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**EXPLORING BLACK FEMINISM: DECONSTRUCTION OF GENDER IDENTITIES
IN BUCHI EMECHETA'S *JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD* AND CHIMAMANDA NGUGI
ADICHIE'S *PURPLE HIBISCUS***

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Abstract:

Nigeria has always experienced turmoil of one kind or the other. The upsurge of an identifiable and articulate movement in behalf of women's emancipation, the question of the particular oppression that black women face as females has also become a topic of intense debate within the black community. The study of women in general and African women in particular contributed to the breadth and depth of knowledge and theorizing of African realities in diverse ways .It has demonstrated the importance of women not simply as passive breeders but also as economic agents, as active in creating new developments, in resistance to and in collusion with oppression. The basic methods of feminist literary criticism challenge the male centered outlook of authors and suggest that women in literature were historically presented as objects seen from a male perspective. Thus the secondary position of women in comparison with men is the product of gender norms of society which have valued males more than females, and ignores women's experiences.

Keywords: black feminism, challenges, community etc

African women writers often grapple with neo colonialism, racism, misrule, poverty, gender bias, ethnic animosity, religious fundamentalism, famine and misrepresentation and in confronting these social challenges, they have created stories that seek to explore their unique condition. In a race conscious society, the black women writers concur that it is their cardinal to undo the scenarios that subject women to gender and racial discrimination in order to entail a new life that will enhance an egalitarian society. They strive to demythologize the distorted constructions of the African women as slaves, matriarchs, mummies, lewd women, and second class citizens. The black women writers have challenged the status quo in the cultural, political, and spiritual realms of their communities by using their craft to present women who defy traditional roles and resist strictures of oppression.

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In an effort to an answer the question based on deconstruction of gender identity in contemporary African women writing, this study focuses on rich, dynamic literary portraits of Black women to model qualities necessary for deconstructing the gender identity in a traditional and culture conscious society thereby empowering women to foster social change in contemporary African communities in general and Nigerian communities in particular. The act of doing feminine and racial roles differently underscores the fact that norms attached to an individual are not permanent and fixed, but are constructs.

The patriarchal culture in Third World Countries like Africa proves to be andocentric and enforces marginalization of women, which is inherent in their masculinity, hegemonic culture and upholds social injustice in oppressing women. In this paper, an attempt has been made to analyse the African novels by selected women writers in their works to redefine a new female identity. A rigorous feminist approach to African society would therefore reveal a number of excesses in structure and situations which deny women equality. Women in Africa, to a large extent, are virtually regarded as 'second class' human beings who are meant to be seen and not heard, or are simply a pair of eyes behind the veil. The history of the African women is one of the most heart breaking and bloodstained chronicles I ever have read.

They have been fighting against slavery, wars and victimization through centuries in a battle that is far from ended.

Decoding Black Feminism

The sole aim of a woman's existence, according to erroneous belief, is to satisfy the man. Feminists should develop an integrated, multifaceted policy approach that recognizes the Complexity and heterogeneity of women's needs and desires, both their material needs and the more intangible. What constitutes their identity, self and being is a male dominated society. The fundamental issue in the postcolonial feminist discourse is to consider the intersection of *gender*, *class* and *race*. Silencing women has always been one of the most effective weapons used by the patriarchy to gain control over women. The novels selected spin around the breakdown of family and community under the pressure of religious dogmatism and colonial influence. Black women experience various forms of oppression simultaneously, as a complex interaction of race, gender, and class that is more than the sum of its parts. The recognition of women's differences, however, does not negate the fundamental premise of feminism that women are oppressed as women. To speak of being treated as a woman is to make an empirical statement about reality, to describe the realities of women's situation. In this country, which parallels other cultures, women's situation combines unequal pay with allocation to disrespected work, sexually targeting for rape, domestic battering, sexual abuse as

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children, and systemic sexual harassment, depersonalization, demeaned physical characteristics, used in denigrating entertainment, deprivation of reproductive control, and forced prostitution.

Core Study of Emecheta's Joys of Motherhood

Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* presents us with the protagonist Nnu Ego who suffers hardship, humiliation, and even rejection by all as a result of her crave for motherhood, which society has set as the only means of measuring a woman's relevance and acceptance as a human being. She dies an unhappy woman. *The Joys of Motherhood* is a rich, engrossing novel. It is a fine piece of literature as well as a fictionalized social document. No self growth or development other than the role assigned to women by men is allowed. The novel presents the domesticity of women and denial of any role in the family's life outside the home to women. Emecheta traces gender inequality in the Igbo society as hinging on the tenets of the gender socialization process, customary and traditional practices. The dichotomy of public private certainly underscores the African patriarchal victimization of women. Women's voices were mostly squashed and they were projected more in the private domain while men operated in centered ground. Emecheta criticizes the effects the colonial patriarchal discourse has on the native patriarchy. Emecheta is depicting a society in which it

is gender which determines the value of human being.

Female characters are regarded as the subject of double oppression by the intersection of oppressive forces of race, gender and class as they are created just to serve men. *The Joys of Motherhood* points out the way in which women are silenced and oppressed by native patriarchy and, however, this oppression is not mediated by race and class. This is, by no means, in contrast with postcolonial feminist premise. They are deprived of their sexual desire and rights when they are replaced by a new beautiful young girl. Her depiction of the African women's position in the polygamous family casts further light upon the issue of gender oppression in African feminist study. *The Joys of Motherhood*, an extraordinary novel which unfolds the story of invisibility and marginalization of African women who have no voice, aims at reconstructing part of history which is dismissed. Buchi Emecheta, in her novel, manages to disclose women's marginalization and oppression by both colonial and indigenous patriarchal regimes. She attempts to speak for the disempowered African women who have no voice of their own. She, indeed, discloses the fact that it is possible to struggle for Third World women's rights and gender inequality within the patriarchal society while discussing for decolonization and antiracist struggle. This is the specificity which makes *The Joy of Motherhood* an extraordinary work.

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Black feminism in purple hibiscus

The first novel, *Purple Hibiscus* of contemporary Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie implicitly explores the numerous societal structures through which women are oppressed. She identifies patriarchy, domestic violence, religious fundamentalism, and general intolerance, as being responsible for unequal gender relations forming the basis of exploitation of women. *Purple Hibiscus* centers on an Igbo family living in the south eastern part of Nigeria in the late twentieth century. Narrator Kambili's maturation is a subtle narrative of deeply painful conflicts with loyalty and fear. It is her quiet voice, always teetering on the edge of emotional collapse that haunts this work. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie sets her powerful debut novel in small cities and sleepy towns. Adichie furthermore shares with her contemporaries an ambition to rewrite Nigeria's rich literary tradition. But Adichie's most powerful revision occurs in an act of displacement. Kambili literally has no voice, and she is trapped in a cycle of self negation by her adoration of her God like father and her acute need for his affirmation.

Adichie's writing is an effort to voice internal knowledge and needs of women in a way that challenges the status quo. She reworks earlier images of African women projected by patriarchal order and figures female characters as speaking subjects in her novel *Purple Hibiscus*. The African woman writer's goal is to redefine

the woman's exercise of authority and seek entry into the public sphere since women's voices have been largely marginalized. Adichie surveys the identity of women as wives and highlights different forms of gender oppression linked to such identity. African cultures, as interpreted by women, inscribe ways in which women reach forms of self fulfillment in interaction with, or itself aware of contradistinction to the experience of other closely related women, through 'Female Bonding' or 'Sisterhood'.

In Adichie's novel, cases of women coming together to challenge the effects of patriarchy or to aid one another to overcome male created misfortunes are notable. Adichie appears to suggest women to come together because there is strength in numbers and there are higher chances of succeeding. The different strategies Adichie adapts to accord women a voice in the face of the silencing structures are really admirable. Although other African female writers like Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta etc., have explored the gender issues, Adichie is a unique voice in the sense that her works are cast in wider human oppression and not necessarily exploitation confined to sexuality and gender. Her approach to subvert male oppression confirms that despite the struggles, women assert themselves in a world dominated by men through education and female solidarity and her novel suggests a social transformation by which the different forms of oppression, exploitation, exclusion and

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silencing that promote gender inequality can be confronted by women.

The oppressive and dehumanizing situations women undergo in this novel seem extraordinary, but these are real life stories that have been modified and recreated for the society's awareness. This novel is, in effect, a dramatic indictment of the oppressive attitudes of men towards women and children that they are supposed to love and care for. It therefore has direct relevance to our contemporary society. The title *Purple Hibiscus* reflects the theme of hybridity in the novel. It raises questions about both the traditional and Catholic patriarchal oppression of women. In *Purple Hibiscus*, the author seeks to present a complex rather than simplistic view of their characters which distinguishes their novels in the post colonial literary diaspora. Adichie's novel depicts a young African girl's journey from a naive teenage girl to adolescence and maturity.

Conclusion

This study analysed with a view of exploring how the contemporary African women confront individual problems as the African society grapples with gender, class, ethics and other social inequalities and it concludes that it is high time for male and female African writers in the contemporary era to retrace their roots to provide a greater meaning to the interactions of a holistic African nation based on African cultural specificities. It is also the position of this work that a robust and holistic approach to

gender studies should be taken particularly as it relates to African cultural values and suggests that the literary genres should emphasize showcases of complementarity at the individual, family and societal levels. It further opines that the cultural practices that are considered inimical to development like widowhood, polygamy, succession rites, incest, tribal conflicts, discrimination against the girl child, forced marriages, occult etc., should find stronger interrogation without any biases and prejudices in African writings.

The narratives taken up for analysis in this work show the accounts of how women in African societies alter the dynamics of power through sustained efforts in crafting possibilities of redemption in spaces created in and disseminated by social practice. Through the various subversive strategies, the writers encourage their readers to re examine both the patriarchal and postcolonial gendered ideologies. Their novels affirm a continuous challenge and resistance to the hegemonic power discourse in postcolonial Africa, particularly when they display liberating tools like safe spaces that empower women to speak and listen to each other. In that sense I considered in my study are seen forging new paths as they recollect distorted women's past and commit to articulating and sharing a liberating women's future.

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Feminists in Africa are sometimes erroneously regarded as radical and adopting western lifestyle which is alien to African culture. This, unlike other types of feminist theories, does not condemn all men or sees them as oppressive towards women, but addresses individual men with oppressive tendencies towards women. Black feminists are not antagonistic nor are they out to usurp men's positions but recognize the fact that in African traditions, men and women are complementary partners in the general development of the society. The Black feminist postulation also recognizes the fact that there are positive aspects of the patriarchal society that encourage women and give them the opportunity to develop themselves intellectually, socially, and politically. Hence, this discourse identifies those factors militating against women in patriarchal societies in order to alleviate their plight or putting a total stop to women's oppression. Nonetheless, with all the advocacy for women to be granted social justice and equality with men, it is still a factual reality that women are still doubly oppressed. By the patriarchal arrangement, the women and the children belong to the minority group in the sense that they are denied some privileges and freedom, which society normally allows for the dominant group. But imbibing positive attitudes towards women, as portrayed in the characters of Father Amadi, Ifediora and Jajawillbe helpful to women in the society. If men with oppressive tendencies regard women as partners in progress and

make a conscious effort towards changing their negative attitudes, the society will be the better for it.

The novels share many similarities; they are coming of age novels with young female protagonists who independently fight to be heard and seen in their respective societies. In these stories, nothing is only black or white, but multifaceted regardless of class, culture and gender. The victimization of women does not depend on class or cultures, it is universal. The undisputable strength of the novels is the narrative perspective. Emecheta and Adichie individually focalize their stories through young African girls, which allows us to see the women's situation from an insider's perspective. The innocent voices of young girls who share their childhood experiences, make these novels stand out as genuine and realistic stories readers believe in, and to a certain degree are able to identify with. The way to liberty and independence proves to be long and painful, and the price of freedom is high. Fighting against the patriarchy seems to her lonely and endless battle that in her time, she is destined to lose. Kambili, who grows up in Nigeria twenty years later, has similar experiences of the injustice and the oppression of women in her society. By sharing their own stories they finally are able to break their silences. In the process, they contribute to the collective healing of African women both inside and outside the texts. Thanks to the efforts of many, including writers such as Emecheta and

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Adichie, African women have gained a long-awaited voice.

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