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2. WOMEN AND SOCIETY IN FEMALE AUTHORED SHORT STORIES AND POEMS FROM NAMIBIA

The Dimensions of Oppression and Violence

INTRODUCTION

In Africana women's literary criticism, there has been a lot written on whether women literary critics hold to the feminist, African feminist or womanist point of view (Etim, 2000a, pp. 71–72; Ogunyemi, 1993). There has also been the question of whether African female writers write from the feminist or womanist perspective. In defining womanist, Alice Walker declared:

A black feminist or feminist of color. ... usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered "good" for one. In charge. *Serious... Also*: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women's strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male *and* female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. (p. xi)

Hudson-Weems (1993) in tackling the issue of naming and African women's literary tradition declares:

The Africana womanist is not to be confused with Alice Walker's "womanist" as presented in her collection of essays entitled *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens...* Neither an outgrowth nor an addendum to feminism, Africana Womanism is not Black feminism, African feminism, or Walker's womanism that some Africana women have come to embrace. Africana Womanism is an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in African culture, and therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of Africana women. (pp. 23–24)

In another definition, Hudson-Weems (1997) pointed out that "Africana Womanism commands an African-centered perspective of Africana women's lives—their historical, current, and future interaction with their community, which includes their male counterparts" (p. 82).

According to Warhol and Herndj (1996), feminist studies have been the domain of white middle class straight women who share much of the cultural privilege of their male counterparts (p. xi), while for Hudson-Weems (1993), the African womanist “invites her male counterpart into her struggle for liberation and parity in society, as this struggle has been the glue that has held them together and enabled them to survive a particularly hostile and racist society” (p. 61). The idea of inviting men and women to tackle the problem of the position of women led Chukwuma (1994) to declare that African feminism “is accommodationist not exclusive and negativistic. Men remain a vital part of the women’s lives” (p. xvi).

This view is in line with Ogini’s (1996) declaration that the new form of Womanism, “desires that the man and the woman should be in harmony in the home and society at large” (p. 15). In presenting a fuller picture of the term womanism, Philips (2006) declares that womanism manifest five overarching characteristics including ‘antioppressionist’. So, “A womanist knows oppression when she (or he) sees it, and she (or he) is against it...Womanism supports the liberation of all humankind from all forms of oppression ...womanism seeks to enable people to transcend the relations of domination and oppression altogether” (p. xxiv).

Writing about the treatment of women in male authored texts in Nigeria, Etim (1996) found that in the plays, novels and short stories analyzed, there were “many types of male domination and subjugation of women, ranging from physical and sexual abuse to emotional abuse” (p. 163). Amouzou (2006) declared that women are often “devalued and considered second class citizens” (p. 97). Amouzou continued by indicating that Flora Nwapa, the first Nigerian female novelist was to change that since with her works “she has re-created and re-presented women to reflect the changing realities of African women” (p. 99). In the same manner, Nnolin, posited that male authors have often portrayed female characters “as helpless, dependent, brutalized, disparaged...prostitutes or concubines or good time girls” (1989: 59). In redressing this treatment, Uko (2008) pointed out that African women writers now place women at the forefront and that these writers are “largely concerned with the assertion of self, reaffirmation of female pride, authentication of African womanhood as well as a search for an independent identity” (p. 67).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Writing by African female writers (whether feminist or womanist in nature) could be regarded as a counter to the many male misogynistic writings. These women writers are concerned with depicting the ongoing degradation of women, “ what has caused unhappiness and pain for women and how women can achieve happiness and ensure their full development and participation in society (Etim, 2000a, p. 71). Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) pointed out that feminists have posited two major responsibilities for the woman writer...” first to tell about being a woman; secondly, to describe reality from a woman’s view, a woman’s perspective (p. 57). This chapter examines women’s realm of experience as reflected in the short stories

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and poetry of Namibian female writers. Specifically, the issues of focus will be: (1) What is the “reality” depicted by women writers? What are their concerns as expressed in the literature? The areas of violence, human rights and oppression will be discussed in this area (2) How are women trying to assert their independence/voices in the writing under study? How does “freedom” come for the characters? (3) How are the writings tied to the African feminist/womanist point of view? (4) How are men presented at the end and is there any relationship between the sexes to encourage their working together to solve the problem?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON NAMIBIA

Namibia gained independence from South Africa in 1990 after many years of liberation struggle. During the struggle, both men and women fought alongside each other. Post-independence, Namibia has adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women” (CEDAW) in 1992 that condemns any form of discrimination against women, and states that measures have to be taken to eradicate all forms of barriers and restrictions that has the effect or purpose of “impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field” (CEDAW, 1979, Part 1 Article 1) Also according to the Ministry of Gender Equality and Child Welfare (2006), the Constitution of Namibia “commits Namibia to eliminate all discriminatory practices based on sex, race, colour, ethnic origin, religion, creed or social or economic status” (p. 5).

“Novels and short stories are in many cases a reflection of the society or period they were written” (Etim, 2000b, p. 103). According to Emenyonu (as quoted in Nnolim, 2015), the literature of a people is more or less “an imaginative recreation of a people’s account of their social, cultural, political and economic perspectives at a given time and place”.

ANALYSIS

1. Voices of women’s concerns in the areas of violence, human rights and oppression.

UN Women (2015) in *Ending Violence Against Women: From the Beijing Platform for Action to the Sustainable Development Goals* declared that “women’s rights are human rights” (p. 7). Furthermore, the paper defined violence as encompassing (a) Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family; (b) Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring within the general community; (c) Physical, sexual and psychological violence perpetuated or condoned by the state (pp. 9–10).

In an earlier study, Etim (2000a) pointed out that many African women novelists write about the oppressive nature of patriarchy in pre-colonial and post-colonial Africa (p. 71). Writing specifically about Namibia, Andima and Tjiramanga (2014)

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pointed out that in post-independent Namibia, the voices of women writers are advocating “for change” in the portrayal and situation of women in society. Using several stories from Elizabeth Khaxas’ (2006) *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow: Writings by Namibian Women*, the themes of violence, human degradation/loss of rights and oppression against women will be discussed.

Violence

The highest level of violence in many of the stories and poems is that of rape. In Londo “Nangula’s Story”. Nangula is raped by Sam, a distant relative who is living in the same house. The experience leaves her frightened and depressed (p. 75). However, Sam does not end the abuse. When he gets Nangula pregnant, he denies being the culprit. Even when he is caught, the punishment does not fit the crime “Later on, he was found guilty of rape and murder but was jailed only for a few years and then released. Nangula died with her unborn baby, brutally killed by a man who raped her and got away with it” (p. 76). This violence also displays itself in the name calling and lack of sensitivity to the plight of women even by close relatives as expressed in Linumbu’s poem, “I’m just a girl”

They call me names
The way they feel like
They rape and abuse me
They say I’m their property
Coz I’m just a girl
To them

I call out for help
But they don’t care about my feelings
No one helps at all. (p. 112, lines 7–15)

Human Rights

In her short poem, “Women’s human rights”. Iihuhwa pointed out the indignity and loss of human rights meted out to women in Namibia.

But women are humiliated
Their rights stolen
Their humanity not counted

In marriage, it’s worse

Women are exploited
They are made slaves. (lines 6–11)

The humiliation continues in the area of decision making – women are not allowed to make decisions since they are regarded as “empty tins”.

Londo in “Our Cultures deny women their rights” writes about how culture is used to deny women their rights. The author pointed out some of the rights denied:

- Women are not allowed to make decisions of any kind in their own homes.
- Women are expected to obey every rule made by the man of the house.
- Women are regarded as housewives, only there for reproduction or for satisfying men’s sexual desires, for working in the fields, collecting firewood and water, and for cooking (Khaxas, p. 21).

Continuing on the theme of loss of human rights, Londo in “Questions men might have answers for” asked, “Why are we still being denied our rights?” and declared “We are tired of being victimized, brutally killed, raped, assaulted and stigmatized after 15 years of marriage” (p. 44).

In Msiska’s “Evil in the name of culture”, Jocinta has no rights after the death of her husband. First of all, she is accused of being the cause of his death and has to appear in a court called and run by her late husband’s brothers. When she refused to listen to them and marry one of her late husband’s brothers, is locked up as a common criminal – “She was locked up in a room where she stayed for days. When she was finally let out they told her she could stay in the village to look after her children but she could not take them anywhere” (p. 11). She has to hide to see her children and when she finally, for the sake of her children reluctantly surrenders to be one of her late husband’s wives, she is rewarded by being infected with HIV. The description shows not only the loss of dignity but also the emotional toll she goes through as a result of a system that stipulates that the woman will be married to one of her late husband’s brothers:

Then Jacinta was also tested HIV-positive... She lived quietly in her small hut and made no contact with anyone. She just lay in wait for her death, listening to the whispers of the wind and the singing of the birds. She lost contact with others and her daughter took over her role. ... Jacinta’s only comforts were the bird’s songs and nature. (p. 12)

Oppression

In Hashiyana’s “Women”, the narrator complains of the oppression of women worldwide – women are victims of everything especially rape and murder. They are not counted as human beings and “our human rights are violated everyday” (p. 17). The narrator also declared:

We women are suffering in many ways because our husbands of nowadays do not assist us. They have many relationships with other women while they are married. That is why we become infected with HIV unexpectedly. Married women are suffering because they have to take care of kids, the house and everything which climbs on women’s shoulders. (p. 17)

In Mbala’s “Nothing Can Stop Her” Namasiku the heroine goes through three levels of oppression. (a) denial of educational opportunity; (b) denial of voice; and (c) verbal abuse. When she completes Grade 12, her parents refused to send her to college even though she strongly desired to further her education. This is a clear denial of opportunity. It is just that she is a girl and her parents judge that education is not important for her and a waste of money for the family. This is not the case for her younger brother for the father sent him to college immediately he is ready. Secondly, she is given to marriage without her consent and even in the face of her protests. And then the husband takes a second wife, as a matter of his rights, without any consideration of Namasiku. Then in her husband’s house, she goes through a lot of verbal and emotional abuse: “On a very rainy day, while Namasiku and her husband were sitting in their house by themselves, she told him she wanted to go to college and complete a teacher’s diploma. Her husband became very angry and started using abusive language” (p. 30). The oppression of women by denying them an education is also highlighted by Iluhwa in “Too late for regrets” where the father intentionally does not allow the girls to go to school. Thus, while the male child was educated, the girls in the household stayed “at home with their mother, toiling in the field day out and day in. They were illiterate; reading and writing was something strange... and he (the father) began to assault them and told them they were stupid since they were illiterate” (pp. 118–119).

Data presented by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (2011) showed the following for Windhoek, Namibia in terms of the various types of violence against women.

Table 1. Violence against women prevalence data for Windhoek, Namibia, 2002

	INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE		
	<i>Physical</i>	<i>Sexual</i>	<i>Physical and Sexual</i>
Last 12 months	15.9	9.1	19.5
Lifetime	30.6	16.5	35.9

*Adapted from UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women 2011
Violence against Women Prevalence Data: Surveys by Country*

Table 1 show there is some level of intimate partner violence in the areas of physical and sexual abuse.

2. How are women trying to assert their independence/voice in the writing under study? How does “freedom” come for the characters?

In an earlier study Etim (1996) reported that in many of the male texts analyzed, the female characters either died or were inhibited in their quest to develop themselves. Female authors on the other hand tended to allow the female characters to remain alive and fight for their freedom. The female characters “obtained their

freedom through various means including leaving the abusive environment, getting an education and a job, bonding with other women and making it clear to the spouse that they will not accept abuse” (p. 163) in many of the short stories and poems in this analysis, we find female resistance to patriarchy and male domination manifested in several ways.

i) We must speak out.

In many of the stories and poems, women have been denied their voices by men, their ideas often discarded and men have made decisions without allowing them to be part of the process; they have been marginalized. Iluhwa in the poem, “Women’s human rights” advised women to speak up.

No, No, No!
 We women must speak up
 We must be confident
 We have the power to win! (p. 7, lines 19–22).

Likewise, Londo in “Our cultures deny women their rights” called for women to advocate for themselves: “But all I know is that it is us African women who have to bring about change if we want to live our lives in peace, love and harmony” (p. 22). The same idea is offered in Iihuhwa’s poem who declared that if women are quiet and do not struggle for their rights, then they will be disrespected by men (p. 32).

ii) Get an education.

In many of the stories and poems, women are not allowed to get an education either because of culture or the cost associated. In Khaxas, “The Unknown Himba girl”, the heroine, name unknown, dies violently in the hands of her uncle simply because she dared to go to school. In Hangula’s “The clever herd girl” we are introduced to Ndalila, who is determined to make it notwithstanding her condition. She goes to school and starts a small business to help sustain her while at school. In Gava’s “If you were born a woman”, Susan is also determined not to allow poverty to keep her down. We are introduced to life in pre-independence Namibia and immediately after independence for some women.

There were many sorrows in her life, and all she had seen was oppression and pain. Although it seemed like a dream, one would say, Susan was determined to rise above it... Many women and girls in Susan’s era submitted to the oppression and never rose above it. But, Oh no, not Susan. She had dreams for the future and she was determined to rise above her adversities. (p. 182)

It is instructive to note the authors repetition of oppression, pain and adversities and Susan’s determination to rise above these condition. Susan “... went the extra mile and fought for her education” (p. 183).

In Mbala’s “Nothing can stop her”, we see Namasiku triumphing over male oppression at the end of the story when she completed her three year teaching

diploma and is given a job in her village. “Namasiku continued to motivate and encourage other women in her village and surroundings to stand up for their rights... she began encouraging parents not to marry off their daughters at a young age but to encourage them to get the highest education they could achieve” (p. 31).

In Ntnda’s “Mwalepeange: a woman of courage”, Mwalepenge, caught in a very abusive relationship, decides to leave her husband, get an education and be free from “being beaten as if she were a punching bag. She feels free and she knows she has achieved much... freedom and liberty to be an independent woman” (p. 62).

iii) Leave the abusive environment.

In Nuunango’s “I will leave you”, the narrator is sadly disappointed at not only at the behavior of her boyfriend who broke all his promises- to marry her, to send her to school, to take care of her- but also the fact that he does not listen to her “... he doesn’t care to listen and doesn’t pay attention to any suggestions I have to make. He is always making excuses” (p. 172). The narrator leaves the relationship declaring words of advice to younger women:

Don’t think that a boyfriend will solve all your problems. You must make your own decisions. As girls, we have to make our education the first priority so that we can provide whatever we need for ourselves, including buying our house. And if you have done all that and you find yourself with a dictatorial boyfriend or husband, leave him. Divorce him. Right now. (p. 173)

3. How are the writings tied to the African feminist/womanist point of view?

Earlier, I pointed to the raging debate on whether African women writers write from a feminist or womanist point of view. Akung (2012, p. 114) pointed out that in Africa and Nigeria as the debate rages, the radical form of feminism has been played down both by writers and critics. According to Davies (1986), “African feminism examines African societies for institutions which are of value to women and rejects those which work to their detriment” (p. 9). Since “womanism seeks to enable people to transcend the relations of domination and oppression altogether” (Philips, 2006) we see in this analysis that women writers are giving voice to women’s concerns, challenging patriarchy and all forms of oppression, marginalization and violence against women. In Iihuhwa’s “Women’s human rights”, the narrator journeys from complaining about humiliation and loss of human rights through calling on women to speak up to ending in a voice of women’s emancipation and triumph over male subjugation:

You men must change
We have been putting our eyes on you
What you have been doing to us is enough.
Just keep in mind that
Once we have taken action
You will know who we are

And we will walk with the crown. (p. 7, lines 22–29)

The women will move from humiliation to wearing crowns – a symbol of power and authority. In the resistance, the female writers portray some strong women who through persistence and determination, having some education or opening a small business, are beginning to carve out an independent path for themselves. Many of the women will agree with the narrator in Londo's "Nangula's Story" who declared:

Namibian women, let us stand up for our rights, let us speak with one voice
Let us fight injustices against us, be they physical, emotional or psychological
Namibian women, it is never too late to try.
...United we stand. (p. 76)

4. How are men presented at the end of the short stories and is there any relationship between the sexes to encourage their working together to solve the problem?

In many male authored texts, the female is often relegated to the background since patriarchy upholds the idea that women are inferior. Their roles are often regarded as inferior and given less cognizance – she is thought often as the homemaker (devalued) versus office worker/professional, child bearer (often devalued) versus breadwinner. In these short stories and poems, the male characters are totally non-existent at the end or have been rendered unimportant as the female character makes her decisions and charts her course for independence and development. The narrator in some of the short stories and poems analyzed want a society that is more just for women. IHoakhaos in "Time Changes", the narrator wants a new culture that respects everyone:

Now, it is time
To create a new culture
A culture where everyone is equal
Where all voices are heard

At the end of the short stories and poems analyzed, there is very little relationship between the male and female characters. Rather, the female characters with the new freedom and independence are "reborn a better spirit" (p. 209).

CONCLUSION

The female characters in these short stories and poems are aware of patriarchy and other forces that seek to constrict their development and desire for freedom. Many of the characters grow to be very assertive and utilize whatever is available to them to assert and affirm their independence from traditions or situations that seek to constrict them and their desire for freedom and growth. We see women trying to live lives worthy of note, even in the face of such barriers/structures as culture, polygamy and little education. These short stories are meant to show that the world is not phallogocentric; that it does not and should not revolve around male dominance

and world view only but that women's views and perspective should be heard and implemented. These writers have elevated the concerns and issues facing Namibian women to the forefront. These include ending all forms of rape and violence against women, allowing women to have an education, equal justice and a voice in all kinds of affairs of concern to them.

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