

## Deconstructing Feminist Positions in Unigwe's "Possessing The Secret Of Joy" And Aidoo's "The Girl Who Can"

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### Abstract

*For many years, African women have been blaming men for the inferior position of the female gender in African societies. In this blame game, the patriarchal and cultural stipulations of societies are not left out since they present the male gender as superior. This observation is emphasised by the myriads of texts on feminism which largely present discourses that highlight the roles of the male gender and patriarchy in perpetuating female otherness. In doing so, the females are portrayed as mere victims who do not play any active roles in this ordeal and are therefore exonerated from blame. This notwithstanding, a close study of events in patriarchal societies and the evolving contemporary current of thought in feminist domains questions the portrayal of women as helpless victims of patriarchy. By using the theories of feminism and deconstruction and by focusing on the themes and language of the stories, this paper seeks to unearth some patterns in Unigwe's "Possessing the Secret of Joy" and Aidoo's "The Girl Who Can" which speak to the involvement of women as agents of patriarchy. It also argues that some of the time too, men can be victims or subjugates of patriarchy in the African context. The paper concludes that the fight against patriarchy remains the lot of both genders and not in the blame game.*

**Keywords:** Agents; Feminism; Deconstruction; Patriarchy.

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### Introduction

The paper leans on a theoretical framework comprising feminist theory and deconstruction. Feminism exposes us to the concept of patriarchy and its tenets. The theory of deconstruction, on the other hand, aids us unveil certain patterns in the selected

short stories that prove how women, consciously or unconsciously, engage in attitudes and stance that indoctrinate patriarchal ideologies. It also helps us establish the possibility of some men suffering from the subjugation of patriarchy in some patriarchal African contexts.

Arguments in the paper are presented through an introduction, feminism in Africa, methodology, an analysis of the content of the two stories, and a conclusion. Thus, a qualitative method has been adopted in doing a close reading and criticism of the narratives. Three basic questions and objectives have been used to guide discussions in the paper: what is the fate of female characters in the two short stories, how does patriarchy contribute to that fate and to what extent do the women contribute to such a fate? The objectives for raising the preceding questions are to establish how female characters are presented seemingly as helpless victims, how patriarchy and male domination are blamed as the cause of the suffering of the female characters and the extent to which women in the narratives also contributed to the entrenchment of patriarchal positions, knowingly or unknowingly. This angle of the study is justified by the observation that previous publications on feminism in African writing have concentrated mainly on the following thematic areas: differences between western and African feminisms, the presentation of African women as the helpless victims of patriarchy or male domination, how African women are able to subvert patriarchy through diverse means and the impact of colonialism on the fate of the African woman. For instance, Steady (1981), Ogunyemi (1985), Ogundipe - Leslie (1994), Acholonu (1995), Kolawole (1997), Nnaemeka (2003), Opara (2003), and Ezeigbo (2012, a) have all agreed that western feminism is quite different from the African one. They reject western feminism on the basis of cultural differences, the fact that western feminism has another imperialist agenda of imposing white women experiences as the only form of feminism on all women all over the world and the fact that western feminism seems to exclude black women and men in general from feminist spaces.

Asaah (2007), Azuike (2009), Olanipekun (2013), and Subba (2014) have also all agreed on the presentation of African women as victims of patriarchy and male domination in the African context. In their works, what comes out clearly is the unfair advantage that patriarchy gives to the male gender over the female gender. Even when the woman, in certain circumstances, manages to subvert

patriarchy, the success of such a subversion comes after a myriad of obstacles that she needs clear before she gains such independence.

On the other hand, Odhiambo (2006), Musila (2007), Nkealah (2013), Chitando (2015) and Mba (2018) have concentrated their efforts in looking at the ability of the African woman in subverting the roles and positions that have been imposed on them by patriarchy in the African context. To these critics, women are not helpless victims in the works that they have reviewed. Women are agents of resistance, change and “complete humans with full potentials and agents of change in a changing world” (Mba, 2018, p.11)

To Ezeigbo (1990, b), colonialism made the traditional Igbo woman worse off as compared to the pre-colonial time. Traditionally, women had powerful associations of wives and daughters in traditional Igbo societies that made them wield power and enabled them manage their own affairs. These traditional associations are no longer a thing of the post-independent era, depriving the woman of the strength that she derived from such associations. Thus, from the literature, what is inadequate is the portrayal of women as agents of patriarchy. The argument here is that it is not all the time that women are presented as victims; sometimes they help in entrenching patriarchal positions through their actions and inactions, whether consciously or unconsciously. Some of the time too, men “can equally be made subjugates of patriarchy” (Sanka, 2019, p. 111).

Thus, from the works reviewed, feminism in Africa has been presented by both critics and writers as an issue that can be looked at from different perspectives. What is missing in this discourse of feminism is the contribution of women to the entrenchment of patriarchal values in their societies and how this can be illustrated from the literary perspective. Both Ademiluka (2018) and Mkhize (2017) agree that women contribute to the entrenchment of patriarchy in African societies both consciously and unconsciously. This is the problem this paper intends providing answers in its analysis.

The conclusion drawn is that women sometimes act as agents of patriarchy, whether consciously or unconsciously and sometimes too, some men can be victims of patriarchy. The blame game is not the solution to the damning effects of patriarchy on everybody; there is the need for a closer collaboration between both sexes in order to fight the common enemy.

### ***Feminism and Its Interpretations in Africa***

Ibeku (2015) observes that feminism is a movement which seeks to change the face of the dehumanising treatments meted out to women and in consequence, it focuses on the emancipation of women. It is interested in “exposing patriarchal form of power as the cause of the unequal and subordinate status of women” and is therefore against “the erasure, expropriation and the exploitation of the labour and political contributions of African women” for the benefit of African states (Eke and Njoku, 2020, p. 154, Matandela, 2020, p. 7) Still on the definition of feminism but in the modern African sense of the term, Filomena Steady (1996, p.4, a) also observes that “African feminism is, in short, humanistic feminism”. It is a movement that seeks to achieve a humane treatment of women, men and children in general in the society. It is not a tug of war between men and women. In addition, Annapurany (2016, p. 424) posits that “feminism refers to a social movement to empower women” or it is a movement which arose in the 20th century to “struggle for cultural roles and socio-political rights ...” for women.

Implying from the above, one can deduce that feminism is a movement that recognises the ill treatments meted out to women politically, economically, socially and culturally and seeks to liberate women from these harsh conditions they find themselves in. This ill treatment meted out to women, generally blamed on “patriarchy” is the springboard on which the feminist movement thrived since patriarchy propelled women to advocate their rights.

Patriarchy on the hand, is defined as “any culture that privileges men by promoting

traditional gender roles” (Tyson (2006, p. 85). To Mudau and Obadire (2017, p.67), patriarchy is “a social structure that gives men uncontested authority.” By implication, patriarchy does not only malign women; rather, it is a structured system which heavily relies on traditional gender roles to malign women. These traditional gender roles which, overtime, become the accepted norm and therefore, the culture and way of life of the society, is said to “cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; [while] they cast women as emotional (irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive” (Tyson, 2006, p.85). Emphasising this, Boonzaier et al (2004, p. 444) opine that in the canons of domestic abuse which is a subset of feminist discourse, “some theories typically described women as masochistic, passive and personality-disordered.”

On deconstruction, Ulmer observes that one interesting feature of the post-new critics era is the discovery that “unlike physics, in which two bodies may not occupy the same space, language is a material in which the same names are capable of supporting several mutually exclusive meanings simultaneously” (1988, p.165) This means that unlike the new critics who believed textual meaning to be definite and capable of being identified by relying solely on the formal features of the text, deconstructive critics “redefined meaning as open to continual shifts, in contrast to the earlier modernist conception of meaning as close in finite denotations” (Stern, 1996, p.62). Thus, the exclusion of readers from the creation of meaning as well the exclusion of socio-cultural influences from such meaning is taken care of by deconstructive critics who acknowledged the role of these same factors in weaving meaning out of the text.

Jacques Derrida propounded the theory of deconstruction in the 1960s. According to him, deconstruction is all about looking for the “unperceived, the non-present and the unconscious” in a text (1967, p.68). By the “unperceived, non-present and the unconscious”, Derrida was referring to the gaps, the inconsistencies and the contradictions inherent in a text. To deconstruct, one needs to first construct a meaning before looking for the absent

meaning. Thus, deconstructive critics look out for what is present in a text in order to uncover what is absent. Therefore, the new critics and formalists still have some influence on deconstruction since one has to look for what is present in the text by largely applying the methods proposed by these critics to the text.

Deconstruction basically asserts that language is fluid and ambiguous and as a result, an utterance lends itself to a varied number of meanings depending on its environment and context. According to Tyson (2006, p. 249), "language is not the reliable tool of communication we believe it to be, but rather a fluid, ambiguous domain of complex experience in which ideologies program us without our being aware of them."

### Methodology

The research uses a textual analysis method and grounds its arguments on the theories of feminism and deconstruction. The two theories have been chosen for the paper since it is the situation of women in African societies and how such situation has been interpreted in various ways by researchers that is at stake here. Apart from the use of theory to support arguments in the paper, a close textual analysis of the two primary stories has been adopted. Words, phrases, clauses, symbols, metaphors, situations and contexts of the two primary sources have been analysed through close reading, thematic and contextual and interpretations. This is also coupled with a selective review of literature from secondary sources such as books, journals, newspapers and electronic media in order to support arguments or adduce evidence in the presentation of the paper. Thus a close reading of the primary texts based on the theories chosen and evidence from empirical literature all come together to form the basis for drawing a conclusion in the paper.

### Results and Discussion

Aidoo's story, "The Girl Who Can" is a tale about the seven year old Adjoa who has spindly legs and as a result, Nana frets about Adjoa's possible inability to bear children. To Nana, the legs are too thin to support firm hips which are a prerequisite for childbirth. Nana

believes that female education is a mere waste of time and that a woman's worth is in doing domestic chores.

"Possessing the Secret of Joy" by Unigwe tells the story of Uju who is the only daughter of her widowed mother. In order to enjoy wealth and emancipate themselves from the poverty that has taken over their lives after the death of Uju's father, Mama Uju psychologically and emotionally blackmails the daughter into marrying the ugly, old, enormous but wealthy Chief Okeke. Uju is thus sold into a life of unhappiness until she discovers what joy there is in motherhood.

The two short stories can be interpreted as texts that speak to feminist ideologies where there is a fight for female equality through the telling of the tale of female maligning in African patriarchal societies. Many could argue that these two texts are geared towards unveiling the challenges of African women in patriarchal societies and how they survive. The above assertions are forthcoming upon a reading of the narratives.

In Unigwe's story, the third person omniscient narrator emphasises the role of men as well as the patriarchal systems of Africa in subjugating women. There is the exposition of the fact that Uju's father died in a road accident as a result of the bus falling into a huge pothole, turning over and killing every passenger. However, Uju's father's family blames it, as it is the norm, on Uju's mother who has suddenly been elevated to the status of a "witch" who has killed their brother overnight.

The culture of the society strengthened Uju's paternal family to abuse her mother after being told by a prophet that Mama Uju, through a vision, chased Papa Uju with a knife and killed him. This "revelation" of the prophet is heavily built on superstition where Africans, generally, believe that everything that happens in the physical world is linked to a spiritual cause since the "spiritual universe is a unit with the physical and these two intermingle and dovetail...them"(Mbiti, 1976, p. 75). This situation makes it arguable that women are cornered in their deprived status by culture as

superstitious beliefs are propagated and sustained through cultural practices.

To make matters complicated, the story reveals that:

*Supervised by Uju's uncle, her father's oldest brother, Uju and her mother had been sent sprawling out of their modest three bedroom flat in New Lay Out, to a less modest one room face-me-I-face you flat on Obiagu Road, their property trailing behind them like unwanted children. The ...tragedy. (Unigwe, 2005, p.28)*

The preceding quote cements the role of culture in the economic deprivations endured by women. According to some African cultures, the next of kin of the husband is entitled to all of the deceased's property including his wife or wives and children if the deceased does not have a son. Being a girl, Uju just like her mother, is not entitled to her father's property. This is why Uju's mother says, "If I had a son, your father's family would never have thrown me out of our home" (Unigwe, 2005, p.28). These cultural inheritance customs deprive African women of economic stability since they are mostly left with the choice of either marrying their late husband's brothers or agreeing to fend for themselves. We are privy to how this inheritance system, built on gender discrimination, impoverishes Uju and her mother after the demise of Papa Uju.

This leads to a life of an unenviable hardship and poverty for the duo who have to eat "abacha slices of cassava soaked in water, salted and, on lucky days, eaten with some coconut" for a long time (Unigwe, 2005, p.28). Apart from living in a one room "face-me-I-face-you flat", being thrown out of her matrimonial home also meant borrowing money from a woman's cooperative in order to survive. This leads, eventually, to Uju quitting school and helping her mother with the selling of "akara balls" and fried yam.

It is also important to note that the details of the hardships faced by Uju and her mother after the demise of Uju's father unveil the issue of unequal economic opportunities for women in African societies because of the belief that women are cognitively defective but

domestically effective. This presents a tale where women are mere victims of the hardships that come along with patriarchy as we see in the lives of Uju and her mother. This belief entrenches the perpetuation of a patriarchal culture as being solely responsible for the hardships endured by women in such a society.

With the use of the dependent clause, "supervised by Uju's uncle", the plot moves from blaming culture to blaming the men for the inhumane treatment of women as there is a deliberate emphasis on their role in the subjugation of and the unfair treatment women endure incessantly (Unigwe, 2005, p.28). Though the cultural stipulations state that women are not entitled to the property of the deceased husband, the dependent clause emphasises how the men perpetuate these ideologies by implementing them.

To further depict men as perpetrators of patriarchy, we see how Chief Okeke who is old enough to be Uju's grandfather finally subdues her and marries her against her will. Apart from rendering Uju a voiceless entity, Chief Okeke, being a representative of patriarchy and being fully aware of their age difference, marries Uju using his money as bait, and produces a baby with her. This presents a clear case of commodification as the female is seen as an object to be bought with money. The Chief could have helped the family out with a small loan to be paid later without necessarily asking the under-aged girl to marry him against her will.

The tale is not different in Aidoo's narrative as many can argue that just as the title denotes, it aims at debunking the patriarchal ideology of women being inferior to men. It focuses on how the female gender equally possesses intellectual and cognitive abilities. The narrative presents a tale in which women who are mere victims of patriarchal ideologies seek to prove their worth. Being a narrative about the survival of three women without a man, the story aims at proving that women can equally survive and be successful without the male figure.

Undoubtedly, there are certain structures in "The Girl Who Can" that are clear indicators

of the role of culture in the subjugation of women as it is observed below:

*Nana: 'As I keep saying, if any woman decides to come into this world with all her two legs, then she should select legs that have meat on them: with good calves... And a woman must have solid hips to be able to have children.'* (Aidoo, 2002, p. 29 a,).

This analysis by Nana is heavily undergirded by African myths and cultural beliefs. First, we understand how culture aids in subjugating women as the preceding quote emphasises the cultural belief that a woman's worth is determined by her ability to give birth. A woman who does not give birth is generally branded a witch and the society is uncharitable to the barren (Aidoo, 1985, b, Aidoo, 1985,c) . This situation is largely responsible for the hardships that women go through as well as the prevention of women from breaking out of their domestic gender obligations.

Also, the quote: "The older women wear long wrap-arounds all the time" dictates the culture of the people of Hasodzi (Aidoo, 2002, p.30, a,). Thus women are not allowed to show any part of their bodies because their worth in the society is based on how carefully they preserve their bodies against prying eyes and what they can offer with their bodies; they are obliged to wrap themselves up so that their bodies are admired and consumed only by their men. This again, presents a clear idea of how culture and customs aid in presenting women as the inferior sex who are intellectually handicapped and created just to satisfy the sexual urges of men.

Though these arguments speak to the undeniable roles played by men and culture in the subjugation of women, this paper takes a different view and addresses these two short stories as texts focused on not just presenting females as victims but also imaging the hand-in-hand roles of women in propagating the female gender as the other. Upon a careful study of the texts, Derrida's deconstruction theory helps unearth certain patterns and gaps in the language used in the selected texts which point to the fact that culture as well as men is not solely responsible for the persona

non-grata status endured by African women in the society. They (women) also play prominent roles in perpetuating their own marginalisation.

One of the most recurring ideas in the studies of patriarchy is the "uncontested authority" enshrined in the hands of the male gender over the females by the socio-cultural systems and the abuse of such authority by men, leading to the subjugation of their female counterparts (Mudau and Obadire, 2017, p. 67). Interestingly, there is a complete elimination of the male gender and their authority from the lives of the main families in "Possessing the Secrets of Joy" and "The Girl Who Can". The few male characters in the texts are given a rather passive image. For instance, Uju's father is only mentioned in passing and is reported dead in "Possessing the Secrets of Joy". Apart from being dead, we see a conscious effort, through the use of language, to ground Papa Uju's passiveness in the story when we are told that to Uju, her father is "...like an old polaroid picture. Defaced. Effaced. Without a face." (Unigwe, 2005, p. 27) Consequently, when Uju decides to go a step further to give her father a face and a voice by shutting her eyes and searching the "crevices of her mind", she can still not remember her father's face.

The absence of Uju's father's voice as well as his position of not having a "face" as seen in the quote above symbolises a position of powerlessness. Emphasising the above is Mama Uju's reference to her husband as a "quiet" man. This goes a long way to undergird his passive role. In the same text, mention can be made of Uju's paternal uncle who is also flung to a less prominent position by being mentioned only in passing to have supervised the abuse of Uju and her mother after the death of Papa Uju. The elimination of male control and dominance is not also left out in Aidoo's "The Girl Who Can". Adjoa's father is only mentioned in passing and is not seen playing any active role in their lives. More so, he is given an ill image and referred to by Nana as a "man like that." (Aidoo, 2002, p. 30 a).

Though the absence of the males from the stories as seen above is geared toward the presentation of the females as worthy of equality, this paper argues that this

elimination of the males from the story liberates the women from male control and gives us a clear portrayal of how women in their own right become patriarchal agents, particularly, in the absence of male control. This elimination also enables us to question the presentation of females as mere victims in the hands of patriarchal men and culture.

By ridding the above stories of male influence, the authority and power to make and take decisions is solely concentrated in the hands of the female characters who, unlike the men in the texts, are given a voice and a face. This creates a setting where the lives of the female characters are void of any direct external forces of control from the male counterparts, at least within the context of the family, so that decisions taken are solely in the jurisdiction and control of the females.

For instance, an illustration of the use of authority to make decisions being solely in the hands of the female characters is seen in "Possessing the Secret of Joy" where Uju and her mother are presented to be solely responsible for their decisions towards survival after being thrown out of their family home. The vital decisions of the means of survival after their ordeal with Uju's paternal family is now solely in the hands of Uju's mother and readers are told how she decided to "...borrow money from a woman's co-operative to start a petty business, selling Dandy chewing gum and sachets of milk and Omo detergent in her kiosk..." (Unigwe, 2005, p.28 ). Readers also see how the decision of Uju's schooling is practically in the hands of her mother who has the power to decide whether or not Uju stops schooling. Even more importantly, Unigwe concentrates the authority to decide who Uju marries in the hands of her mother which is contrary to the normal practice in the African patriarchal society. In such societies, the selection of spouses is the sole prerogative of the male gender or at worst, both wife and husband.

The same is seen in "The Girl Who Can" where Nana, Mama and Adjoa are left to their own fate: living independently of male domination and control with the power and authority to make decisions fully concentrated in the women's hands. Throughout the story,

Adjoa, the seven-year old first person narrator of the story clearly portrays the wide gap between the authority of the adult women in her life and that of the children like herself. This clearly draws the hierarchy and shows the concentration of power in the hands of Nana and Mama. Also, we see the decision of Adjoa's education being a sole prerogative of her mother, Kaya.

Interestingly, being the masters of their own lives and independent from male control, it is expected that these female characters in the two narratives will take decisions that will elevate females from the dungeon of otherness to a position of equality. However, the female characters in the selected short stories are seen digging into the belly of authority and taking advantage of the power of autonomy given them to subdue people of similar sex. By so doing, they become agents of patriarchy who perpetuate serious violence on the other females in the two stories.

This is a clear pointer to the fact that women are not merely victims but are sometimes participants in their own subjugation because of having been psychologically conditioned, though unaware, to accept their positions of inferiority. According to Signorella, "A lingering but not new assumption is that women may be less likely to exhibit racist or other prejudicial attitudes ... an assumption that frequently fails both historical analysis and current empirical examinations" (2020, p. 257). Thus, advertently or inadvertently, they (women in the narratives) subject either themselves or other females to patriarchal injustices even in the absence of male control. Through the actions of Mama Uju, Kaya and Nana in the two selected short stories, there is the presentation of varied profound ways through which women themselves aid in sustaining patriarchy in the society.

Through the character of Nana in "The Girl Who Can", we see how women have over the years accepted their positions as the inferior other as a result of their habitation in patriarchal societies. This acceptance shows that women are not helpless victims without a will. Many of these women, as a result of staying within patriarchal cultures,

unconsciously allow themselves to be programmed into accepting these inferior positions. Tyson (2006, p. 86) concurs with this assertion when she observes, “I call myself a patriarchal woman because I was socially programmed... not to see the ways in which women are oppressed...” Hence, to end patriarchy, women, just as the men folk, should be made privy to the subtle roles they also play in entrenching patriarchal ideologies.

Nana, who is the oldest member of the family is presented to have been so conditioned and programmed by the stipulations of culture and patriarchy such that she is convinced without any reasonable doubt that women are inherently inferior and thus are designated for certain traditional roles from which they get their worth. This is why she shows immense commitment and worry towards her granddaughter’s “defective” legs which, she believes, will serve as a prohibiting factor to the achievement of Adjoa’s traditional roles as a wife and subsequently, rid her of her worth as a woman in the society.

Adjoa takes care to vividly portray the importance of her physical features to Nana. She says:

*Like all this business to do with my legs. I have always wanted to tell them not to worry. I mean Nana and my mother. That it did not have to be an issue for my two favorite people to fight over. But I didn't want either to be told not to repeat that or for it to be considered so funny ... (Aidoo, 2002, p. 28 a).*

The preceding quote reveals to us how Nana has joined the fight in favour of patriarchy by reducing the female’s worth to the state of her body because of the patriarchal ideology that the woman has nothing else to offer but her body. That Nana, a woman, is highly committed to these patriarchal ideologies and their sustenance in the society proves that men are not the sole enforcers of patriarchy. Women also enforce patriarchal ideologies, to some extent.

We are told by Adjoa how this discussion about her legs has been repeated regularly and this schools us on the importance Nana places

on the body of a woman as a symbol of her worth to the neglect of her brains, industry and contribution in various ways to the family and society (Aidoo, 2002, a). We understand how important and natural the reduction of the worth of the female to the state of her body has become to Nana such that Adjoa observes, “what I’m very sure of is that when I came out of the land of sweet, soft silence into the world of noise and comprehension, the first topic I met was my legs.” (Aidoo, 2002, p. 28 a). It is why Nana also observes:

*But Adjoa has legs...except that they are too thin. And also too long for a woman...But if any female child decides to come into this world with legs, then they might as well be legs...As I keep saying, if any woman decides ...children. (Aidoo, 2002, p. 29 a).*

This does not only show how important the physical features of the female body is to Nana but it also indicates how much of a restriction she has put on the female’s ability to play roles outside of the traditional roles designated for her in patriarchal societies. Nana is presented as a symbol and an agent of patriarchy because she objectifies the female by restricting Adjoa’s abilities and worth to her physical looks.

Nana’s unconscious involvement in propagating patriarchal ideologies is also emphasised when we see how happy she is about her daughter’s giving birth to a female. She says, “Kaya, I thank my God that your very first child is female” (Aidoo, 2002, p. 29 a). This proves how much worth she places on the female gender. Paradoxically, to her, the female is only useful if she possesses certain key physical features that will enable her perform her traditional duties: to marry and give birth. This patriarchal ideology of a woman’s worth is emphasised by Awogu-Maduagwu who posits that “...it is also believed a woman has no worth outside marriage because” “a husband crowns a woman’s life” (Awogu-Maduagwu, and Akindele 2016 p.203, Adichie, 2006, p.83)

Consequently, being fully convinced of the belief that the woman is born merely to be a domestic servant, born without any cognitive and intellectual abilities, Nana disagrees with



Kaya that Adjoa should be educated because to her, "it would be a waste of time" (Aidoo, 2002, p. 31 a). The above scenario creates a gap in thinking as one wonders why Nana accepts the importance of the female child by not lamenting that Adjoa should have been born a male but also refuses to accept the abilities of the female in other areas of life apart from the traditional roles assigned her. This presents a situation where Nana fails to live up to the expectation of the society as old women are believed, especially by the Akans of Ghana, to be repositories of wisdom (Yankah, 1995, p.70).

The story emphasises the extent to which these agents of patriarchy are willing to go because of their convictions. Nana is so glued to the idea that Adjoa tells us how Nana resorts to the voice that "...shut[s] everyone up" when talking about this subject and how she would not care even if she were a source of unhappiness to her children (Aidoo, 2002, p. 29 a). She resorts to any means possible to attack Kaya as long as she, Nana, wins the argument for patriarchy. The quotation that follows illustrates this point:

*Maami: 'Mother, why are you always complaining about Adjoa's legs? If you ask me...'*

*Nana: 'They are too thin. And I am not asking you!'*

*Nana has many voices. There is a special one she uses to shut everyone up. (Aidoo, 2002, p. 29 a).*

We see a clear case of the length Nana goes to uphold patriarchy. More so, the text lends itself to the interpretation that Nana deliberately resorts to her special kind of voice regardless of the effect on her daughter, Kaya, just so that she prevails. With the use of ellipsis as against Nana's use of an exclamation we are presented with a clear understanding of Maami's inability to complete her sentences because Nana would not allow her to. To emphasise this abuse of power and the rendering of the same sex voiceless, Adjoa presents Nana's authority and subduing of Maami with an exclamation. Nana is emotionally attached to this ideology about thin legs as a serious drawback on the female's ability to perform her societal roles.

Aidoo's narrative introduces us to another character who practices patriarchal ideologies, Kaya. She is presented as a woman who has outgrown and unlearned patriarchal ideologies. However, she fails to stand up against her mother because of the respect she has for her. She disagrees with her mother on two things: Adjoa's legs and Adjoa's education. We see this when she argues with her mother against the view that women are domestic entities whose worth should be measured by their physical bodies. More so, she:

*...kept telling Nana that she...felt she was locked into some kind of darkness because she didn't go to school. So that if...her daughter, could learn to write and read and little besides\_\_\_ perhaps be able to calculate some things on paper\_\_that would be good. [she] could ... (Aidoo, 2002, p. 31 a).*

Though Kaya has unlearned these patriarchal ideologies, the text deliberately emphasises the role of her silence in perpetuating these ideologies. Her lack of confidence in confronting the patriarchal ideologies leads to the sustenance of such ideas and this makes her a programmed patriarchal agent. Tyson (2006) argues that though the socio-cultural systems are to be blamed for this social programming, women have to learn and recognise to resist that social programming and this is what Kaya fails to do. Adjoa makes it clear how her mother allowed herself to be subdued by Nana's ideologies all the time. We are told by Adjoa how Kaya would respond to Nana's arguments, "'Oh mother.' And that's how my mother would answer. Very very, quietly. And the discussion would end or they would move on to something else" (Aidoo, 2002, p. 30 a).

Though Kaya seems to have unlearned the patriarchal ideologies of the Hasodzi people, her show of disbelief when she is told that Adjoa has been selected to represent the junior section of her school in the district games puts this belief in doubt. Interestingly, we see how Nana and Kaya are on the same page of disbelief about the news Adjoa tells them and so they have to go and "ask into it properly" (Aidoo, 2002, p. 31: a). Though this disbelief

may be as a result of adults taking for granted the things children say, this scenario is loaded with other interpretations. One would have expected that show of incredulity from Nana who has proven straight away her disbelief in the abilities of a woman outside her domestic roles, especially one whose legs have been a bone of contention. Hence, Kaya's disbelief comes across as a sign of uncertainty and doubt in the abilities of the female to achieve success outside of the traditional roles assigned her. She is sure the female is worth more than patriarchy defines her to be but she is not fully convinced and this may be one of the reasons underlining her shallow confidence in dealing with the dictates of patriarchy.

The issue of women being active participants in the implementation of patriarchal ideologies is also seen in Unigwe's "Possessing the Secrets of Joy". Uju's mother is presented to have become an agent of patriarchy. Moreover, unlike Nana in Aidoo's short story, Uju's mother's involvement in the sustenance of patriarchy as well as woman on woman violence is presented to have been fuelled not only through indoctrination in the otherness of the female but more importantly, by greed and materialism.

Having been elevated to a place of authority to take decisions, Mama Uju misuses her authority and consciously or inadvertently perpetuates patriarchal ideologies by subduing the rights of her daughter and by objectifying her. The concept of commodification in Marxist criticism aptly describes the way and manner in which Mama Uju treats her daughter: not as human being but as an object with an exchange value. Mama Uju objectifies her daughter by reducing her to a domestic entity who possesses only the qualities of marriage and childbirth. We see this reduction of the female to the performance of sexual and domestic responsibilities when Mama Uju strategically positions her young daughter, Uju, at the forefront of her business purposely to expose her to men so that eventually, her body will attract and bring a rich suitor home to emancipate them from poverty.

To emphasise this, the third person narrator observes:

*As Uju wrapped up the food straight off the pan for customers, she knew that at the back of her mother's mind, lurked the hope that one day, one of their clients would notice her daughter and ask for her hand in marriage. (Unigwe, 2005, p.28 )*

To Mama Uju, a woman is not of any worth if she does not bring home a rich suitor. It is worth noting that Mama Uju's main focus and aim for reducing her daughter to a domestic entity is because of her assumption that Uju's marriage must, as a matter of necessity, bring them financial emancipation. Mama Uju's actions open us up to the fact that, she does not only believe in the woman's worth being restricted to marriage but that Uju must marry so that she Mama Uju can become wealthy. It is Mama Uju's attitude of consumerism as well as her decision in commodifying Uju which explains why she quickly ascends the throne of motherhood and protects young Uju from the prying eyes of Godfrey who, she thinks, is a mere carpenter incapable of offering them financial emancipation. We are told that:

*Godfrey, the bachelor carpenter who lived in the same compound as they did had knocked the table up for her at a really cheap rate. 'Neighbourly rate,' he said, showing off his buck teeth as he smiled, his eyes taking in Uju's developing body, ...daughter. (Unigwe, 2005, p. 28 )*

Consequently, the undergirding reason for the decision to subject her daughter to marriage at an early age and to an old ugly Chief is in consonance with Mama Uju's materialistic goals. Due to her desire to become wealthy, Mama Uju disregards the physical appearance of the old Chief, the age gap and how unhappy he would make Uju and does everything possible to condemn the seventeen-year old to perpetual melancholy. The man Uju is forcefully married to is described as a man who does not only look many years older than his age but also a man whose stomach:

*...wobbled and preceded him whenever he walked into a room. It was like that of a*

*woman on the verge of delivering quadruplets, but without the firmness of a pregnant stomach. The hair on his head was sparse, and white, like cotton wool that ...to him. (Unigwe, 2005, p.27)*

Chief's appearance is so monstrous that Uju cannot but conclude "This man is an elephant" (Unigwe, 2005, p. 28). It also explains why on his wedding day he is described as looking "fit to burst in his three piece suit" and more so, why Uju can hardly breathe when Chief rests his weight on the poor girl on their wedding night (Unigwe, 2005, p. 28). This presents an image of not only the harsh realities in the differences in the ages of the Chief and Uju but also emphasises the mismatch between their physical appearances. Being a forced marriage, the willful negligence and irresponsibility of Uju's mother in performing her motherly roles is revealed here. She merely gives Uju to Chief Okeke because of what she stands to gain from the marriage. In fact, she is not different from Binetou's mother in *So Long A Letter* who "...begged her daughter to give her life a happy end, in a proper house, as the man has promised them" (Bâ, 2008, p.37)

In addition, Mama Uju does not only enforce the patriarchal ideology of the woman being made for marriage but her actions fuelled by materialism become patriarchal as she also advances the belief that a woman is made for childbirth. Further, she propagates the idea that a woman's value is only elevated if she gives birth to male children. Then again, the structures of Unigwe's story also link Mama Uju to the undergirding force of materialism. She only emphasises the importance of male children over females because she needs her daughter's position as the wife of a wealthy chief to be well grounded. Hence, Mama Uju takes to praying ceaselessly for Uju to have male children for Chief Okeke as "A wife with male children has her position secured. Nothing can shake that" (Unigwe, 2005, p. 28) She ratifies the patriarchal belief and acts on it.

Interestingly Uju, unconsciously, has also been indoctrinated by her mother to accept the importance of male gender over the female one. We are told that:

*Uju prayed fiercely in her mind as her mother spoke. She prayed that she never had a son for Chief. She did not want her position crystallised. She wanted it to be shaky. She wanted Chief to find her wanting and ...home. (Unigwe, 2005, p.28.)*

We see Uju's gradual acceptance of the female gender and male gender dichotomy as presented in patriarchal societies. She expresses her belief in the efficacy of male children as potent sources, organically and culturally imbued with the abilities to crystallise one's position as a wife as against the inferior positions of female children who are not potent enough to secure her position as a wife. This is why she prays for female children instead of males because to her, giving birth to female children will cause "Chief to find her wanting" (Unigwe, 2005, p. 28).

Just as we see in Aidoo's story where Nana would resort to anything possible to subdue other women in her family simply because of her convictions about the patriarchal ideologies, we see Mama Uju resorting to anything possible which would make her achieve her materialistic goals. This ends up in making her an agent of patriarchy. This is further developed by the conflict of the story which revolves around differences in opinion between a daughter and a mother. The daughter believes marriage should be based on love and a source of happiness. The mother believes that her daughter's marriage must relieve them from abject poverty whether or not there is love in the marriage or it is incapable of making her daughter happy.

To paint an accurate picture of the materialistic and authoritarian tendencies of Mama Uju and how this fuels her enforcement of patriarchal ideologies, there is a subtle contradiction of Mama Uju's assertion that Uju's marriage to Chief Okeke is the "only" hope for their survival. Mama Uju is portrayed in the story as an industrious and visionary woman who has been able to make ends meet for herself and her daughter no matter how difficult it is. We see her visionary skills at play as she elevates herself from being the owner of a mere table top kiosk to the owner of an additional business of selling akara and fried yam. More so, we see her ability to get what she

wants through the way she resorts to every means possible to get her daughter to marry the old Chief.

By implication, investing this same energy into her business, Mama Uju can improve her economic fortunes over time but due to greed and abuse of authority, she resorts to taking the shortest route towards prosperity. Her actions create a scenario where materialism, abuse of authority and the urge to quickly amass wealth drives her into enforcing patriarchal ideologies by subjecting her only daughter to a state of unhappiness. This is illustrated by Mama Uju's insistence on Uju's marriage to the old Ugly Chief regardless of Uju's concerns. We see this materialism showcased when Mama Uju asks her daughter, "Don't you want to see me in nice clothes? .A big house? Servants? Don't you want to enjoy your life, nwam?" (Unigwe, 2005, p.27) The order of priorities in the preceding quote is very important to this assertion and explains why Mama Uju thinks Chief Okeke is their only hope. Mama Uju places her material needs first and makes her daughter's happiness her least priority by placing it last. All the preceding instances present a picture of a woman whose actions are deliberately acidic to another woman's welfare.

## Conclusion

It can be argued that the selected short stories are narratives aimed at presenting the ill state of affairs that women are subjected to by men in African patriarchal societies. However, this paper argues that through the characters in the stories, the events presented and a study of the language used in both texts, we see how the same texts present women not as mere victims of patriarchy but also as agents in the ordeals they endure in these patriarchal societies. It also emphasises how women carry out different forms of violence on other women. Some of the men are also victims of patriarchy in African societies. Some researchers are of the view that women are the hardest hit the outbreak of the recent Covid-19 due to their situation in society (Al-Ali 2020, p.334) The problem is that some of these repercussions of the pandemic are made worse by some fellow women in some contexts, intentionally or unintentionally

because they have become agents of patriarchy. This paper therefore contributes to research on feminism in Africa and the world at large by drawing attention to gaps in tackling the fight for feminism and against patriarchy: women as agent of patriarchy (consciously or unconsciously) and the possibility of men being victims of the same patriarchy in the society. It also draws our attention to the unstable nature of meaning due to the fluid nature of language and how language remains a powerful weapon in shaping and portraying the extent to which women could be enemies unto themselves. It is therefore necessary for women and men in Africa to accept their subtle, conscious and unconscious ways in perpetuating patriarchy so that together, they can minimize the effects of this phenomenon on all segments of the population in African societies.

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