Redefining the African Female Identity: A Palimpsestic Re-reading of Selected African Women’s Writing

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Abstract:
This paper examines female identity in selected works of African female writers across several generations of writers. The author uses the palimpsestic analogy as a critical tool in re-reading the selected texts. The study reveals that textual meaning, particularly as it relates to female identity, is couched in deep ironies, thereby giving multi-textual layers which are similar to a palimpsestic pattern. Consequently, the palimpsestic nature of these female identities, as the study reveals, affects authorial intentions, as several plausible meanings are unraveled. It is also evident that through the multi-layered presentation which gives a palimpsestic pattern, the new carved out female identities seem problematic. Most of these writers did not succeed in completely erasing ‘the namby pamby’ women from literary texts as envisioned in most earlier texts written by African male writers. Consequently, female characters are still portrayed as prostitutes, murderers and other self-effacing images. Therefore, the study suggests that women writers should employ other means of crafting new identities for their female characters, identities as full citizens, free from patriarchy oppression utilizing positive aspects of our cultures in liberating and nurturing ways.

Keywords: African female identity, Palimpsestic, and women’s writing

1. Introduction
Criticism of African women’s writings which started from the mid 20th century demonstrates a vigorous response to the creative output by many celebrated women writers. Women writers such as Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Zainab Alkali, Sefi Atta, Tess Onwueme, Chimamanda Adichie, among others demonstrate their understanding of the place of creativity in fostering a re-definition of the female identity in Nigerian literature. Inevitably, critics rose to the challenges arising from the issues raised by African women writers, thus introducing the critical trend of feminism into the Nigerian critical discourse. This new trend of critical re-appraisal of the female characters’ roles is a reaction against the passivity, docility, naivety and other forms of stereotyped images with which female characters were presented in the Nigerian literature.

Thus, the passion that elicited the re-appraisal of female identity was the ambition to rewrite and positively represent female characters in literary works with a vision of affecting their lives and cultural milieu, since literature feeds from reality and gives back to reality. African female writers thus, believed that the mandate to recreate the absurd female identity in literary works was a task which they must confront with every ardour. It is within this framework that this paper finds its relevance, since it seeks to assess the recreated version of female characters and female identity by female writers vis-à-vis the earlier images created of female characters in male authored texts.

2. Definition of Working Terminology
Central to the discourse in this study is the term: palimpsest. The palimpsest originates from the Greek word ‘palimpsestos’ and is defined by several critics as a piece of parchment severally written over yet showing a superimposition within the fabric of the text, thus creating a text-in-between phenomenon. The concept, according to Berdnt, was introduced into post-colonial discourse by linguistic critics who described palimpsest as the act of erasing the indigenous culture by the colonial settlers to inscribe their own culture on the erased surface. However the process is incomplete as traces of the decimated culture interplays with the new. This analogy is used metaphorically to compare the act of erasing the absurd women’s image in male-authored texts in order to project what Ogundipe-Leslie calls ‘correction of these images of the women in Africa’ (8).

Bey, in an online article titled ‘The Palimpsest’, defines palimpsest as a manuscript that has been re-used by writing over the original writing, and sometimes more than once. He further reiterates that a superimposition occurs which makes it impracticable to distinguish which layer was first inscribed. He explains that there is always a connection between the superimposed layers; these connections are not sequential in time but juxtaposition in space, in other words, different texts might be separated by decades, but a juxtaposition of these texts will reveal several layers of interplay. Agreeing with Bey’s definition, Dunn submits that the traces of past writing legible beneath the present text makes the palimpsest ‘a symbol of recurring human experiences’ (55). For the purpose of clarity, palimpsest is, the traces of the former in the latter, the old writing in the new writing; a piece of writing or any other phenomenon that has a version of
the past consciously or unconsciously infused in the present attempt to create a new image. Thus palimpsestic reading is a method of reading which is geared towards identifying plausible layers of meaning in literary works.

African feminism as used in this paper embraces the problematic women subjugation and marginalization as well as the subject of identity formation for both men and women.

3. African Women and Feminism

Theories about women’s struggle for emancipation from the grip of phallocentrism in African contexts are informed by the different myths of human origins; by world views, and by different cultural attitudes to gender relations. Writing about gender issue in Africa, Sofola believes that in the African context discrimination and any form of oppression against women is frowned at. She writes that:

The African world view underscores the idea that both genders have the same divine source even though each has its own distinctive roles to play in the life of the community. Consequently, the African sees that human society as an organic, holistic reality whose existence and survival can be achieved only through a positive, harmonious social organization in which all the members are relevant and effective (52-53).

On the other hand, Mcfadden’s view, as quoted by Mama, submits that the, gender hierarchies have existed in the African societies and that the subsequent power inequalities were exacerbated by colonialism. Some critics tend to agree with this view; the prevalent patriarchy in the African society cannot be absolutely attributed to colonialism. A deeper retrospect in the traditional society will unearth this fact that prior to colonial era, the woman in the African society was seen as subordinate to the man. Bessie Head in her short story, ‘The Collector of Treasures’ examines these inequalities in three stages: the pre-colonial era where the traditional society confers on the man, a superior status, during the colonial era, the men were taken away and most of them were engaged with the white men, while the women were clearly off the political and economic areas. During the period of neo-colonialism, the African men only perpetuated this hierarchy, constraining the women and preventing them from realizing their potentials beyond their traditional roles as mothers, wives and daughters.

Prior to the 21st century, the controversy surrounding feminism marred the actualization of an organized feminist movement. The view that feminism is an imported concept that turns African women into social deviants further widened an organised forum. Meena states ‘women’s oppression has been located in the traditional African society, in the colonial system, in the new-colonial nature of the African state, and in the patriarchal ideologies of post-colonial African state’ (87). She views feminism in Africa as a struggle, whose goal is to create spaces for women to participate in the management of their societies.

In a recent development, women in Africa have made remarkable strides in a bid to leap over the boundaries of ostracism and identify with feminism. However, not as ‘blind copy cats’ of Western European feminism, but creating a niche for themselves, making it possible to have an organized forum. For instance, the African feminism forum, whose ideological task as outlined in the Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists, is to understand the system that legitimizes the patriarchal ideology and have as political task to end such system. Their focus thus, is fighting against patriarchy as a system rather than fighting individual men or women. The African feminist forums explained in the Charter is committed to craft new identities for African women, Identities as full citizens, free from patriarchy oppression utilizing positive aspects of our cultures in liberating and nurturing ways.

Thus, in an attempt to name African women’s struggle for the cessation of all forms of discriminatory and violent practices against women, in the context of their culture and within the confines of their unique experiences, many terms have emerged among African women writers and theorists. There are several nuances of meanings, applications, and engaging debates among women scholars on the issue of ‘what is and what is not’ feminism within the African context, as mentioned in the previous section. For instance, feminism was re-named as Womanism, Africana Womanism, Negofeminism, Stiwanism and Motherism, among others.

An Igbo proverb says ‘Anahia akwu ofuebe ekir nmanwu’ (one does not stand at one point to watch a masquerade). Indeed, the act of re-naming feminism is geared towards bringing about diversity in the feminist discourse. In the foreword to The Dynamics of African Feminism, Nnaemeka writes that it becomes imperative to name African women’s struggle because of the ‘marginalization of African women and their inscription in both mainstream White feminism discourse and the women of color feminist discourse’ (11). Bolzt, adding her voice, elucidates that some African women are not willing to be defined as feminists for ‘very personal and political reasons’ (Bolzt,55). The reasons are similar to those observed by Nnaemeka. However, Bolzt goes further to elaborate on the issue. She quotes Kolawole as saying that, one of the major arguments is that white feminists treat African women with ignorance and arrogance. She writes further:

There are liberal white feminists such as Kate Millet (1969) who ignore or marginalize the specific problems of African women. Radical and Marxist feminists on the other hand presume to be able to speak in the name of all women without being informed about the specific situation and problems in African countries… (55-6).

Bolzt reiterates that, the rejection of white feminism by African women is based on the argument that, white feminism is a struggle which concentrates on women liberation among other issues. On the other hand, the focus of the African women is not only geared towards discrimination based on gender but it is all encompassing. Other social factors such as race, neo-colonialism, nationalism, religious fundamentalism as well as dictatorial and/or corrupt systems are considered.
Also, quoting Omalade, Bolzt writes that, African women view their Western counterparts as allies with their men either by association or through individual behaviour in the oppression of Africans, which both men and women are victims.

In the same vein, African women critics subject the African-American version of feminism through the same criticism because, like their white counterparts, they tend to speak in the name of their ‘African sisters’ using the African-American women’s experiences, while neglecting or marginalizing the peculiar problems of African women.

Based on the above debate, African women theorists/writers cast their own stone in the pool of feminism, first with an attempt to name their struggle, as the western version lacks the apparatus to describe their experiences. Bolzt writes that, Tsitsi Dangarembga states in an interview that ‘White Western Feminism does not meet my experiences at a certain point that is the issue of me as a black woman’ (57). Thus, the attempt by African women theorists to name feminism in Africa has a fundamental concern which is, ‘the use of different aspects of African cultures, historical moments, and current global imperative to make sense of feminist engagement’ (12).

4. African Feminist Perspective/Theories

Selden et-al observes that over the past two decades and half, ‘feminist critical theory has meant par excellence, contradictions, inter-change, and debate (and also) a series of creative oppositions, of critiques and counter-critiques, and is constantly expanding its own positions and agenda, grounded in specific cultural political needs and arenas’ (123). Due to these several metamorphoses, it becomes inherently complex to arrive at a synoptic account of all the divergences. What this segment attempts then, is (while conscious of the several debates about the name that best describes African women’s struggle for a redefined image/identity) to give an overview of African feminist theories and to subsequently arrive at a conclusion that all the forms have the same objective.

The African feminist theory as an umbrella term has several components as earlier on mentioned. They include; Womanism, Africana Womanism, Negofeminism, Stiwanism, Motherism among others. The concept of womanism was coined by Alice Walker and Chikwenye Ogunyemi at about the same time. They suggested that the term best describes the African or Black woman’s struggle, because it is an all-encompassing term. In her book, In search of Our Mother’s Garden (1983), Walker first used the name ‘womanism’ to describe Black women’s struggle to reclaim their identity. In her summation on the differences between white feminism and her womanism she elucidates that: ‘A black feminist or feminist of colour . . . (is) committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female’ (xi). Thus, womanism is considered more promising and effective than feminism, because it is designed much more broadly. This provides the basis for definition of the concepts as an all-inclusive struggle that seeks the survival of all humans.

In addition, Ogunyemi in her article ‘Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English’, delineates the differences between feminism and womanism. She claims that, ‘The ultimate difference between the feminist and the womanist is . . . what each sees of patriarchy and what each thinks can be changed’ (69-70). This idea leads to her definition of womanism, as ‘a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced representation of black womanhood’ (72). Elaborating further, she claims, an African woman writer ‘will recognize that, along with her consciousness of sexual issues, she must incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic, and political considerations into her philosophy’ (64). Ogunyemi’s view of the African women’s struggle in her liberal praxis, is to deal with the complexities of the totality of liberation in her society because she operates in the context of a community. And within this context are other issues which must be integrated in the African woman’s concern, because she functions as a social being in a given space and time. Thus, Ogunyemi believes that gender issue can be dealt with within the context of other issues that are of communal importance. This concern she believes ought to make African women writers’ vital agents in the fight for total liberation of both men and children. Adding her voice to the debate, Ardtnt submits that Ogunyemi’s version of womanism wants a meaningful union between black women and black men and black children and will see to it that men begin to change from their sexist stand . . . ’ (40). Thus Ogunyemi’s view of womanism is capable of turning society right-side-up, not only because it seeks to address communal issues but also it seeks a kind of social transformation that must be achieved in co-operation with men, as they must be involved in the process of social transformation.

Kolawole in her book entitled Womanism and African Consciousness (1997), discusses the African alternative to white feminism. Kolawole clearly distances herself from white feminism because she feels it lacks the potentials to describe her African experiences and cultural ethos. Kolawole reiterates that, African womanism embraces ‘female bonding and collective actions as part of the larger struggle of all Africans, of all Blacks, all women and indeed all dispossessed people’ (203). She claims that African womanism does not reject the nurturing of life and motherhood, nor does it repudiate the family unit. She writes, ‘It does not seek to achieve emancipation by hating men. African womanism is centered on the need for positive gender self-definition with historical, geographical and cultural contexts’ (203).

The binding point between all the concepts discussed so far, is that, they all seem to agree that, there is a struggle which must consciously be engaged in by women to liberate the black race. According to the women theorists, womanism is not an association of male antipathy, but embraces men in their struggle for liberation. Also, that the liberation praxis of African women must seek to build and nurture a healthy egalitarian society. This study embraces this point as a basis for critiquing the female characters in the selected works.

On the other hand, Nnaemeka coined the concept ‘negofeminism’ in 1995. According to her, negofeminism by implication stands for ‘feminism of negotiation as well as no ego feminism’ (12). She says that, ‘feminism of negotiation’ implies the need to challenge given facts by negotiation, while ‘no ego feminism’ criticizes the white Western feminism’s arrogance, imperialism and power struggles. Nnaemeka further explains that negofeminism gives freedom for a
negotiable woman's identity with the boundaries of limits. This implies that women's fight for their freedom and redefined identity cannot be constructive or beneficial, if there are no boundaries provided in the system where it functions, in the same way that men's freedom becomes oppressive when there are no checks and balances provided in the same system. The point Nnaemeka emphasized here, quoting the Yoruba proverb which when translated says 'The sky is so vast that all birds can fly without colliding', is that, African women should learn from the birds. The context within which they are is elastic enough to give African women possibilities and choices instead of relying upon Western feminism that may alienate them culturally, determine their actions, and consequently obfuscate their horizon and space. She believes that the need to fight for the reclaiming of a denigrated female image rests on the historical, cultural, socio-political, and religious contexts of the women's community and not on any anticipatory antagonism between men and women.

Finally, Steady in 'African Feminism: A World-wide Perspective' writes that:

African patterns of feminism can be seen as having developed within a context that views human life from a total rather than a dichotomous and exclusive, perspective. For women, the male is not 'the other' but part of the human same. Each gender constitutes the critical half that makes the human whole. Neither sex is totally complete in itself to constitute a unit by itself. Each has and needs a complement despite the possession of unique feature of its own [8].

The implication of the above submission by Steady is to advocate for unity and co-operation, inclusiveness and complementariness between men and women, rather than a separation. The import of Steady's summation encourages a striving towards unity between men and women, lack of fragmentation and a wholistic view of society. Based on this summation, the review draws on all the various concepts of the African women theorists and subsumes them under the broad name of African Feminist Theory. The fight for the rights of women need not diminish the rights of men because the planet is large enough for everybody, according to an Igbo proverb ‘Egbere ugo bere, nkesi ihe ya belie, nku kwao ya’ (let the kite perch and let the eagle perch, but the one that hinders the other from perching loses its wings). The proverb emphasizes the recognition of the rights of men, women and children. There is no need to sidetrack the argument for women's equality by implying that it takes away the rights of men. And this conviction feminism in Africa advocates.

5. Literary Application of Palimpsestic Analogy

The word ‘palimpsest’ is often traced back to the nineteen-century writer, Thomas De Quincey. Therefore, the term ‘the palimpsest’, recently, has been employed by critics in reading modernist works with different connotations and several nuances of meaning. Palimpsest, as defined by Bornstein, is:

...a written document, typically on vellum or parchment, that has been written upon several times, often with remnants of earlier, imperfectly erased writing still visible, remnants of this kind being a major source for the recovery of lost literary works of classical antiquity' (1).

Bornstein says that the original connotation of palimpsest from the Greek and Latin root meaning is ‘scraped again’ or ‘rubbed smooth’ or vellum treated to act as a slate.

However, the word palimpsest is now viewed beyond its original meaning; first by Romantic and Victorian writers who seized upon the metaphorical implications of the word. For instance Thomas De Quincey used it as an emblem for human brain, and in Aurora Leigh, Elizabeth Barret Browning applied it to the soul. According to Coleridge, the word was employed by S.T. Coleridge in the 1828 preface to The Wanderings of Cain. He wrote’I have in vain tried to recover the lines from the palimpsest tablet of my memory’ (2). It is through this idea of memorial impression that Thomas De Quincey makes the connection between the palimpsest and the human brain. Quincey says, the human brain possesses multiple layers of old experiences which tend to interplay with newexperiences.

Gilbert and Gubar, use the metaphorical term ‘palimpsest’ in the Madwoman in the Attic, to describe a work whose surface designs conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning: (73). Whalen, using the word also, describes Virginia Woolf’s first novel The Voyage Out (1915) as ‘palimpsest’. He explains that there are ‘two stories operating simultaneously’, a ‘surface story’, about the initiation of a young woman into maturity and sexuality and a ‘submerged story’ which undermines the surface narrative, the ‘less socially acceptable’, feminist complaint or protest that young women are frustrated in their voyages of discovery and self-assertion by their male counterparts’(5).

Palimpsestic reading thus is interpreted both at the surface level and submerged level of meanings. At the submerged level of meaning it reveals and encompasses more subtle, obscure layers of meaning. While palimpsest at the literal level entails the overwriting or rewriting upon an erased surface. The foregoing brings about thephenomenon of many textual layers. This, Coleridge describes as ‘an ancient palimpsest upon which earlier writings are not entirely effaced by superseding inscriptions’ (1). He further uses the palimpsestic analogy at the literal level, to describe S.T Coleridge’s poem Christable’. He explains, ‘Christable betrays in its resemblance to the 1816 and 1828 printed editions’(Coleridge, 1).

According to Ouedghiri, in an abstract ‘Writing Women’s Bodies on the Palimpsest of Islamic History’, Arab women reconstruct the past as they rewrite Islamic history. She writes that, this task is perilous because they unlayer, the palimpsest of the fundamentalist narrative, engaging its ambiguities, activating its silences, interrogating its in-between(s), and filing in its blanks’ (1). The act of palimpsest according to her is used by Arab women to make available several visions of female image in contrast to their overshadowed images in male texts.

Katrin Berndt in Female Identity in Contemporary Zimbabwean Fiction writes that the term palimpsest originates from linguistic discourse. According to her, linguistic critics use the literal analogy of palimpsest to examine the indigenization of English Language in former British Colonies. Berndt says ‘the Settler colonies are also described as palimpsest cultures’. The settlers erased the original cultural inscription of the occupied land in order to ‘inscribe their own culture into it’ (7). She explains that this cultural inscription is not absolute as there remain traces of the erased
culture in the new. Berndt thus says: ‘Zimbabwean Literature in both English... Shona and Ndebele displays ‘a palimpsest’ of oral and written characteristics’ (7). In this same way, women’s writings reveal this superimposition, resulting in a creative hybrid.

In explaining the reason for superimposition of the old, negative image of female characters in women’s writings, Gilbert and Gubar opine that the literary convention of the 19th century saw women writers writing alongside male authors. They explain that, the women writers, before being able to move on to self-definition, had to struggle with the two ‘paradigmatic polarities, angel or monster’ (76), in terms of which she was defined by male writers and which were so alien to her sense of herself as a woman and as a writer. In creating versions of the self in her fiction, therefore, with the help of female precursors, she radically revised those conventions. There are traces of old images. Monsters appear, yes, but they are madwomen, burning down the patriarchal mansion. Angels show up as well, but strangely afflicted with amnesia. Moreover, the angel and the monster seem strangely related, the madwoman acting out the subversive impulse cannot be expressed directly by a woman who wants the approval of her culture, she writes conventional novels or poetry with concealed levels of meaning, which they described as ‘palimpsestic works (Gilbert and Gubar, 76).’ Also citing Gerard Genette’s Palimpsests, Gilbert and Gubar describes any text that reveals the traces of earlier writings as a palimpsest. Such text offers the most systematic categorization of the inter-textual phenomenon up to date, in a classification that proves particularly useful for analysis of literature of the present with literature of the past.

6. The Concept of Female Identity as Palimpsestic

The third generation of Anglophone women writers, who from late 20th century to the present recognize the crux of identity formation in literary texts and are engaged in the quest of forming positive identity for their female characters. The task indeed cannot be viewed as a simple and straightforward one. Woven into the fabrics of most of these texts are issues of race, gender and class. These interlaced elements often make their vision of identity complex. However, this complexity can be unraveled through an in-depth study of various representational forms in their fictional works. Whatever the genre these women writers employ: autobiography, bildungsroman (a genre of transition from ignorance to cognition), epistolary, gothic and so on, their intention has been to disrupt the existing trend of representational identity, mothers and daughters, mistresses, witches/murderers, or liberated, unmarried termagants, among others. Thus, the African women writers commenced an expedition of first, erasing these unwanted, irrelevant and out of place portraiture of the female characters on the parchment of African Literature, in order to rewrite on the parchment a positive and pragmatic identity of women. This is with a view to rendering the old depiction as unimportant and irrelevant in the new order of things, in the new depiction of the female identities set upon rubbed out version. Thus, with a sure stronger conviction, the African women writers erase the old identities to rewrite their own envisioned, positive identity. Anybody who has attempted to completely erase something can attest that a little bit of the old remains, stubbornly on the surface. It might be diminished, perhaps seemingly rubbed off so that nobody can see it glaringly, yes. However as noted by Berndt, the imperfectly erased remnants of the old can still be perceived. The past thus, stated in an online article titled "The palimpsest Narrator", is like magnetic remnants of a deleted file or like the imprints of a dinosaur foot prints, which cannot be totally erased. Although the intention of these African women writers is to create new female identities in their fiction which will in turn affect reality. It is imperative to state that the former identities peep through the new identities, even if it is not pronounced. Thus, in reading the new text, one sees an overlay of the absurd identities of the old text woven and resonating through the fabrics of the women’s narratives, as a result of this phenomenon, the female identities in women’s fiction possess a palimpsestic connotation because in reality the supposed erased images are not completely erased.
Chukwuma writes that, ‘When Flora Nwapa . . . started writing in 1986; her writing interest was women and her motive for writing was to correct the disparaged image of women in male-authored novels’ (3). Nwapa’s fictional universe, as observed by Mojola, ‘is a world of women for all her central characters and most of her secondary characters are women’ (22). She explains that, the men are made to function as husbands or lovers. Her women characters overshadow their men both mentally and materially. Although the focus of this study is streamlined to female identity, it is necessary to mention briefly the state men, in women’s writing.

Mojola writes that in Nwapa’s novels, ‘men are often regarded as nothing more than instruments for procreation’ (20). For instance, in One is Enough, Amaka the protagonist deserts her marriage due to infertility and the husband’s extra-marital affairs that produces two sons. She becomes indomitable in the city due to her guts and tenacity. However, in her quest for self-fulfillment, Nwapa produces the images of a seductress, who succeeds in seducing father McLaid and eventually bears two sons. She refuses his marriage proposal, although the priest deserts his priesthood for her sake. Beneath Amaka’s identity is a version of Segi in Wole Soyinka’s Kongi’s Harvest, who, according to Bryan, is depicted as a ‘right cannibal of the female species who sucks the vigour and vitality from men, leaving them like sugar cane pulp squeezed dry’ (124).

Despite the increasing novelities, Adichie’s depiction of Olanna in Half of a Yellow Sun, follows the same trend. Here, the man is used to actualize her revenge against Odenigbo. Olanna skillfully seduces her sister’s lover Richard, with no authorial condemnation. Rather the narrator states, ‘Afterwards, she felt filled with a sense of well-being, with something close to grace’ (234). Despite the reversal of role, the fact remains that, the woman is still stereotyped as a seductress in women’s writing. This, thus, constitutes a palimpsestic identity; the old identity of seductress in male-authored text resonates in women’s writing, as they intend to erase the former negative image in order to create what Adichie termed as a ‘woman taking charge of her own life’ (228). This unfortunately represent a problematic reality.

The negative portrayal of women as prostitutes in male-authored texts as mentioned earlier, is amongst the negative identity women writers seek to erase. However, a study of the works of Buchi Emecheta, Nawal El-Sadawi, and Tess Onwueme reveals some portraiture of female characters as prostitutes. The re-appearance of negative portraiture of female characters in women authored texts as viewed by Gilbert and Gubar is one of the paradigmatic polarities which the women writers had had to struggle with. This reappearance does not however, endorse such negative portraiture rather according to them; it empowers the female character with the freewill or the freedom ‘to be’ and to eke out a living.

In Buchi Emecheta’s Joys of Motherhood, Adaku abandons her marriage and goes into prostitution in order to make money to train her daughters. In Nawal El Sadawi’s Woman at Point Zero, Firdaus after being oppressed and violated by the patriarchal structure (symbolized by the characters of her father, uncle, and Bayoumi), is introduced to prostitution by a woman (Sherifa). In Tess Onwuemie’s What Mama Said, the 23-year-old Oni is depicted as Oceana’s exploited mistress, who regains her senses and rather than breaking camp with her exploiter, she turns into prostitution. She boldly states:

Like you too, I fix my price for my buyers . . . you come to our land. You take and take and also dictate the price? And still we have no right to say no . . . to you, I fix my price $5? $10? And all night long everything adds up (Vulgarly displaying her body . . .) you touch? $10? Suck? A double blow, And the big one? . . . You think you can continue to pour and discharge all that for nothing? . . . Not anymore! You pour it? You pay for it? You Pump it? You Pay for it? You mess it up? You clean it up! (89).

Chukwuma says that this depiction of the woman is a drastic way of combating a dreaded disease which ‘needs a correspondingly drastic cure (Chukwuma, 5). Uko argues that, Oni is a symbol of the exploited African woman, in particular, and Africa, in general. However, we ask this, what justifies the characters of Adaku, Oni, Firdaus and condemns, Ousmane Sembane’s Oumi N. Doye, Cyprain Ekwenisi’s Jagua Nana and Ngugi Wa Thiongo’s Wanjia respectively? This palimpsestic portraiture gives a problematic stance, Nwapa’s statement in ‘Women and Creative Writing in African’ confirms this. She states, ‘I explore the theme of moral laxity as a response to earlier novels written by men where prostitution is always associated with women’ (531).

Another problematic identity which the women writers tend to rewrite is the stereotype of the woman as a witch or murderer, one who is capable of taking lives, and subjecting men to undue torture. For instance, in Wole Soyinka’s Kongi’s Harvest. Dandola cautions Daoud against Segi, ‘Oh you have chosen to be swallowed whole, Down the Oyster throat of the witch of night clubs, Segi . . . son. She’ll shave your skull and lubricate it in oil’ (Soyinka, 52).

The above portrayal of the female characters, evoked in women writers, a desire to use the literary vision as a way of correcting absurd female images, in African literature. Despite this well intentioned motive, the women writers still depict traces of the absurd identity of the woman either as a witch or murderer using different means to unleash their aggression on their unsuspecting male victims. Critics have argued that such depictions are symbolic. The argument here is that, such a depiction renders the identity of women in such works as palimpsest. For instance, in Bessie Head’s The ‘Collector of Treasures’, Dikladi kills her husband who abandons her andrelates his responsibilities by cutting off his genitals, in Woman at Point Zero, Firdaus, in self-defense, Kills the pimp, who exploits her and tries to suppress her. In Yvonne Vera’s novel, Under the Tongue, the protagonistRunyararo kills her husband, when she discovers he has been raping their daughter. Bolzt, quoting Hunter, writes that these depictions ally ‘these women’s acts of murder with protest against the physical and emotional abuse of women and against their continued denial of human rights’ (205). This defense does not change the fact that they resorted to murder. Chukwuma rightly observes that:
There is a need to remove the immoral and murderous options in women’s strive for rights because the presence of only two genders leaves no room for mediation so it becomes rationally expedient that both have to come together in mutuality and work out their differences (12).

Chukwuma, further opines that, in trying to redefine the identity of women in fiction bearing in mind its implication to reality, women writers could employ other means rather than resorting to murder, promiscuity and prostitution. She states boldly:

The worry is if aggrieved women then killed all their male culprits there will be very few men left, indeed, if any at all. This is a phase in feministic writing in Africa. One can look forward to the near future where other ways of shaking off the yoke can be explored (7).

7. Conclusion

Finally, there is no doubt that the issue of female identity has long been an issue of debate on several academic debate tables. In African literature, for instance, the concern has been to create a positive female identity, an issue that African writers are engrossed in. This review has shown that subjecting African women’s writing to western feminist theory may lead to erroneous textual meaning. It also reveals that African feminist theory is a viable alternative in analysing feminine issues in African Literature in general. Also the review made it clear that palimpsest analogy can be a vital critical tool in appraising literary works that portray intertextuality. An Igbo proverb says ‘Anaha akwu ofuebe ekiri onwu’ (One does not stand at a point to watch a masquerade). With such continuous self-effacing images in women’s writing, and its antecedent consequences on readers, women writers must craft new identities for female characters, identities as full citizens, free from patriarchy oppression utilizing positive aspects of our cultures in liberating and nurturing ways.

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