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Unmasking Women's Pushback for Emancipation against The Backdrop of Social Change in Zimbabwe: An Analysis of Works by Dambudzo Marechera and Shimmer Chinodya

Dr. Abib SENE^{1*}, Mr. Ablaye NDONG²

¹ Associate Professor, Laboratory of African and Postcolonial Studies, Department of English, Cheikh Anta Diop University, Dakar, Senegal

² PHD Student, Laboratory of African and Postcolonial Studies, Department of English, Cheikh Anta Diop University, Dakar, Senegal

Corresponding Author: Dr. Abib SENE (Associate Professor, Laboratory of African and Postcolonial Studies, Department of English, Cheikh Anta Diop University, Dakar, Senegal)

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Abstract: This paper aims at spotlighting the bumpy path towards women's emancipation and the latter's full whack to find a way out of the social or traditional norms the aim of which is to have women knuckle under men's will. Having for decades been under the yoke of male dominance, women's all-out drive to break the shackles of a two-pronged system of patriarchy, (a system informed by both tradition and colonialism), is given undivided attention. Thus being, Shimmer Chinodya and Dambudzo Marechera in their fictional works bring on surface traditional systems and cultural practices such as polygamy that continually wreck untold psychological havoc to Zimbabwean women. The paper, as well, looks at women whose feminist bent in the post-colonial era for the de-phalocratization of traditions and cultural norms appears as a foil to the single-mindedness by men to fence off their power and authority. It further delves into the social cum psychological changes that, to some extent, favoured gender balance, which is then the sense in which modernity can be seen as an open sesame to the end social stratification and women's silence.

Keywords: patriarchy, women, emancipation, modernity.

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Introduction

Born in 1952 and 1957 to belong to the second generation of Zimbabwean writers, Dambudzo Marechera and Shimmer Chinodya may differ in styles and strategy, however, their literary productions become hugely informed by the multi-layered chaos set off by the nefarious colonial enterprise in Zimbabwe. Accordingly, it is in such turmoil that one may find the roots of Africa's altered gender equilibrium. Indeed, this inkling is germane to the fact that "European influences were not just diffusive but also divisive, and that gender inequality was reconfigured rather than eliminated under colonial rule" (DE HAAS and RANKEMA 2018: 965). Disadvantaged beyond the limits by a colonization-informed patriarchy, women across Africa not least in Zimbabwe have been doomed to bear the brunt of gender oppressions. Thus being, marriage becomes a sealed bond by which women are expected by society to behave as owned and brook domestic subservience.

However, education cum women's feminist bent reveal resoluteness to call time on the social stratification and turn their back to old school beliefs that actually made of men a stumbling block to women's path towards emancipation and self-actualization. Therfore, a bunch of female African writers among whom Tsitsi Dangarembga translates in her fictions this

determination by women, game changers according to whom, to be a woman is not an offence to sentence by servitude to a man: "I don't have to be tied by those beliefs because I can support myself and I will not sacrifice myself to a man's eye just because society says I ought to. I'm as much a part of society as any one [...]" (Dangarembga 1987: 35). This steadfast and unwavering commitment by women to break the shackles of patriarchy and gender oppression found the political and social changes in post-independent Africa as a fertile ground to blossom and yield its fruits. Indeed, Gender-based oppression came in many forms. Therefore polygamy and male sexual promiscuity are singled out to be parts of African women's sour trials. However, in post-colonial Africa with the high rate of schooled women, and constitutional reforms guaranteeing equal rights, women bid farewell to old school shibboleths that ever kept them suffer in silence in a bid to curb or rather guard against men's heavy hand on them [women].

A Gutsy Drive Against The Obnoxious Patriarchal Mind-set

"This is not the old days anymore. We women have rights to protect us now" (Chynodya 1990: 240), these Shamiso's utterances to her husband ring loud to tell of constitutional reforms meant to egg women on and give them a voice in their fight against



gender inequality and gender-based ill treatment. Indeed, the rationale behind Shamiso's words to Clopas her husband, "a selfish bitch" (Chinodya 1990: 239), is to warn him about change. Her husband is promiscuous and goes filling the town with children like a "stud bull" (Chinodya, 240). These off-handed words by Shamiso who sharpens her tongue at Clopas speak volume about the hit male supremacy has taken and women's breaking the patriarchal shell for their voice to be heard. The writer digs out women's mentality in post-colonial Zimbabwe in comparison to bygone days when they were bullied into losing their freedom of speech and witness their personhood trampled. Shell-shocked by her husband's moral deficiency, Shamiso rakes up all his misdeeds and dares fearlessly paint a blotchy picture of him. This eagerness and steadfast determination by Shamiso to speak her mind or rather spew her venom to her now lousy husband who wrong-foots her through male promiscuity finds meaning in A. SENE's words that italicize the freedom of speech as a crucial element for an individual's agency: "the right and power to vocalize one's mind becomes a challenging issue, of which control or loss of control humanizes and empowers or dehumanizes and disempowers (...)" (Sene 2020: 23). This women's turning their backs to such a gag law of patriarchy in a bid to snatch back their rights and devoirs becomes a big leap forwards in their journey from unhuman to human and powerlessness to powerfulness. After her discovery of a child he fathered out of wedlock with a next door widow named Muchaneta, Clopas, becomes a howling nincompoop in the household. He is weakened and always bollocked by a wife who squirms up big time against him:

'Muchaneta!' she spat savagely. 'Devil-snake bitch-Muchaneta! Babbling at my babies in the cot and wriggling her red-hot-bitch-arse at you behind my back. Don't think I didn't notice, Clopas. I knew the day that woman came to live next door you were after her. Don't think I didn't notice how you secretly rejoiced when her husband died in the accident (Chinodya, 239).

This newly acquired courage and self-esteem to speak her mind and denounce injustice at the hands of her husband is pregnant with meaning. It heralds the beginning of change or rather the first level of women's feminist bent for equity before unfairness of any ilk from men. Hushed up and oppressed for ages, women's breaking their silence to gutsily denounce such a blind paternalism comes very handy to be a landmark in their path towards emancipation. This post-colonial African women's doggedness for freedom from the claws of tradition and the colonial legacy actually jibes with Nelson Mandela's words: "Freedom can never be taken for granted. Each generation must safeguard it and extend it. Your parents and elders sacrificed much so that you should have freedom without suffering what they did. Use this precious right to ensure that the darkness of the past never returns."¹ Before the souring marital life cum the dwindling confidence and tolerance male sexual promiscuity earned the then happy couple, Clopas, almost written off by his wife, eats humble pie and copes with her revengeful demeanour to set him on the straight and narrow:

Mr Tichafa acquiesced, resenting the way his wife had been, purposely or not, pushing him up for judgement all time, hating the way she had succeeded in making him spend the night and cut the ground from under him by

keeping her cool and refusing to share the bedroom with him (Chinodya, 239).

In her efforts to fight and find a way out of such a bone-crunching situation, Shamiso avoid falling in the trap of sex and sexuality, a weak point for women and therefore a hindrance liable to make the path towards freedom a cul-de-sac. Having long silenced women and condemned them into abduction, sexuality is part of the much eschewed preserve if Shamiso is to mop up her suffering and walk away from the status of an unheeded being to gain back male respect and her rightful place in the household.

These gallant efforts mirror that by the Zimbabwean female gentry to do away with cultural, social, and even religious misbegotten ideas meant to still fence off male authority over women. Too different from the old-age Rhodesian society where patriarchy still weighed so heavily on women to condone polygamy and the physical cum psychological havoc it wrought, Shamiso takes offence from her philandering hubby's extramarital shenanigans and makes no bones about her both vindictive but deterrent decision. She, true to type, refuses to kowtow any longer to his will for sexual gratification. As a wife whose husband's promiscuity and moral nakedness is beyond the pale, she dismantles the traditional mental state to make him get his just deserts. Through a tit for tat reaction, the husband's mischievousness cannot but have a boomerang effect on him, making him swallow his male pride and face the sad reality of his endangered masculine power._Chinodya both tasks about the victimization of women through male promiscuity and offers a glance at their winning back, hands down, their right to speak their minds in order to count and be considered not as second class citizens.

In *House of Hunger*, Marechera, by the same token, stresses on women's resilience and prowess to nix the dead hand of a patriarchal organization that stifled them and their ambitions no end. Through the eloquent but extricate metaphor of women as 'bottles' that men's only purpose is to break and dry out their dreams, ambition, etc., Marecher metaphorizes the possessive and harrowing grip of men on women even in post-colonial Zimbabwe. Thus being, he illustrates in so subtle a way the survival of a brutal and skewed social organization dead set on continually having women's "voices pinned down into nothingness" (Sene 2020: 23) in the bid to confiscate their bodies for male libidinal pleasure. Yet the opposite image of now stiffened and non-flexible 'bottles' gives the hint or denotes consciousness among the Zimbabwean female gentry to rise up against challenges of any ilk appertaining to male dominance. Consciousness is, therefore, italicized by the writer and appears to be a quantum leap in women's push back for emancipation. The narrator reveals:

There was a race of men in Africa whose women were bottles. And in every bottle, there was a ship. Now the men valued the ship highly, but did not think much of the women themselves. After all, what is a ship in a bottle? Now these bottles were unbreakable. And the men could not break their women to get to the ships... (Marechera 1978: 80).

The 1990s in Zimbabwe, to pinpoint the country's post-independent era, was stamped with the hallmark of an opening up beyond national boundaries, which doubtless was in favour of a new consciousness among women to sharpen their fight through activism. Indeed, any scrutiny of this image ('bottles' which are now 'unbreakable') to hint at women's resilience, goes hand in

¹ Sue Ann Barratt, "Patriarchy, the resilient force that never takes a time out, must be overcome", *MenEngage Alliance*, 03 August 2023.

glove with a joining of hands by the latter, geared towards pulling themselves out of the claws and shackles of male domination. This metaphor then deals both in the harrowing effects of social, cultural and religious old school shibboleths on women but also the latter's pertinacity to roll back men's edge over themselves. Yet women's pace towards gender mainstreaming got brisk against the backdrop of "fundamental restructuring of the law and legal instruments that men were using to exclude them (...)" (Eerdewijk and Mugadza 2015: 14). This, indeed, harks back to the fact that their citizenship status, freedom of speech has been contingent on law and constitutional reforms:

They stimulated the use of the law as a tool for development, and brought with them the language of gender and development, (...). In the second half of the 1990s, sexual and reproductive rights became a new area of focus, and the impact of HIV and Aids called for attention" (Eerdewijk and Mugadza 2015: 13).

This aforementioned passage is pertaining to the full whack women paid in a newly freed Zimbabwe to rejigger their *personae*, place and role to play in a male-dominated society. Constitutional reforms and new governance have somewhat been an antidote to the malady of gender inequality and women's dragged-on Yes/Okay position in Africa, not least in Zimbabwe. Thus, Marechera's words: 'the men could not break their women...' are reminiscent of both women's dogged determination to overcome the challenge of male domination, but also the paramountcy of a modern governmental mantra of 'democracy' in the fight. Sold to Africa by the erstwhile colonizer, democracy and its tenets helped too in women's dodging the slings and arrows of male supremacy.

Modernity: A Scope to Hasten Women's Emancipation

Patriarchy, gender inequality and other practices bedevilling women may have been introduced to Africa through colonial domination. Yet modernity at its political, cultural and even social levels appears as a panacea for women's trials and tribulations at the hands of men. Characterized by a repudiation of the past, traditions, and cultural norms, etc., modernity is defined by *The Oxford English Dictionary* as "The quality or condition of being modern", which stresses on a downright contrast existing between modernity and traditions. However, that modernity mantra is not criticism-free when its purpose is to bleach the face of Africa at every strata. Marechera unearths the redefinition of his people, the appalling pandemonium it set off, while stressing on the fact that such a new mind-set and social organization imposed upon his people tally, in one way or another, with women's call and fight for equality:

There was a new magazine. Its main emphasis was 'the black family. This was nothing to do with the old traditional black family – not at all, because that reeked of bride-prices, polygamy, ignorance of Family Planning, lack of time saving gadgets, primitive environment, and general suspicion – [...] of incest, infanticide, fratricide, matricide, and all the other things that the magazine disapproved of (Marechera 1978: 149).

Weighing the gains and losses of this aforementioned magazine, one first feels athirst to point out that it is based on a clichéd and imperialist-oriented view of Zimbabwe and Africa at a broader level. This magazine heralds a subtle de-Africanization agenda that looms ahead. However, in its aim to do away with the old

traditional black family with its perks and downsides, women will witness themselves pulled back from the brink of thraldom. Indeed, a new paradigm shift, whether referred to as modernity or neo-colonialism has ruled out, somewhat, the traditional and religious shibboleths that ever kept women knuckle under men's will or power. Linked with political participation and therefore economic independence regardless of sex, modernization brought positive change in the life and future of female Zimbabwean denizens. Arguably, it has been a turning point to vanquish outdated customs that hushed women beyond the limits. Thus being, there is no shortage of scholars stressing the gender neutral nature of modernization:

According to these scholars, material wealth and educational emancipation of the society help in the promotion of democracy which ultimately increases women's political participation and representation. Gender inequality is prevalent in traditional society while in modern societies women are given equal opportunities to perform their roles in various avenues of life. Western industrialized societies are the icon of modernized societies having the torch bearer of women's egalitarianism (Mustafa, Nawaz and Rubab 2022: 119).

Linked to changing women's status, modernization is, doubtless, supportive to them. Indeed, it fostered awareness of their rights and quickened the pace towards liberation and self-actualization. Indeed, both Marechera and Chinodya spotlight women's single-mindedness to find a way out of male dominance, but stress the fact that the battle and women's consciousness picked up speed against the backdrop of social, cultural and even political change commonly referred to as modernity.

Again, women's endeavour to, by hook or crook, castigate and challenge male power speaks of their consciousness but also the fact that they are egged on by social changes that appear supportive to them. Hence Shamiso's challenging the remnants of traditional societal rules and customs that made it possible for her to be mouthed off. She seeks refuge in modern law and rules that see to equity and social cohesion. In her efforts to unburden herself of the crass injustice and discrimination inherent in polygamy, Shamiso threatens and warns at once by informing of her readiness to go to court if her husband fails to be fair and side with her sister wife:

Everything is going to be equal between Muchaneta and me. If you spend one week with her you'll spend the next one with me. You will split your pay equally between us. Whatever you buy for her you'll buy for me and if you refuse I'll go to court. I have been meaning to do so but my pride wouldn't let me. Don't think I don't know my rights (Chinodya, 240).

In his shouldered-mission to cast light on the different changes Zimbabwe has gone through, and women's emotional turmoil to boot, the writer focuses on a post-colonial era when his country, because of a social metamorphosis, has become a preserve for both men and women. In *Harvest of Thorns*, transformational steps in the political realm are described as a foil to men's inclination to maintain their women in serfdom. Thus, words from the lexical field of 'court or justice' are then brandished by women to veto and nix the unfairness of men to women relation. Shamiso then resorts to court in order to shrug off a heavy hand on her, which, for very long, victimized her of the throes and discrimination intrinsic in

polygamy. Before the different and differing blueprints in one couple, the writer underscores the paradoxical love-and-hate relation as a hallmark of the Tichafa's marital life. Shamiso's dream is to enjoy equity and male respect: "All I want is some respect" (Chinodya, 240), which doubtless is germane to women's path towards liberty. Yet Clopas, as husband who reeks of male ego, is still caged in a patriarchal-oriented mentality the aim of which is to silence and keep his wife brook the burden of his masculine power.

From a western feminist vantage point, marriage is viewed as a colonial apparatus that still sticks to women's gizzard, while education is perceived as easing the path towards freedom and self-actualization for women. In proof of that, Katherine, a learned women in *Black Sunlight* finds herself egged on by new jurisdictional rules and a mind-set shift to opt out of her marriage. As an awakened and enfranchised woman, Katherine's walk against the sacrosanct nature of her marital bond is a very eloquent hint of women's immunity, owing to a western-oriented consciousness and ideology marketed to African women, to fight the strictures of a both social and religious system. The narrator tells of her going separate ways with Sordid Joe who "frequented the bars and brothels and in those places there were bosoms which wished him luck and bedded him down" (Marechera 1980: 34). Indeed, Marechera through Katherine conveys a resounding message apropos to men's loosened grip on women. Different from Shamiso in *Harvest of Thorns*, Katherine appears more radical and strict in dealing with men's immoral conduct in order not to be an everlasting victim of marriage and love relation. She finds nothing else but an ultimate solution which consists in ridding herself of a man who utterly shrugs off his responsibility and devoirs as a husband. Sordid Joe is jilted, yet Katherine's resoluteness seems not to baffle in the aftermath of Zimbabwe's independence, with the spread of a western-oriented thinking meant to even gender imbalances. The narrator stipulates: "No one blamed her when she left him. Sordid Joe seemed to be aggressively setting out on a course of self-destruction" (Marechera, 34). This passage reveals emancipation from the yoke of patriarchy and stifled agency. In fact, it has long been a challenging issue for women to voice a piece of their minds. Yet Katherine, a woman who were expected very much by society to be meek and make do with male supremacy, testifies that women's utmost drive to walk across social servitude and genderism outstripped male chauvinism. To gain back her female poise, she challenges or rather mouth off the male domineering voice in marital life, a voice the aim of which is to shore up women's 'powerlessness'. Marechera brings on the surface the social barriers that extinguish the dream for women's emancipation. Yet at the same time, he stresses on women's consciousness leading to a view of marriage as a social barrier that writ large sought not to unload women of the burden of silence.

Women's subverting social norms that impose silence and subservience to them is more laid out through Susan, another female character in the novel whose displeasure at her man's silencing her and her ranting at him actually translates the steadfast revolve by women to move away from oppression at men's hands. She buries all bygone beliefs and practices that trapped women into silence and submission. As an epitome of the post-colonial Zimbabwean female gentry, Susan's losing her temper is geared towards loosening a stranglehold that ever kept women to their knees. Their discussion reveals Susan's rebelliousness and her man's domineering mental attitude meant to truncate her freedom of speech:

'Shut up.'

'What did you say? What did you just say to me?'

'I said SHUT UP.'

'Please stop the car. I'll walk.'

'Susie ...'

'Don't SHUT ME UP and then Susie me like that, you snivelling worm. I said stop the car and I'll walk. STOP THE CAR.'

'All right, my dear. As you wish. But for the record I would like to apologize now.'

The car had come to a dead halt. She had got out. She meant everything she said.

'Apologize for what?'

'For shutting you up.'

'You didn't shut me up. Nobody can shut me up. When you said SHUT UP you were irritated by your own ignorance.'

You were hiding from yourself, your own ignorance. You were insulting your own intelligence. So you should apologize to yourself. And I want to hear it. I refuse to sit in the same car with a motherfucker who has no self-respect (Marechera 1980: 48).

Christian, the man, gets caught in a profound pit of unawareness of bygone époques during which, men's words outweighed and overpowered women's. Susan's sour words serve as a yardstick to just gauge the authenticity of women's will to walk away from a patriarchy-informed social organization that, for very long, made of Africa a bottle neck for them. Christian is taken aback by Susan's fury, and his having to swallow his male pride. Arguably, their discussion appears as a scope for Susan to extricate herself from the remnants or rather vestiges of a long existing mentality that disadvantaged women. Her reactions and mentality actually shanghai him into caving in before her stance against men's deep-dyed propensity to consider women as inferior and undeserving of male respect. This newness in thinking and behaving by women tantamount to their winning back hands down their rightful place in society bares the stamp of a multi-dimensional change, which is referred to as modernity or neo-colonialism according to its perks or downsides in Africa.

Conclusion

Through their literary works, Marechera and Chinodya highlight women's guts and stamina geared toward throwing the shackles of gender-based domination. Abused and objectified through mainly male promiscuity, women's mind-boggling rise to turn a deaf ear to social and cultural norms and let sound their desiderata rings loud to tell very much of their emancipation. In such a phallocentric society, women's move from chimney to pulpit in the betterment of their status quo is given undivided attention by both writers. In other words, the writers seek through the boldness of their female characters to reinstate women's dignity across Africa, not least in Zimbabwe. More to the point, women's consciousness of sex and sexuality as a weak point of theirs capable of undermining their agenda, helped writ large

maximize the chances for them to leapfrog traditional but religious rules that seemingly serve men's edge.

Having witnessed multifaceted change after the colonial take over, the influence of a new era nay the impact of an imported and modern thinking on women has been instrumental to their efforts that actually packed a punch for their freedom from an obnoxious gendered societal organization. Female characters in novels by both writers adopt therefore a new mind-set hallmarked by a downright rejection of patriarchy that ever wrong-footed them beyond the limits. Thus, it will be of paramount importance to ask a perspective question such as the following: What can be the impact of a western-oriented feminism that even goes as far as finding fault with marriage in African society?

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