, 'the system built on the most cruel suffering for women' (86). In other words, liberation begins where the confines of marriage breaks down. It is liberation to own private property; liberation to beat workplace exploitation and ascend social status. It is the quest for emancipation that drives Beatrice into conniving with her house help, Sisi, to poison Eugene's tea, to end the humiliating silence he envelops his household with. This action results in his death, and a perceived collapse of his overbearing tyranny. The philosophies of Auntie Ifeoma and Firdaus inform the attitude of nearly all feminist characters in the texts under review. The determinations they wield force them to creative enterprises outside the confines of marriage. Firdaus recounts that all women are prostitutes of one kind or another, '...and because I was intelligent, I preferred to be a free prostitute, rather than an enslaved wife (91). A careful consideration of the determination of these characters: Auntie Ifeoma, Firdaus, Adaku, and Beatrice, brings one to ask, after emancipation from male domination and exploitation at home, what next? Does liberation from the tyranny of family institution produce the desired freedom in its true sense?

Touching down upon the experiences of Firdaus with the pimp, the thirst for her freedom meant his death after which she feels...as light as a feather...'and walks the street in confident steps of a woman who believed in herself, knew where she was going and could see her goal (96). Her subsequent encounter with an Arab Prince ends with a display of her killer instinct. The fear-stricken Arab Prince screams for help and the police immediately arrive to seize and lead her away to prison, where she is confined to a room with shut windows and doors. The conditions of the prison room restrict her movement, and association; a newer kind of suffering, pain, loneliness, and subjugation. And yet she declares, '...I am free. For during life it is our wants, our hopes, our fears that enslave us. The freedom I enjoy fills them with anger'(101). But then, where lays freedom within the prison room? Is this not a worse form of suffering and subjugation? Where lays freedom in the demise of the female body? Does the demise of the exploited woman correct the 'unjust' social and economic power relations? Like Firdaus, Adaku's freedom from the suppressing traditional demands from women is questionable. After leaving Nnaife's house with her daughters for a trade of her body, she dies a prostitute, without having the male sons and the luxury for which she decided to trade her body for. Adaku's end eventually makes mockery of a true freedom and emancipation. Beatrice, Eugene's wife does not remain the same after her husband's demise as a fresh brand of silence envelops the household. A heavier silence wraps both women – Kambili and Mama; the similitude of the sort that is about to suppress Firdaus supremely. Mama becomes emotionally depressed and therefore becomes a shadow of her own self. She never speaks until she is first spoken to. Kambili narrates that, 'there is so much that Mama and I do not talk about' (297). They do not, for instance, talk about the huge bribes they pay to Jaja's lawyers and doctor; what Eugene would not have tolerated if he were alive. They do not talk about the new freedom which Eugene's death has wrought. The news of Jaja's release also fails to bring an expectant excitement among the family. Kambili's mother having master-minded the poisoning of her husband finds no succour but strange emptiness that seemingly estranged her from herself and life. This is a clear case of double alienation. Although the oppressor having being removed, her freedom and emancipation hang on a balance.

Through the experiences of these characters, the female family/social crises, to propose, do not seemingly end with rebellion against family and social institutions. It rather appears to worsen it if one closely observes the end results of these female characters' actions. Should we now say that the achievement of emancipation outside family and social institutions only transcends into higher and complicated crises? The female might be able to triumph over and be free from the tyranny of family denigration and cultural tyranny but may become defenceless and vulnerable before traditions of the state and culture wherein she is located. Auntie Ifeoma is a brilliant example. After she successfully breaks free from the subjugating tendencies of her late husband's kinsmen, she is faced with a deadlock of unpaid salaries by the ruling military government and victimisation by her university colleagues. Feeling helpless to the prevalent situation, she pursues her career in the United States. Her relocation to the United States is a cultural repositioning where she may not be restrained by the cultural boundaries of her native norms and practices. Unlike Auntie Ifeoma, Firdaus and Beatrice refuse to seek solace

outside their immediate cultural environment. Firdaus becomes more confident after the police apprehend her; she refuses to let down her defiance but fearlessly awaits what might come next. Unfortunately, her death is the resultant effect while Beatrice after successfully bringing down the tyranny of her husband sinks more and more into depression.

Certainly, the African adage that no man can win a battle against his clan (culture) seems to stand as a witness against this new female posture. Emancipation from the novels reviewed thrives practically within the family setting but suffers a great setback in the larger traditional society. The woman who is successful at pulling down the denigration within her family would be unsuccessful at an attempt to overpower the institutions of the prevalent culture wherein she is located since these cultural institutions have given the people (especially men who are custodians of these institutions) 'protection' and a sense of belonging. And, except the woman is liberated from her prevalent culture, emancipation cannot be said to have been attained. So, what options are these oppressed characters left with in a society that is patriarchal? As these options are sought by all and sundry in this globalized era, caution should be everyone's watch-word so that unhealthy extremes are avoided.

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