

GENDER CONSCIOUSNESS IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN FEMALE POETRY

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Abstract

This paper examines gender consciousness as a defining feature of contemporary African female poetry. Drawing from the development of African poetry, this paper examines African poetry as a medium of protest and resistance, and contextualises African female poetry as one belonging to this tradition as it seeks to expose gender inequalities in society. This paper also highlights the fact that existing scholarship on modern African poetry has largely privileged male poets and male-centred experiences, resulting in the marginalisation of women's voices within the African poetic canon. It therefore argues that contemporary African female poets actively intervene in this critical gap by foregrounding the African female experience as central to their poetic vision, thereby producing gender-conscious poetry. The study focuses on the poetry collections of three African female poets: Warsan Shire's *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth*, Ijeoma Umebinyuo's *Questions for Ada*, and Tjawangwa Dema's *The Careless Seamstress*. These collections represent diverse regional and cultural contexts across East, West, and Southern Africa. Through a close textual and analytical reading of these works, the paper examines how the poets challenge dominant representations of women and articulate alternative narratives of African female subjectivity. Taking a cue from gender-conscious and feminist literary perspectives, the analysis reveals that contemporary African female poetry reclaims narrative authority, dismantles male-centred poetic traditions, and positions gender consciousness as an emergent and significant feature of modern African poetry.

Keywords: African Female Writers, Gender Consciousness, Contemporary African Poetry.

Introduction

Gender consciousness has become a crucial aspect of contemporary literary discourse. Hering and Marken (2008, p. 1) define it as "the recognition that one's physical sex shapes one's relationship to the political world." Here, Hering and Marken relate gender consciousness to one's level of awareness regarding how one's gender affects one's experience of reality. Bierema (2010, p. 2) asserts that most men and women operate in a state of gender unconsciousness as "they neither question the status quo nor work to change it." Bierema (2010) further argues that "The gender unconscious may also be aware of gendered power relations but choose to deny, minimise, or ignore them, because the cost of addressing them is too high" (p. 2). To be gender conscious, then, means to be aware of the disparity that exists between both genders and to acknowledge the unfair power structures that govern the reality between men and women. It also means challenging normative practices that are unfair and unjust, yet have persisted based on gender. Most scholars have readily identified the fact that gender functions in such a way that the differences between men and women are exaggerated to enforce the dominance of men over women. This is especially true in African societies where patriarchy acts as an overbearing reality for women, relegating them to second-class citizens. As Ojaruega (2022) succinctly puts it, "patriarchy is a very strong aspect of African culture. It is a custom that privileges men over women in almost all spheres of human endeavours and interactions...specifically, a woman's status as mother, wife, or other filial relationships she shares with the men in her community defines the essence of her womanhood or identity as an African" (p.34)

In African societies, this patriarchal reality is reflected in issues such as the preference for male children over female children, the inability of women to inherit property, child marriage, domestic violence, and female suppression in decision-making, all of which Ojaruega (2022) identifies as “triggers of mental instability” in women (p. 35). It is therefore not difficult to assert that gender remains a valid issue in African society, and, since African literature is functional, it continues to find expression in the poetic compositions of African writers. It is important to note at this point that gender in the discourse of African poetic composition carries dual meanings. First, it represents the writings of people (mostly women) that address gender to challenge the oppressive structures between men and women. Secondly, it seeks to entrench women and the female experience in the canon of modern African poetry, as “literature has become about the most fertile ground for the discussion of gender issues” (Ukwake and Nwaogu, 2019, p. 66). Akachi-Ezeigbo (1999, p. 24) identifies the fact that “gender has been encentred on contemporary discourse as a result largely of efforts and activities of feminist scholars, critics and theorist from different disciplines such as Medicine, Education, Law, the Humanities and the Social Sciences...many scholars and theorists of gender studies believe that much of the differences between the two genders is socially constructed.” Through Akachi-Ezeigbo’s stance, we see that the contemporary scholarly reality has been defined by the flourishing of gender criticism in various fields. The need to therefore examine modern African poetry through the lenses of gender consciousness is timely and urgent, as the reality of the African woman is still burdened by patriarchy, which insists on female subservience and silence. This “silence” has been translated into a lack of critical engagement with the poetry of African female writers, making modern African poetry more attuned to the masculine experience.

Fraught gender relations are perhaps most visible in African poetry, where women’s voices have historically received comparatively limited critical attention. While scholars such as Aderemi Raji-Oyelade (2014), Anthonia C. Kalu, Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi, and Omofolabo Ajayi-Soyinka (2013), as well as Sule Emmanuel Egya (2012), have explored the complexities of female poetic expression in Africa, such studies remain relatively marginal within the broader critical discourse on African poetry. Consequently, critical engagement with African poetry has continued to privilege male-centred perspectives, a tendency that leads Bamgbose (2012) to observe that “the language of Nigerian (African) poetry is androcentric, that is, it promotes the men’s worldview” (p. 99). This reality necessitates an exploration of women's roles in the African poetic scene. Written African poetry has received due attention since its inception in colonial times. It has been hailed for its usefulness in depicting the ills of colonialism, nationalism, feelings of alienation and hybridity, and the disillusionment that came with independence. Despite this variation of thematic concern, the female voice has not been privileged. Oyebolu (2019) gives a diagnosis of diagnoses this erasure. To her, the male-dominated literary space is conditioned by the deeply political nature of early African writings. This is truer of poetry, which has historically been viewed as the most serious of the three literary genres. She also faults the Western education system, which relegated the scholarship of the African woman to the background. Oyebolu contends that, “with their writings, male African writers engaged the society, colonialists and the ruling political elites on germane issues that affected the society” (2019, p. 440). It follows that while the male experience and expectations have been repeatedly expressed, the female experience and expectations have yet to be equally represented in African poetry.

The male voice retains its foreground in African poetry as systems of repression continue to interact to dwindle the female voice. Egya, quoting Maduakor, writes that, “it is in the area of poetry that the Nigerian female writers are still trailing languidly behind the menfolk on the literary scene” (2012, p. 105). Raji-Oyelade has contested that the invisibility of women in the African poetic canon is not due to their muteness; rather, female poetry in Africa suffered

from a dearth of critical attention. He records a bibliography of African female poetry, mentioning the collections of Ifi Amadiume, Catherine Acholonu, Molara Ogundipe-leslie, Mabel Segun, Flora Nwapa, Iyabo Fagbulu, Emilienne Motaze, Chika Unigwe, Promise Onwudiwe, Toyin Adewale Nduka, Maria Ajima, and Hauwa Sambo, amongst others. His generous list of female poets affirms the thriving existence of female writers in the African poetic scene. It becomes paramount to ask why female writers suffer from Invisibility, unlike their male counterparts. Raji-Oyelade (2008), in answering this, posits that "the increasing publication of poetry by Nigerian women authors has not been met with a commensurate critical study of the emergent works" (p. 199). He therefore faults literary criticism for its inattention to female poets. Bamgbose (2012) supports this view; he writes, "critics have often paid attention to fictions and plays produced by women with very little attention paid to their poetic art" (p. 94). To the scholars mentioned above, the neglect of female poetry by literary connoisseurs is the main reason for the perceived absence of female poets from the African poetic landscape. This neglect results in a poetic landscape that prioritises only the male lens in viewing the world. This monolithic view in poetic criticism defeats the goal of gender equity that has been clamored for over the ages.

The relative obscurity of women in the critical reception of African poetry reflects broader gender hierarchies within African societies, in which literary authority and cultural value have historically aligned with male voices and experiences. Scholars such as Stratton (1994) have observed that early African literary production often mirrored these social structures, resulting in representations of women that were symbolic, marginal, or devoid of agency rather than fully articulated subjectivities. This tendency is evident in recurring tropes such as "Mother Africa," which, as Stratton (1994) argues, "reproduces in symbolic form the gender relations of patriarchal society" (p. 51), by positioning the continent as a feminised, passive figure whose meaning and destiny are articulated through male nationalist and poetic discourse.

These gendered representational patterns were further reinforced by the historical conditions under which early African poetry emerged. Early written African poetry developed largely within an anti-colonial context, shaped by the urgency to contest European colonial discourses that constructed Africans as inferior or as the cultural "other" (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1989, p. 20). While this nationalist literary impulse was instrumental in reclaiming African identity, it also tended to privilege male perspectives, as men dominated both literary production and the political power structures of the colonial encounter. Within this nationalist framework, women's limited representation was a consequence of male-dominated political and literary agendas that prioritised collective continental resistance over the interrogation of internal gender hierarchies.

African women thus experienced what scholars have described as double oppression: subjugation under colonial rule and marginalisation within male-dominated indigenous and colonial power blocs (Boyce-Davies, 2007, p. 564). This intersection of coloniality and patriarchy contributed to the silencing of women's voices in early African poetry and underscores the necessity of gender consciousness as a critical lens for re-examining African poetic traditions. Bamgbose (2012, p. 95) comments on the colonial structures that further relegated women when he asserts that "the maximum utilisation of men in the colonial scheme renews their sense of superiority over women. The colonial value system prioritizes and recognises men and condemns women to the domestic sphere."

The African woman started to fight back against the silence imposed on her and often ascribed to her in literature. Some scholars have described this as an African branch of feminism, a branch of gender criticism that seeks to fight for the rights of women. Atanga

(2013, p. 301) introduces us to this theoretical dilemma in the conceptualisation of African feminism when she asks the following rhetorical questions:

‘Can and does ‘feminism’ as such exist in Africa?’ ‘If yes, in what form?’ These are questions some African researchers have been trying to answer. Some feminists in Africa claim they are ‘African feminists’ rather than just ‘feminists’. This relates to what constitutes Africa: is Africa the evident geo-political space, a psychosocial one, or a cultural one?

If we properly understudy the above statement, we notice that the geographical expression of Africa contributes to the dilemma of conceptualising feminism in the African continent. There is the idea that, because of the peculiar historical nature of the African continent, Western feminism is insufficient to capture the realities of African women, thereby necessitating the theorisation of feminism in Africa based on African women’s experiences. Thus, one can say that feminism is not homogeneous, a fact most evident in the third-wave feminist movement. Oyekan (2014, p. 3) espouses the rationale behind the term African feminism when he says that

Generally, those who canvass a separate approach to feminism, especially the African variant, fall under two categories. On the one hand are those who see “Western feminism as a calculated attempt to overlook or ignore the plight of black women as a result of their racist inclinations.” On the other hand are those who feel that the failure of what is termed Western feminism to capture the challenges of the black woman stems largely from its inability, not unwillingness, to grasp the historical nature of such challenges and the implications thereof.

The need to “Africanise” the feminist movement, therefore, stems from the need to adequately reflect African women’s experience, which differs from that of other women around the world. However, there are commonalities in terms of patriarchal domination. While African fiction has seen the flourishing of female writers from the colonial period to the post-independence period, and their advocacy against patriarchal domination in their works, African female poets have not received the critical attention that their fiction counterparts have. In fact, early anthologies of African poetry featured very few African female poets. Donatus Nwoga’s edited *West African Verse* (1967), *Poems of Black Africa* (1975), edited by Wole Soyinka and *A Selection of African poetry* (1990) edited by K.E. Senanu and T. Vincent which are often regarded as anthologies that solidified the poetic composition of African writers against the back drop of an attempted erasure of Africa’s literary history as a result of colonialism, feature little to no female poets. It was not until the 1990’s that female poets began to appear in African poetry anthologies. Although they had always written, as Bamgbose (2012) observes, their works did not have the same reach as those of their male counterparts. A key anthology that tried to correct this oversight in African poetry was *The New African Poetry: An Anthology*, published in 1999 and edited by Tanure Ojaide and Tijan M. Sallah. Here, Ojaide and Sallah attempted to grant African female poets the publicity they needed after years of critical obscurity. In 2008, another attempt by the critic and poet Raji-Oyelade to canonise women’s poetic composition was made when he published “Notes towards the Bibliography of Nigerian Women’s Poetry

(1985 – 2005).” These publications sought to dispel claims that African female poets were “still trailing languidly behind the menfolk” (Madukor, 1980), demonstrating that African women, too, have expressed their realities through poetry as an imaginative vehicle.

In recent times, contemporary African female poets have continued the tradition of their predecessors, such as Catherine Acholonu, Lola Shoneyin, and Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, using their poetry to explicate gender issues (Egya, 2012). Despite this, there is still an underrepresentation of female poets in Africa in scholarly and literary discourse. Uchendu and Kwaghe note that “the essential duty of scholars of African women includes empirically recovering their lives and restoring their story to history and deconstructing conventional historical paradigms and devising new ones that will rid history of its inherent androcentricism” (2019, p. 6). Taking a cue from Uchendu and Kwaghe’s position, literary scholars are therefore tasked with dismantling the male-dominated scene of African poetry by engaging the poetry of African female poets in critical discourse. Currently, contemporary scholarship on modern African poetry seems to be having a field day focusing on male poets, without extending its gaze to their female counterparts. Friday Okon’s *Politics and the Development of Modern African Poetry* (2013) has come to be regarded as an important work that examines written African poetry and its intersection with politics, which has catalysed its growth. Although we notice an attempt to give an overview of African poetry from its earliest to its contemporary stages, Okon’s overview grossly underrepresents women poets, identifying only Gladys Casely-Hayford as a female poet in the pioneer tradition and speaking only of gender issues through the romanticised lens of Negritude poetry. Mathias Orhero’s *Trends in Modern African Poetic Composition: Identifying the Canons* (2017) also bears the same oversight. Even though the paper provides a broad overview of trends identified through a diachronic study of modern African poetry, the works of female poets or issues of gender do not fall within its critical purview.

This paper aims to advance critical inquiry into the poetry of African women by exploring the work of contemporary female poets from across Africa and discussing their thematic concerns. These poets thoroughly explore the encumbrance attendant on being African and female. Gender consciousness in African poetry, therefore, reflects the writings of women that explore and expose inequalities between the sexes. It also interrogates the basis for these inequalities. It seeks to examine lop-sided representations of women, patriarchal domination of women, and specific issues that women are burdened with by virtue of being African women. Gender consciousness reflects a deliberate act of writing silenced women's voices into poetic composition. Scholars have overwhelmingly focused on male African poets, reinforcing the idea of man as the centre and elevating the male experience over the female. The writings of these three female African poets showcase their attempts to write themselves and their experiences into contemporary African poetry.

Textual Analysis

This study focuses on three contemporary African female poets: Warsan Shire, Ijeoma Umebinyuo, and Tjawangwa Dema, from East Africa, West Africa, and Southern Africa, respectively. These poets’ works highlight the predicament of women in society. Their works take into cognisance issues such as domestic violence, body autonomy, perception of beauty, sexual harassment, female silence, self-love, and male infidelity as they attempt to capture what it means to be female in a patriarchal society. Although from different regions of Africa, the themes that run through their poems show that the female experience in the African continent is shaped by patriarchy. Gender consciousness is therefore an integral feature of their poetry.

Warsan Shire - Somalia

Warsan Shire is a contemporary African female poet from Somalia whose works engage the themes of female oppression, subjugation, shame, migration, and identity crisis. Just like other female poets, she uses her work to deconstruct patriarchal notions about women that have held sway and to bring to the fore the ways women suffer because of these constructs—her work centres on the woman's narrative, exploring her mind and her stories. For Shire, female sexuality is a part of the female experience. She tears down notions about sex being an act of female submission to men. She reconstructs the female body in such a way that sexuality is owned and not passively participated in by the woman, and this is dominant in her collection, *Teaching My Mother How to Give Birth* (2011), which is used for our analysis.

In “Birds,” the virtue attached to virginity is treated with mockery as the poet persona states that “Sofia used pigeon blood on her wedding night/ Next day, over the phone, she told me/ How her husband smiled when he saw the sheets.” (p.14). The expectations of virginity and sexual purity are emphasised in the preceding extract. The woman named Sofia, although not a virgin, deceives her husband at the time of the consummation of the marriage that she is. This moral expectation of her is simply by virtue of her gender, and the man is absolved from such expectations. This also points to how sex and women are viewed. While sex is an act engaged in by both the man and the woman, the shame associated with the act is often ascribed to the woman. Sofia, in this context, utilises the expectations of her culture to her own advantage. She takes the route of deception to be absolved of the shame, while she ridicules the husband who “smiled when he saw the sheets” and “mimicked his baritone, how he whispered/ her name – Sofia/ pure, chaste, untouched/ we giggled over the static.” (*My Mother*, p. 14, Line 3, 6). The tone of humour and the satirical nature of this poem suggest the futility of virtue being attached to virginity. Sofia is not a virgin, but by crafting her way through, she is exalted by her husband about her virtue, an exaltation which she knows will extend to his mother as she “imagined his mother back home, parading/ these siren sheets through the town/ waving at balconies, torso swollen with pride/ her arms fleshly wings bound to her body/ ignorant to flight.” (*My Mother*, p. 14, Lines 11 -15). It ridicules the idea of a physical signifier of virtue, of which men are excluded from participating because of the lack of a hymen, and women are burdened to carry. This poem deconstructs the sexual power dynamics between men and women, showcasing the ease with which deception is made possible as a result of cultural bias entrenched in patriarchy.

In the poem “The Kitchen,” male indiscipline and female submission take centre stage. The title itself is helpful for understanding, as the kitchen is often seen as a female domain, a place where women are relegated and spend their lives. The kitchen then becomes the world for the woman, a symbol of dedication to her home and a place she is taught to use to nurture it. In this poem, female silence is foregrounded, as we see the poet persona engaged in kitchen acts even though her “husband’s mind has been elsewhere” (p. 16, Line 2). The portraiture of the dutiful wife who does everything required of her is emphasized in this poem. Not only does she cook and clean in the kitchen, but she also offers “the hollow of your throat” (*The Kitchen*, p. 16, Line 8), signifying a sexual act, although this does not guarantee affection from her husband. The silence that has been normalised among wives who never hold their husbands accountable for their actions is also given prominence as this woman, whose life is confined by the kitchen, distracts herself so she “does not ask him her name.” (p. 16, Line 10). This statement confirms the earlier postulation that the husband’s mind was elsewhere. Even though it is an act that hurts the wife in question, she withdraws into silence and continues to do her wifely acts as “almonds soaked in rose water;/ your husband is hungry.” (p. 16, Lines 15 – 16). She is aware of the mistress, but she simply learns to take solace in the fact that “she cannot make him eat like you.” (Line 20). Shire paints a picture of a marriage that thrives off deceit and female silence at the expense of herself. She is relegated to the kitchen and has no agency. Marriage is therefore viewed as another system

of oppression that promotes female silence and masculine domination as represented in the poem.

In "Fire," Shire focuses her attention on domestic violence. She examines the history of the lives of women who give birth to daughters and pass to them the ideas of patriarchy, of internalised shame. "Fire" shows the prevalence of domestic violence in marriages in the African society and the suppressive ideas of how they are supposed to take the violence without complaint. The woman in this poem decides to leave her abusive situation as "the morning you were made to leave/ She sat on the front steps/Dress tucked between her thighs" (p. 17, Lines 1-3) until "her mother phoned." (Line 7). What follows is a reflection of an older generation of African women so conditioned by society in terms of what to expect from intimate partners, and it is captured below:

What do you mean, he hit you?
Your father hit me all the time
But I never left him
He pays the bills
And he comes home at night
What more do you want (p.17, Lines 8 – 13)

In the above extract, it can be seen that the signifier of a good husband has nothing to do with character but is solely hinged on provision, and this is used to justify violence against his wife. The poet persona's mother clearly tells her daughter, "Your father hit me all the time/ but I never left him." She therefore views domestic violence as a trivial reason to leave a husband and encourages her daughter to stay in such an abusive situation. Proving that masculine domination is cultural and historical, the relationship between the poet persona's mother and father exposes the fact that female subjugation is a historical reality and is seen as normal. The poet persona seeks to break free from the shackles of oppression in her marriage, but she faces resistance from society. The mother here can be seen as a symbol of society at large, which prescribes the place of the African woman and forces her to stay there, without any hope of redemption in sight.

Ijeoma Umebinyo - Nigeria

The Nigerian poet Ijeoma Umebinyo is a representative of a novel voice in West African female poetic compositions. Her work focuses on the female experience, especially its psychological aspects. She views the woman from the woman's perspective, not from an outside perspective. Her poetry reveals the diverse, multiple stories of women who suffer because of the experiences they face as women. Love, isolation, and psychological torments are key thematic concerns in the poetry of Umebinyo. She reflects a modern, intuitive voice on the nature and function of gender in African society and how it shapes women's experience in the society. Three poems from her collection, *Questions for Ada* (2015), are used to conduct an in-depth investigation of gender consciousness in her poetry.

In "Brave," the poet persona views a romantic relationship between a man and a woman as a place where the woman gets hurt, hence affecting her mental state. Here, men are perceived as dangerous who come into the lives of women to destroy them in the name of love. The woman is therefore, at the receiving end of the story when she tries to fall in love as "even strong women/ who fall in love with men/ break apart." (p. 14, Lines 1-3). The focal point of this poem is the power dynamics that shape romantic relationships between men and women

in Africa, where women seem to get the short end of the stick by falling in love with men. This love is often dangerous, as it makes them question their self-worth and sense of self. The poet persona also examines the value often placed on the man-woman relationship, which makes it easy for women to lose themselves in it. Women are often told that their worth depends on their relationship status, but we see a love that destroys even the bravest women because “on the bathroom floor/at a quarter to three a.m./hugging their knees &/ Cursing their reflection.” (p. 17, Lines 4 -7). Her tears reflect the fact that even the bravest of women fall prey to the patriarchal system of domination that exists in relationships, which causes emotional turmoil for them. The poet uses the relationship between the man and woman in this context to symbolise the power relations between the genders in society.

The poem “Conversation with Broken Girls” details how women have been abused bodily and mentally by men within the context of romantic relationships. The poet persona explores the reality of women who suffer in romantic relationships, and this is captured below:

She calls you on the telephone
Screaming for help
Begging you to come visit her
You sit
She tells you how she loved him
You listen
As she carries herself to memories
She has a faraway look
Her skin begins to glow

She says
“Men take and take.”
You nod in agreement (p. 18, lines 1 - 12)

The line “men take and take” embodies the cultural reality where women are told to consistently give and sacrifice in their relationships, which leaves them exhausted mentally and physically. Love, in this poem, is no longer an avenue for acceptance but for consistent sacrifice, which sometimes includes self-erasure, reflecting a condition where many women have been forced to give up essential parts of themselves for a relationship because of the importance society attaches to it. The poet persona accuses men who do not know how to love a woman “without trying to erase her from herself.” (p. 22). She goes ahead to encourage women to take on the duty of loving and respecting themselves as “there are so many ways to love yourself/ without breaking in half for a man/ even your mother forgot to teach herself” (p. 27), echoing the revolutionary aesthetics often associated with modern African poetry. She also ties the fact that women imbibe the act of lack of self-love from their own mothers, who were meant to believe that sacrificing their identity was a mark of being a good African woman.

Love again serves as an important symbolic element in this poem, representing the larger society and the relationship between men and women. In this particular poem, the man is the central focus, and the way it treats the woman is emphasized. The poet persona accuses the man of not knowing how to love a woman without ripping her from herself, of not knowing how to love a woman as an individual but only as an appendage to himself. Thus, love is again viewed as a power play between man and woman, with the woman as the losing party. The poem is directed at the men who are yet to love a woman without “trying to burn her into ashes and without trying to possess her body.” (p. 22) The body is symbolic in this poem

because it shows that many women have been told their bodies do not belong to them but to men. The men are also thought to treat women's bodies as tools for possession. Many African women have therefore been conditioned to view their bodies as existing factors for the satisfaction of men, and many men have bought into this idea by forcing women to give their bodies, thereby causing a disregard for the owner of the body. The female body is then seen as a thing to be possessed, not as a person to be loved. This poem brings to the fore the idea of the objectification of the female body as it is reduced to a pleasure tool to please the African man. This makes love a dangerous venture, as the poet persona states that men have not been taught to love a woman for her individuality, intelligence, and respect.

In the poem "Five Languages," the audience is taken on a journey of the different stages of the exploitation of the female body and the denial of female agency. It explores sexual violence against women and self-hate in the name of colourism. It also explores the culture of silence surrounding domestic violence. The first language that the poet persona learns is the language of mistrust, which comes as a result of sexual abuse, and this is exemplified in the extract below:

The first thing you learn at eight
When he called you away from your siblings
And taught you why some men
Who smiles at little girls makes you uncomfortable (p.59, Lines 2 -6)

The sexual assault that the poet persona experiences leads her to mistrust men. Here, her body is violated at a young age, signaling that it does not belong to her but to her abuser. In this particular language, she learns that anyone can abuse her and get away with it, and nobody will come to her defence because she is female. This is symbolic of how prevalent gender-based violence is perceived in the African society and how it is treated with levity, making a lot of women carry seeds of anger and mistrust around.

This poem follows a diachronic timeline, showing how the poet Persona evolves from age eight to twenty. The second language shows the politics of beauty among black women. The poet persona is invalidated by our own uncle, who tells her

You will never be
as beautiful as your light-skinned sister
You heard your mother cry
Five years later
As you begged her
to make your skin
Just a little lighter
For you had learnt the language of self-hate (p. 59, Lines 11 - 18)

In the African continent, fair skin/ light skin is often seen as a synonym for beauty. This reflects how colonial standards still shape perceptions of beauty in contemporary African society. So the poet person becomes desperate to bleach her skin as a growing child because she is black, imbuing an inferior sense of self because of her complexion.

For the third language, the language of helplessness is centered, and it is associated with domestic violence. Many women are taught to be silent in the face of domination and oppression to the point of being helpless and not pushing back against it. They are taught to be unconscious about gender, even though it is a real challenge they face. Auntie, in the poem, who is the victim of domestic violence, is forced to go back to her husband because "a woman is nothing without a man." (p. 59, Line 25). Her life no longer belongs to her but

belongs to the people around her and the society in which she is embedded. Her life is seen as disposable at any time, so her society denies her agency. She is not given the luxury of choice, and even when her husband is beating her, she has to go back to that same husband because of culture and tradition. She does not want to because, as “her eyes are gathering tears” (p. 57, Line 26), she relates the story to her own niece, helpless in the face of societal expectation.

At twenty, the poet persona discovers something interesting. She falls in love with a man, but she hesitates to kiss him as “you did not tell him how/ fluent your tongue is/ with the language of mistrust”. (p.60, Lines 34 - 36). This demonstrates that sexual abuse carries with it severe psychological damage, such as anxiety, which the poet persona experiences when she meets a man she likes. Her experiences are therefore double-pronged - she suffers physical abuse, which eventually translates to mental suffering for her.

Tjawangwa Dema – Botswana

Tjawangwa Dema is a female poet from Botswana whose works have received wide acclaim for her dissection of gender relations. She is also known for curating and producing literary festivals and events. She has two poetry collections to her name, *The Careless Seamstress* and *Mandible* (a chapbook), but this study focuses on *The Careless Seamstress*.

In the poem “Red”, she examines how female bodies are viewed at the start of menstruation. Although a highly biological act that must occur for the female, it becomes another yardstick to control female bodies and to interrogate their chastity. This simple biological occurrence comes with restrictions almost immediately, as “knowing mother/ no sports now/ no fence jumping with the boys” (p. 25, Lines 5-7), reflecting how the transition to womanhood is often met with restrictions. Suddenly, the poet persona can no longer do what she enjoys doing, and the mother enforces these laws. Here, the agency for patriarchal control is through the woman, and it shows that the minds of women who still follow the expected norm. They remain gender unconscious. The poem is gender consciousness aligns with the post-persona’s recognition of the separation between her and the boys as she reaches a certain age. These changes in her body are reflected in the following lines: “A chest bloating with knuckle-sized blossoms/A waist shrunk /else somewhere else has widened/ your own body betrays you” (p. 25, Lines 8 - 11).

The biological changes resulting from menstruation are emphasised. The need for this is to relate a uniquely female experience through female lenses, not as a reportage from a masculine figure. Since menstruation can only be felt by women, the poet persona describes the body changes and the discomforts associated with such changes as the body “tauts at itself, aches a bloody ache/coalesce and collapse, congeal, curdle.” (p. 25, Lines 12- 13) The pain is adequately described from a female perspective, and it gives agency to an inherent female struggle as explained and experienced by a woman. It reclaims the narrative of the female body and tells an inherently female experience from the woman's perspective.

Conclusion

This study successfully investigated gender consciousness in the poetry of three contemporary African female poets: Warsan Shire, Ijeoma Umebinyo, and Tjawangwa Dema. The study has revealed that these poets use their works to represent women holistically and to ingrain women's experiences into the canon of modern African poetry. Although from different regions in Africa, the selected poets foreground the female experience in their poetry. Their poems deal with issues such as female oppression/masculine domination, domestic violence, sexuality, masculine infidelity/female silence, and the perception of the female body by society, as highlighted in the analysis of the poems above.

These poems challenge the hegemonic phallic domination of men over women and explore the experiences of women in patriarchal societies. The poems selected for analysis in this study, therefore, reflect the fact that gender consciousness is a staple of the writings of contemporary female poets across the African continent.

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