Interrogating feminisms, victimhood and patriarchy: A stiwanist reading of *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* (Andreas, 2001)

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Abstract:

The main purpose of this article is to apply a feminist literary theory (stiwanism) to a text (The Purple Violet of Oshaantu) in order to understand the meaning of this text, and in the process advance feminist criticism. The article argues that while feminism's primary objective is for women and girls to have the same rights and opportunities as men and boys, some feminisms, for example lesbianism and raunchism, are so radical that they obscure the fight against patriarchy. However, stiwanism, a moderate brand of African feminism, has tenets that forcefully challenge patriarchy. The study shows that lesbians reject men altogether, and raunchists, whose modus operandi is demonstrating in skimpy and erotic clothing, bare breasts, and exposed buttocks, alienate themselves from broader society. Stiwanists, on the other hand are not anti-male, and their agenda is social transformation including women in Africa. The article concludes by demonstrating that "feminism" in not a dirty word, and recommends the propagation of literature that foregrounds gender issues.

Keywords: feminisms, gender, Ogundipe-Leslie, patriarchy, stiwanism

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Introduction

Anecdote: Girls are made of sugar and spice
And everything nice
But boys are made out of snakes and snails
And puppy dog tails (Dobson, 2010, p. 26)

As already indicated in the abstract, the main purpose of this article is to apply a feminist literary theory (stiwanism) to a text (*The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*) in order to advance feminist literary criticism (APA, 2020), and to understand the meaning of the text (Mouton, 2001, p. 167).

To begin with, it should be recognised that "femina", the Latin word for "woman", is the root for words such as "feminism", "feminine" and "femininity". It should further be observed, right from the on-set, that it is better to talk of feminisms, because feminism is neither monolithic nor homogenous; multiple feminisms exist and co-exist. There are some which specifically articulate the complex multi-tiered realities of Third World women, and here one can think of African women (Mangwanda, 1999, p. 26). One way to understand the varieties of feminism is to use an example somebody gave about Islam: "There are as many flavours of Islamic politics as there are (flavours) of ice cream. Some are retrograde and hostile to all opinions other than their own; others are as open and reasonable as the 'Christian Democratic' parties of Europe ... " (Dyer, 2011, p.7). Among the well known Islamist sects are al Qaeda, al Shabaab, Ansar Dine, Ansaru, Boko Haram, Hisbola, Sunni, Shi'ite, Salafists, kurds, Hamas, Fatah ... and so on and so forth. Some of these Islamic sects are so radical that they believe in the application of Shari'ah, (Islamic law), for example amputation of a thief's hands and stoning to death of anyone found guilty of committing adultery. In the same way, there are different strands of feminism, ranging from the most liberal to the most radical. This view is indeed confirmed by Molara Ogundipe-Leslie (2007, p. 547).

Feminism, which can also be fully explained as an aggregation of ideologies, beliefs, movements and strategies whose primary aim is to detect, define, defend and expand all various aspects of women's lives, has a very long history that goes back to the late 18th century. Authorities on feminism have found it convenient to divide the history of

feminism into three “waves”, each phase dealing with feminist issues considered pertinent to that period. Although first wave feminism is generally regarded as spanning the years when women campaigned mainly for political rights (the women’s suffrage movements), feminism can be traced back to the late 18th century. For example, in France, Marie Gouze, was one of the first women activists to demand equality between men and women. However, she did not receive sympathy or support from the male revolutionary leaders, and Marie Gouze was actually executed in 1793.

Early literature on feminism by female writers includes works from Virginia Woolf, often referred to as the “founding mother of the contemporary debate” (Selden, Widdowson & Brooker, 2005, p. 118). Woolf published texts such as *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938). Simone de Beauvoir, a French feminist and pro-abortionist, also started a women’s newspaper *Nouvelles Feministes*, as well as a journal of feminist theory, *Questions Feministes*. marking the end of first phase of feminism. By the end of the 1940s,the suffragettes and suffragists in Euro-America had achieved their objectives, and so there was a lull in feminist activism in years to come.

The next phase of women’s liberation activism roughly covers the years 1960 to 1980. Whilst still striving to consolidate the gains of the earlier phase’s fight on the political front, this next phase targets “the politics of reproduction, to women’s ‘experience’ to sexual ‘difference’ and to ‘sexuality’, as at once a form of oppression and something to celebrate” (Selden, Widdowson & Brooker, 2005, p. 120). Betty Friedan is often regarded as voice of second wave feminism. In her book, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) she reveals the frustrations of white, heterosexual middle-class American women – careerless and trapped in domesticity.

Since the early 1990s, there has been a concerted effort by some feminists who, quite rightly, feel marginalised by Euro-American feminism, as described above. Third wave (also known as Third World) feminism is therefore largely a reaction by Third World activists to make feminism more relevant to the Third World. In this context, Third wave feminism should be seen to be closely related to post-colonial feminism.

As stated earlier, feminism is neither a homogenous nor monolithic entity. For purposes of this paper, we have to distinguish between three types of feminism, two

radical, far left, lesbianism and raunchism, and one moderate, centrist or even liberal, in the mould of stiwanism.

Radical Feminisms: Under this heading can be found **lesbianism**. "Lesbian" is a 20th century construct, and the common understanding is that lesbianism is about same-sex sexual activity among women. In simple terms, lesbianism is female homosexuality. The reasoning among lesbian feminists is that lesbianism is the only and most effective way to overcome patriarchy.

Another radical version of feminism is **raunchism,** derived from **raunch culture**. The trade mark of raunch culture is raunchiness, craving to be the "most-wanted" woman on sight. The raunchists are identified by their exhibitionist tendencies; "they dress provocatively in order to attract guys, revealing more than they conceal" (Dobson, 2010, p. 9). In many cases, adherents of raunch culture dress in miniskirts or hotpants; sometimes these same women like to display their cleavages.

Levy refers to adherents of raunch culture as "lipstick feminists", "bimbo feminists" and "loophole women" who falsely believe that what they are doing is a type of women's emancipation. In extreme cases, some of these women cut and mutilate themselves and pierce their tongues, lips, noses, eyebrows, ears, navels, nipples, and private parts with spikes and rings (Levy, 2002, p. 7).

Both lesbian and raunch culture feminisms find little favour in mainstream African society. Women who subscribe to these cultures are derided and despised, and even blamed for the rise in incidences of rape. But we know that rapists are sick people who need treatment, first by being put in jail, and then afterwards in hospital. It does not make sense for rapists to blame their victims for provoking them. What excuse do they have for raping infants and toothless old women in their nineties?

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie has coined a new concept called **stiwanism.** (This new word "stiwanism" is derived from **STIWA**, an acronym from **S**ocial **T**ransformation **I**ncluding **W**omen in **A**frica.). "Stiwanism" is an umbrella term for "African feminism" because some people do not feel comfortable with "feminism". The main objective of stiwanism is to include African women and girls in all aspects of present-day life that will make Africa a better continent to live in. Stiwanism has been appropriated by some African women writers because it historicises their circumstances and focalises their politics.

Other feminisms, for example, Euro-American white feminism, French feminism, egofeminism, and so forth are unacceptable to African women writers because they ignore African circumstances.

Most importantly, stiwanism takes into cognisance the fact that both African men and African women must fight together to emancipate Africa from Euro-American domination. It is not synonymous with female aggression, woman's struggle to be like a man, and the rejection of female roles assigned to her by biology (Aina, in Nnaemeka, 1998, p. 85). Stiwanism is not anti-male. Culture should not be exploited to the advantage of men. Those institutions which are of value to women should be maintained, but those that work to the detriment of women must be rejected.

Clearly, then, stiwanism's most important reason for its existence is to rebuild, not to destroy society. There are many examples of women's organisations that are modelled around stiwa tenets, and one good example is Emang Basadi in Botswana. Established in 1986, this organisation's name literally means, "Stand up, women!" – that is to say, "Stand up and speak for your rights!" - political, economic, cultural, and rights an all aspects of life.

Emang Basadi has recorded a number of achievements, most notably lobbying against polygamy in Botswana, as well as lobbying against the Citizenship Act, which initially discriminated against Batswana women married to foreign men – these women could not pass on their citizenship rights to their children. In short, Emang Basadi as organisation is now involved in regional Southern African Development Community (SADC) Observation and Monitoring of Elections.

The purpose of providing this account of Emang Basadi is to demonstrate that stiwanism is not just a theoretical abstraction; it exists in practical terms. Even more important is the need to debunk the myth that feminism is an evil, satanic anti-male women's organisation whose main objective is to cause anarchy by overthrowing the normal order of nature. The truth is that there is nothing wrong or malicious about sensitising women and society at large about domestic and gender-based violence, maintenance laws, divorce, good governance, voter education, leadership skills, and so forth.

Women's organisations in different countries may be called by different names, but essentially, they are all operating under stiwanist principles. Sometimes there may be several women's groups in the same country, but the aims and objectives are similar, and all these organisations are clamouring for the improvement of women's social, cultural, economic and political conditions. For example, in Zimbabwe one of the most prominent women's organisations is WOZA (**W**omen **o**f **Z**imbabwe **A**rise), whose members are often harassed, arrested, beaten and tortured by the Zimbabwean police.

In Namibia, one of the fore-most feminist groups is called Sister Namibia, formed just after independence in June 1990. Sister Namibia's objectives are many and varied, and encompass all spheres of Namibian women's lives, including "to generate short stories, poems and personal to analyse the reality of Namibian women's lives at the time of celebrating 15 years of independence with the intention of stimulating debate on how far we have come, and still have to go, towards the realisation of the protections, rights and entitlements accorded to all Namibian women by national and international laws;

Clearly, then, stiwanism is alive and well in countries such as Zimbabwe, Botswana and Namibia. This paper attempts to interpret a Namibian text, *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* using an African feminist literary theory, stiwanism.

Textual Analysis of *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu*

This is a novel by Neshani Andreas, a Namibian woman writer who unfortunately died on 12th May in 2011 of lung cancer. The plot revolves around two close friends who face contrasting fortunes in their marriages; Mee Ali's marriage to Michael is the ideal thing – full of love and warmth, while Mee Kauna's marriage to Shange is the exact opposite – it is a loveless, abusive relationship in which the husband often mercilessly assaults his wife. Shange even openly parades for the whole world to see his most recent extra-marital affair with another woman from a nearby settlement. In between, there is Mee Fennie, a woman who divorced her abusive husband but has managed to live a very happy life, even educating her children up to university level.

Detailed analysis: "Michael" is a modern name, and so it is significant that this man breaks away from the traditional way of treating a wife. Right from the beginning, even

before his marriage to Mee Ali, Michael ignores all the bad things being said about her: why he should marry her, of all people, her with those hands that look like chicken claws. “That one with the high hips and small legs that make her look like a wild cow” (Andreas, 2001, p. 16). Later Michael protects his wife from the ugly gossip being spread by his mother and relatives about Mee Ali – that she is a whore, and she has given him mountains of *muti* to make him love her so much (Andreas, 2001, p. 17).

Michael works far away in Windhoek and comes home only during long holidays such as Easter and Christmas. In between these times he sends goodies to his family, and keeps in touch by letter. When he is at home, Michael always accompanies his wife to church, his children are all over him, competing with each other for his attention. He is indeed a loving father to his entire family, and is seen distributing presents to each member of the family – a pair of shoes, pants, a dress, material or perfume. Fittingly, the novel ends with preparations for a love-making encounter:

“‘Let’s go to bed,’ he said. ‘It is after midnight already. ... He stretched his hand out to me. I held onto it as I stood up. He put his arm around my waist and felt the beads around it, which sent a thrill through my body. ‘Yes, let’s go to bed,’ I answered” (Andreas, 2001, p. 181).

In contrast, Michael’s childhood friend, Shange, is the worst husband any woman can ever hope to marry. “Shange” in Oshiwambo means “what is mine”, and so throughout the novel, Shange lives up to the meaning of his name – he thinks only about himself. To begin with, he married Kauna not because he loved her but because it suited him: “I was the daughter of a pastor and a teacher, a high school girl and a virgin. I was perfect for him. It was more for his ego than anything else, ” (Andreas, 2001, p. 51). Kauna experiences unhappiness right from the early stages of her marriage, firstly because he did not build her her own kitchen, and she had to suffer the burden of having to cook for so many people in her in-laws’ family. As if that was not enough, it took Kauna nearly three years to conceive. Shange’s relatives said that had apparently ruined her womb and as a result she would never have children. Shange had had children already with his previous girlfriends, so Kauna was automatically blamed for the problem the couple were facing. One time when Shange had not returned to eat at home, Kauna asked where he could be, at which point her sister-in-law rudely answered: “He went to those with fertile wombs” (Andreas, 2001, p. 21).

Shange is such a dishonest husband that he even lies about the true nature of his job. After giving the impression that he works as a diamond miner, it is discovered that in fact he is a chef. This discovery, through a photograph found inside Kauna's Bible, is a blow to his pride, and he vents his frustration by savagely assaulting Kauna. The narrator recounts that Shange strikes Kauna mercilessly all over her tiny body with his mine shoes, so that in the end Kauna has blood mixed with sand all over her face, mouth, nose, eyes, ears, head and clothes. His friend Michael tries to restrain Shange, to no avail, and this episode is watched even by the couple's children who are left crying helplessly.

(Andreas, 2001, pp. 58 -59).

As if the beatings are not enough, Shange also tortures his wife emotionally – by cheating on her publicly. Kauna's unhappiness is so strong that she finds she is unable to shed a tear when her husband unexpectedly dies. When everybody is shocked by Kauna's behaviour, she bravely tells them that she cannot lie to herself and everybody in the village because they all know how she was treated in her marriage. She rhetorically asks, "Why should I cry? For what? For my broken ribs? For my baby, the one he killed inside me while beating me? For cheating on me so publicly? For what?" (Andreas, 2001, p. 49)

Kauna's hardened feelings against her abusive husband, and her failure to shed a tear on his death, is reminiscent of Martha's similar action in Dangarembga's *She No Longer Weeps.* After encountering cruelty and hypocrisy from both men and women around her, especially from her own parents, and also from her former boyfriend, Freddy, Martha says she longer feels pain or pity or sympathy (Dandarembga, 1987, p. 50). Towards the end of the play, her father recalls an incident: "Do you remember the time of Tete Enia's death? Martha stood there, without a tear, only waiting to come back to Harare. That is when I noticed that she no longer weeps," (Dangarembga, 1987, p. 57). It is therefore not surprising in the end that Martha takes drastic measures to avenge the humiliation and suffering that she has endured from Freddy. This man earlier impregnates Martha and abandons her, but after seven years comes back and says he wants to take the child from Martha. Actually he boastfully says that he wants everything from Martha. He reminds her that he had Martha's virginity and her love but she tried to prove that she could manage without him, so now he must

teach her a lesson. Freddy says that Martha is not a good woman. He goes on to say that she does not know her place in this world, which is underneath. He also tells her that she thought she should be on top. To which Martha replies, “No, what I wanted was side by side,” (Dangarembga, 1987, p. 53).

Martha’s humiliation and suffering lead her to take drastic action against Freddy: “I am going to make you suffer for the suffering you caused me. (*She lunges with the knife*) I shall take this for spoiling me. ... and this because you took my daughter from me ... and this I shall take for all the women you have betrayed,” (Dangarembga, 1987, p. 59).

In the end Kauna is ordered to leave the homestead, as she is reminded: “Why do you want to stay here and enjoy Shange’s wealth? You didn’t even shed one tear for him. ... You will not stay here and bring other men into Shange’s bed,” (Andreas, 2001, p. 166).

During Kauna’s ordeal, several people try to advise her to divorce Shange, most notably her aunt Mee Fennie. Physically strong and tall, this woman is admirable in that she divorced her husband because their marriage was not working. Against all odds, Mee Fennie works very hard as a market vendor and improves her material circumstances. Two of her children are boarders in a secondary school, and the eldest, her daughter, is at university. She builds her children their own huts, and for herself she builds a concrete bedroom. Her livestock is increasing as well – five cows and seven goats! Mee Fennie’s action demonstrates that a woman does not need to stick to an abusive husband just because she wants people to say that she is married. If a marriage does not work for you, leave it. Mee Fennie is a happy single mother.

Conclusion: Literary texts such as *The Purple Violet of Oshaantu* and *She No Longer Weeps,* to mention only two, sensitise us to life-giving values and concerns of universal appeal. African feminist literature of this calibre should be part of the educational agenda in Zimbabwe, in the SADC region, and indeed in the wider world. Theories of literary criticism such as STIWANISM must be embraced because they deepen and broaden the debate on feminism. This is important because there is so much mysticism about “feminism”, but everyone ought to know that this word,

“feminism”, is not a dirty word that some people think is synonymous with radical forms of women’s politics such as lesbianism or raunchism. In simple terms, a feminist is someone who believes in gender equality.

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