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FREE AT LAST: A FEMINIST INSIGHT INTO BEYALA'S *THE SUN HATH LOOKED UPON ME* AND EL SAADAWI'S *WOMAN AT POINT ZERO*

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ABSTRACT
This study is based on the premise that patriarchal moulded structures ensure that women remain in perpetual slavery. Using a combination of theories including feminism, patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity, the study examines the types of oppression women face from infancy through adulthood as portrayed in Calixthe Beyala's *The Sun Hath Looked Upon Me* and Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*,and the measures taken by women to free themselves from the shackles of male domination and oppression. It is discovered that due to the daily oppression and subjugation that they suffer from men, including sexual abuse and physical violence; women resort to unconventional and violent means to liberate themselves. The study concludes that patriarchy is a social evil that spread across the African continent and that a concerted effort is required from women to join hands together and fight for their liberation.

Key words: Female liberation, Feminism, patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity

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INTRODUCTION

Female oppression, which began as far back as the biblical times where it is asserted that women should be "subject to man" (Genesis 3: 3), is deeply engrained in present day societies so as to ensure the continuation of patriarchal control of women and thereby depriving them of social, political and economic advancement.

In this paper, I attempt to examine the different subjugating conditions that African women are confronted with daily. These include domestic violence, sexual abuse,clitoridectomy or Female Genital Mutilation, child-marriages and other harmful practices that impede the personal development of women in the society. In their novels, Calixthe Beyala and Nawal El Saadawi bring to fore the various phases of injustices and abuse that women grapple with in phallocentric societies, and how they subvert the masculine oppression and suppression in order to empower themselves. The study includes two novels namely Calixthe Beyala's *The Sun HathLooked upon Me* (1996) and Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (1983).

Theoretical Framework

In this paper, I offer a feminist reading of the two contemporary African female novelists and analyse how they represent women in their fight against the yoke of patriarchy and subsequently free themselves. Also included in the theoretical framework are patriarchal concepts, which are concerned with how patriarchy spreads its ideology of male domination; the concept of hegemonic masculinity will also be used. Through the lens of these theories, I will try to find out to which extent

women struggle in order to free themselves from the yoke of male oppression and suppression.

The subject of feminism has received extensive treatment. It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a comprehensive survey of these debates, but I will focus on those that are pertinent to my discussion.

What is feminism? The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2010) views feminism as "the belief and aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men and the struggle to achieve this aim". In the same breath, Mhindu (2014) states: "feminism is a political position committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism" (46). Karik-Namiji (2016) quotes Adebayo as saying that "feminism brings to mind the idea of challenging male hegemony" (13). It is therefore right to say that feminism entails the advocacy of women's rights on the grounds of sexual equality. In other words, the main thrust of feminism lies in its strive to fight for women's right against oppression. Although there are various feminist approaches like African feminism, liberal feminism, radical feminism, and socialist feminism, they all try to provide different explanations for the roots of gender inequality; they all believe that the source of women's oppression is patriarchy. Thus, the aim of feminism is to challenge the privileged position of men and demand for the equal distribution of power between men and women in all spheres including political, economic and social.

Feminists define patriarchy as a social or ideological construct that consider men as superior to women. In the same breath, Walby (1990) views patriarchy as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women" (20). Similarly, Amouzou (2006) posits that patriarchy is that form of social organization in which males exercise power and thus create for females an inferior status. Commenting on the meaning of patriarchy and its effects on women, Mutunda (2015) observes:

> Patriarchy is a gender system in which men dominate women. The ascribed superior status of men is encouraged and sustained by social institutions that are considered unquestionable and natural. In addition, this system of social stratification based on sex provides men with power and material advantages while depriving women of both those benefits. (52)

Patriarchy therefore is about the arrangement of life in the eyes of the dominant group, i.e. men. This particular culture privileges the exercise of men's power over women.

Deeply entrenched in the concept of patriarchy is the notion of hegemonic masculinity. According to Connell (2005), hegemonic masculinity is "the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women" (77). Hegemonic masculinity, when embodied by at least some men overtime and space, legitimates men's domination over women as a group. In essence, hegemonic masculinity, as Mutunda (2015) suggests, refers to that view of masculinity which has established dominance in society. In addition, this form of masculinity is mostly supported by social institutions namely schools, religion, and law, just to cite a few.

Textual analysis

As mentioned earlier, the two novels that I chose for this research project are Calixthe Beyala's *The Sun Hath Looked Upon Me* (1996) and Nawal El Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* (1983). In *The Sun Hath Looked Upon Me*, an omniscient narrator recounts the story of Ateba Leocadie, a nineteen-year old girl, daughter of a prostitute mother and an unknown father, living in a slum neighbourhood in an imaginary African city, "a world where the future for women is bleak because they have less opportunities than men" (Mutunda 2015: 81). We are informed that when her mother abandoned her, Ateba is raised by her aunt Ada, who mistreats her even though she takes care of household needs. Due to lack of opportunities, Ateba and her friends have to make their living by selling their bodies. We are further informed that in this environment, physical and emotional violence are the norm for women around her including Betty, Ateba's mother, Ada, her aunt, and Irene, her friend. Ateba seeks to end the tyranny and terror of men, whom she holds

responsible for the death of her friend Irene who dies from a botched abortion.

In this novel, Beyala focuses particularly on men who seek to dominate and force themselves on women. One such man is Jean Zepp, who would like to think that he can forcefully jump on any woman he likes. However, he forgets that in matters of sexual intercourse, mutual consensus is required, even in conjugal setting. In one instance, when Ateba comes to Jean Zepp's room to deliver a message from a neighbour, he thinks she has come to spy on him. As a punishment for invading his privacy, he pounces on her like a lion does on its prey: "he grabs her by her hair. He forces her down low, forces her to crouch with her head into his manly smells, her mouth against his penis" (24). This scene reveals that, the intention of Jean Zepp is to inflict pain on Ateba and humiliate her rather than to seek sexual satisfaction.

His savage assault on Ateba shows that Jean Zepp does not care and has no clue as to how the seduction process and subsequent sexual intercourse works. Jean Zepp simply views women as sexual objects to be conquered and the penis as the ultimate weapon with which to subdue them. From his perspective, "a woman was good only in the evening; melting into the dark [. . .] the daytime was absolutely not made for her. Who said that a woman was beautiful? The guys must have two black holes instead of eyes!" (43). For Jean Zepp, a woman has no other value than to provide sexual pleasure to a man, her boss. And once his lust has been satisfied, she has no value to him.

Jean Zepp is like other men found in the novel, whose society expects to exert power, control and authority over women. During one scene of police raid of the slum where Ateba lives, and which is commonly referred to as QG - *Quartier General* or "Headquarters," an officer forces Ateba to follow him in an abandoned shed, where he sexually molests her (70-71). One may wonder whether it's a real police headquarters that the narrator is referring to. Usually, a police headquarters is where criminals are taken for questioning and probably beaten and tortured during interrogation to extract the needed information. In this case however, the slum where Ateba and other women live is likened to a police headquarters because it is a place where women undergo sexual molestation and emotional torture at the hands of men.

In another instance, the anonymous client Ateba picks after her friend Irene's funeral claims ownership of her body saying: "Your body belongs to me until dawn. Another day I might have been able to let you go. But tonight I need an imprint of a woman in my bed" (118). When Ateba tries to leave his apartment, he grabs her wrists and hair, forcing her to kneel and perform oral sex, claiming that "God has sculptured woman on her knee at the feet of man" (118). This wealthy man ironically believes that his power is God given and that he can use his masculine power and wealth in order to subdue a poor woman like Ateba. This view corroborates that expressed by Jean Zepp who justifies his oppressive action against women by proudly claiming: "Since time again, woman has prostrated herself before man. It's no accident that God created her from the rib of man" (84), implying that the subordinate destiny of women has been pre-ordained; they simply have to live with this ordinance. Nick Hitchcott (2000) frames this view when she observes that "patriarchy declares that women's routes are mapped for them in advance" (221). But Beyala rejects this conception – that the course of women's lives has already been mapped out – and urges women to be agents of their own individual fate.

It is worth noting that by justifying the oppression they have inflicted on women in religious terms, the men portrayed here see their power over women as a gift from God and, therefore, believe that it has been ordained that women should satisfy men's sexual desire. Women become, as Mutunda (2015) points out, "a kind of currency that help men display their sexual prowess, thus improving their ranking on the scale of masculinity" (84).

However, it is revealed at the end of the novel that, Ateba has had enough and could not let her oppressions continue. She finally subverts the male conquest by overpowering and killing a client she has met at a bar. The narrator describes the scene as follows:

> I see the woman unfolding her wings, spitting the sperm at the man's feet. Flinging a heavy copper ashtray at his skull.

> I see him reeling a few minutes at this repeated assault by the woman, [and] then he crashed to the floor. . . . She had crouched down, grabbed the man's head and with two hands she is beating it against the stone floor. The blood gushes out, splatters, sullies. She gives a beat to her blows, scanning 'Irene, Irene' and as she still notices signs of life under her hands, she picks up a knife and, overcome with joy, she begins to strike, to strike with all her might. At last, the final spasm. Her kidneys give way; piss floods the corpse beneath her. With haggard eyes, she slumps on top of him. (118-119)

Some critics have read this murder scene as an act of retribution on the part of women, and symbolically an act that would avenge women for the yoke of patriarchy they have been saddled with. For instance, Larrier (2000) claims that Ateba's act is "her way of revenge in the name of Irene and other women, since their arrival on earth" (93). In the same vein, Assah (2003) asserts that "the killing seeks to annihilate man, to make man a non-being. It also seeks to destroy the phallic symbol, source of oppression, violence" (532). While I agree with both Larrier and Asaah, I should add that this apparent revenge-killing is also meant to debunk masculinist supremacy theory. Beyala shows that women can assert themselves by taking a supreme, if not extreme position that annihilates men's so-called superiority.

Connell (1987) reminds us that "the authority of men is not spread in an even blanket across every department of social life. In some circumstances women have authority; in others the power of men is diffused, confused or contested" (109). Also, to paraphrase Michael Kimmel (2001), the image of those men who hold power is subject to change or contestation (271). This is true for Beyala who, through her protagonist Ateba, has challenged the myth of male supremacy on one hand and female inferiority on the other.

In *Woman at Point Zero*, Nawal El Saadawi portrays the life of a young woman named Firdaus, who is struggling to live a dignified life in rural Egypt, a patriarchal society where women have limited options. In her novel, El Saadawi brings to fore the various stages of injustice and abuse that the protagonist Firdaus, and by the same token all women grapple with in a phallocentric society.

In her early years at her parental home, Firdaus is exploited and mistreated by her father like a slave. Sometimes when there is no food at home, she and her siblings would go to bed with empty stomachs, while "her father never went to bed without supper, no matter what happened" (17). Such a selfish behaviour of the man who is supposedly the head and carer of the family makes Firdaus confused to the extent that she wonders whether the man who mistreats her is actually her biological father: "sometimes I could not distinguish which one was my father. He resembled them [the other men] so closely that it was difficult to tell" (13). Her mother was not spared from such mistreatment either, for instance, each time a male child dies, Firdaus' father beats her mother mercilessly as if she caused it and yet it is her father's self-centeredness that results in the starvation, malnutrition and eventual death of these children. But, "when one of his female children dies, [her] father would eat his supper, [her] mother would wash his legs, and then he would go to sleep, just as he did every night" (17). The father's attitude is despicable to say the least. He is more concerned with male children than females ones as if the latter were not his own.

In this patriarchal society, questioning the authority of a man particularly by a woman is not condoned. Thus, when Firdaus persistently bothers her mother with questions about her father, the mother calls an old woman "who was carrying a small knife [and] a razor.They cut off a piece of flesh between [her] thighs" (13). It is worth noting that this harmful practice, which is common in most African traditional societies and which seemingly, gives sexual pleasure to man, robs Firdaus of pleasure during sex. She is unable to experience sexual pleasure because, as she puts it, "a part of me, of my being, was gone and would never return" (15). Commenting on the harmful effect of clitoridectomy, Okpara (2004), cited in Fwangyil (2012), asserts: "while the woman's body is mutilated for the benefit of the man, the male organ

in the course of circumcision gets manicured for the reification of woman" (17). This reveals that Female Genital Mutilation is at the detriment of women and concerned only with the satisfaction of man's pleasure. Firdaus is mutilated both physically and psychologically; she is "reduced to an object of sexual pleasure only, to the obliteration of all her human qualities" (D'Almeida 1994: 80).

One may wonder why this practice is carried out by elderly women who have gone through the same painful exercise and know the devastating effect of this mutilation. Undoubtedly, these women do it not on their own volition, rather because they have internalized the traditional values of their upbringing, that of submission to the will and rule of patriarchy.

The physical and psychological brutality that Firdaus experiences in her childhood means that, "she never experiences childhood, or at least the simplicity and innocence that are ordinarily assumed to fill a child's world" (D'Almeida 1994: 76). It even creates in Firdaus feelings of hatred for her mother and her father, by the same token all men supporting what her father does. For instance, when she moves to the city with her uncle to pursue her education, she is given a room of her own with a mirror; as she watched herself in the mirror, she develops "a deep hatred for the mirror, [for the images of her father and mother still haunt her]. From that moment, [she] never looked into it again" (21).

To move to the city from her habitual rural environment opens a new perspective for her. Firdaus' uncle sends her to school and subsequently provides her with a much better life than the one she lived with her parents. However, soon after her uncle gets married, Firdaus' happiness and sense of freedom begins to fade away. Pressured by his wife, who claims "the house is too small and life is expensive. She eats twice as much as any of our children" (35), Firdaus' uncle marries off his niece to Sheik Mahmoud, a sixty year old rich widower and a relation to his wife for a large sum of money. Firdaus is married off against her will; it is just a way to get rid of her because she is regarded as an unnecessary liability, yet she proves to be important to the house in assisting with the daily chores.

One is stunned by the level of frivolity and lack of foresight displayed by Firdaus' aunt. She does not care for Firdaus; she is more concerned with money than her niece's education. She thus persuades her husband not to let Firdaus pursue her education, instead to "auction" her to the wealthy but old man, Sheik Mahmoud:

> Sending her to the university [. . .] a place where she will be sitting side by side with men? [. . .] Besides, where will the money come from for her lodging, and books, and clothes? You know how high the cost of living is these days. Prices seem to have gone mad, and yet the salary of us government officials only rises by a few millimes. My uncle, Sheik Mahmoud, is a virtuous man. He has a big pension and no children, and he has been on his own since his wife died last year. If he marries Firdaus, she will have a good life with him, and can find in her an obedient wife, who will serve him and relieve his loneliness. Firdaus has grown . . . and must be married. It is risky for her to continue without a husband. (36)

By disrupting Firdaus' education, her aunt destroys another woman's life and subsequently jeopardizes her nice chance of becoming financially independent. At this point it is fair to say that Firdaus experiences – in her father's home and at her uncle house – shows how women within patriarchy become accomplices with the control of power that men have claimed for themselves. Mutunda (2007) is right when he observes that, "[such] ignorant, selfish, manipulative and insensitive older women are a real obstacle to women's emancipation" (118).

Soon after marrying Firdaus, a girl young enough to be his granddaughter, Sheik Mahmoud subjects her to inhumane treatment that does not fit a wife. For example, her sexual relationship with her old husband is one of torment, as she explains:

> Sheik Mahmoud would appear on my side. [. . .] On his chin, bellow the lip, was a large swelling, with a whole in the middle. Some days the whole would be dry, but on others it would turn into a rusty old tap exuding drops red in colour like blood, or whitish

> like pus. When the hole dried up, I let him kiss me. [. . .] But on the days when it was not dry I would turn my lips and face away to avoid the odour of dead dogs emanated from it. (43)

In addition, Firdaus undergoes repeated beatings at the hands of her selfish and stingy husband. After one bad beating, she runs away to her uncle for solace. Unfortunately, her uncle – like all men is this patriarchal society – tells her that, "all men beat their wives" (44). To make matters worse, her uncle's wife adds: "[your uncle] often beats [me] and brings [me] back immediately" (44). Commenting on the name of Mahmoud, Ennin and Nkansah (2016) observe, "For a person whose name is a variant of *Prophet Mohammed*, he is expected to be an honourable character. [But] his personality is ironic to his name" (78). Indeed, a religious leader like Sheik Mahmoud, a man well versed in the teachings of Islamic religion, could not be in the habit of beating his wife; for the Holly Quran admonishes men to love, protect, and maintain their wives (Surah IV, v 34).

Perhaps an appropriate question to ask at this juncture is why men have recourse to physical force, especially in their relationships with women. In his anthropological study on male dominance, Steven Goldberg (1993) articulates the reasons for such violence on the part of men; he observes that men tend to use physical aggression as the means to an end; they resort to physical violence in the pursuit of dominance. Mahmoud epitomizes this behaviour; in his relationship with Firdaus, he often resorts to physical and verbal abuse in order not only to subdue his wife, but also to maintain his masculine identity in front of his friends and for himself.

But, after she endures marital rape called sex as well as repeated beatings, Firdaus escapes from her husband and ends up in a coffee shop where she meets Bayoumi, the shop owner. At first Bayoumi appears to be kind to Firdaus, he accommodates her in his apartment and provides for her basic needs. However, once again, Firdaus' life rolls back. In one instance, when Firdaus expresses her need to get a job instead of staying at home, Bayoumi is enraged, he beats her and begins to lock her in the room when he leaves. Expressing her agonizing experience at the hands of Bayoumi, Firdaus says: "He jumped up and slapped me on the face. . . His hand was big and strong and it was the heaviest slap I have ever received on my face [. . .] The next moment he hits me with his fist in the belly so hard that I lost consciousness immediately" (50).

Eventually, Firdaus escapes from Bayoumi's apartment with the help of a neighbour. It is after she escapes from Bayoumi's brutality that she runs to the street where she meets Sharifa El Dine, an old professional prostitute. Sharifa takes her in and teaches her to become a high-class prostitute:

> Neither Bayoumi, nor any of his cronies realize your worth, because you failed to value yourself highly enough. A man does not know a woman's value, Firdaus. She is the one who determines her value. The higher you price yourself, the more [a man] will realize what you are worth, and be prepared to pay with the means at his disposal. And if he has no means, he will steal from someone else to give you what you demand. (54-55)

By using her body as a source of revenue, Firdaus attains little by little her freedom. She becomes self-reliant and chooses what to eat or wear: "Now I could decide on the food I wanted to eat, the house I preferred to live in" (68), she says.

At this juncture, it is worth noting that most of the names in this novel are related to religion or belief of Islam. For instance, as Ennin and Nkansah (2016) observe, "the name Firdaus means paradise" (77). Thus, considering that her name has a glorious connotation, one would expect Firdaus to have a blessed life. Ironically, this is not the case; Firdaus is a victim of sexual abuse and exploitation. She is presented as a character of sexual satisfaction and happiness for men. As Ennin and Nkansah (2016) further observe "[Firdaus] is like a fountain from which men come to drink for satisfaction" (78). Men find paradise (satisfaction) in her, but she does not find that paradise within herself. She is commodified and exploited; the men leave her wounded in both spirit and mind.

Soon, Firdaus realises that Sharifa is not much better than her former husband Mahmoud,

Bayoumi or her uncle; she is an exploiter who wants to take advantage of her, as one of her clients reveals: "Sharia's fooling you, and making money out of you, while all you get out of it is the pain" (58). Realizing that Sharifa is a pimp, Firdaus leaves her. This realization comes because she needs to make her own money and determine the course of her destiny. She gives up her nice apartment and beautiful things, moves into a shark, and begins to work as an office assistant. She is determined to restore her lost respectability: "come what may, I had to become a respectable woman, even if the price were to be my life. I was prepared to do anything to put a stop to the [exploitation and] insults that my ears had grown used to hearing, to keep the brazen eyes from running all over my body" (73).

By leaving the world of prostitution to join the corporate world, Firdaus thinks that this move will provide her the respectability she needs and deserves. Unfortunately, she discovers that as long as she is a woman, she cannot runaway from the gaze of men who only see her as a sexual object to be used. She meets a workmate named Ibrahim, and falls in love with him. They have a relationship and Firdaus begins to feel the world is not horrible as such. Unfortunately, Ibrahim leaves Firdaus and gets engaged to the daughter of his boss; Firdaus is once again hurt and devastated. She says:

> I had never experienced suffering such as this, never felt a deeper pain. When I was selling my body to men the pain had been much less. It was imaginary, rather than real. As a prostitute, I was not myself; my feelings did not arise from within me [. . .] Never had I felt so humiliated as I felt this time. Perhaps as a prostitute I had so deep a humiliation that nothing really counted. When the street becomes your life, you no longer expect anything, hope for anything. [. . .] But in love, I gave my body and my soul, my mind and all the effort I could muster, freely. I never asked for anything, gave everything I had, abandoned myself totally, dropped all my weapons, lowered all my defences, and bared my flesh. (85)

From her lamentation, one may wonder why Firdaus admires her previous life in the street. One reason could be that the street liberates her from men's physical and mental torture. Whenever she faces oppression she runs out "for the street had become the only safe place [she] could seek refuge, and into which [she] could escape with [her] whole being." (51).

Finding no way out of her quagmire, she goes back to prostitution determined to be master of her own destiny. She prefers her trade because it gives her freedom and power over men: "I prefer to be a free prostitute, rather than an enslaved wife" (91), she says. However, even here, she has neither peace nor freedom: "I thought I had escaped from men, but the man who came this time practiced a well-known male profession" (92). She has to contend with Marzouk, a pimp who wants to rule her. He tells her that "every prostitute has a pimp to protect her from other pimps and from the police. [. . .] You cannot do without protection, otherwise the profession exercised by husbands and pimps would die out [. . .] I may be obliged to threaten" (92). After Firdaus tries to protect herself without success, she gives in and agrees to share her earnings with Marzouk who takes the larger sum. When Firdaus realises that she has been exploited enough, both sexually and financially; she then decides to call the police on Marzouk. But she realizes that this could not help because " he had better connections than [her] and the law punishes women like [her] but turn a blind eye to what men do" (92).

Faced with this dilemma, Firdaus has no other option but to defend herself against Marzouk, by extension all men who have abused her for so long. She describes the scene as follows:

> I caught hold of the latch of the door to open it, but he lifted his arm up in the air and slapped me. I raised my hand even higher than he had done, and brought it down violently on his face. [. . .] His hand started to reach for the knife he carried in his pocket, but my hand was quicker than his. I raised the knife and buried it deep in his neck, pulled it out of his neck and then thrust it deep into his chest, pulled it out of

his chest and plunged it deep into his belly. I stuck the knife into almost every part of his body. (95)

One may wonder why such a kind and good-natured woman turns to be hatless and cruel. In my view, the molestation and abuse Firdaus experiences make her to be hard-hearted. She had her back on the wall and had to choose between life and death; as one Zambian proverb says: "a snake bites because the whole has ended" meaning that there is a limit to every person's patience. And Fwangyil (2012) rightly points out: "women are known to be caring, kind-hearted, loving, gentle and tender but unfavourable and oppressive situations can change them" (26). After destroying the silence – to borrow from D'Almeida (1994) – in this case killing the pimp, Firdaus has scored feminist victory; she is now a free–mindedperson, as she says: "I walked down the street, my head held high to the heavens, with the pride of having destroyed all masks to reveal what is hidden behind" (96).

Although she is sentenced to death by hanging for brutally killing Marzouk and asked to appeal to the Head of State for the crime she has committed, Firdaus "refuses to sign an appeal to the president so that her sentence be commuted to imprisonment for life" (1). She chooses death over life for death will finally free her from the clutches of male subjugation. Additionally, death is for her "a journey to a place unknown to everybody on this earth, a place that fills [her] with pride" (101). For a person whose name means paradise, death is the only way to get to this place of bliss and fulfilment, a place that "would make [her] hold her head high, higher than the heads of everyone else, including, princes and rulers" (101). Indeed, it is only by dying that she can attain the peace of mind that she longs for, and which is so elusive on earth.

I should add that by killing a man, by extension all men who have oppressed women for so long, Firdaus has paved way for women to follow: robust action against men. She is urging women to use force whenever necessary in order to attain liberation from the subjugating patriarchal social structures. In other words, through her protagonist, El Saadawi is urging women to be agents of their own individual destiny.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it can be concluded that due to the daily oppression and subjugation that women suffer from men, including sexual abuse and physical violence, they resort to unconventional, violent means to liberate themselves.

Beyala portrays Ateba first as a powerless woman and in the end as a woman with man-like power that enables her to fight back as her way of empowering a gender that is kept subjugated in her society. The subversion in Nawal El Saadawi's work is similar and pronounced. Voiceless and powerless at the beginning of the story, Firdaus reaches her self-realisation in the end. She regains her inner power and peace by killing a man who represents the forces that bar her movement towards freedom. Symbolically, killing the man is in both novels, an act that would avenge women from the yoke of patriarchy they have been saddled with. Assah (2003) rightly points out that "the killing seeks to destroy [man] the phallic symbol, source of oppression and violence [against women]" (532). Indeed, Beyala and Saadawi see killing as a way for women to annihilate the silence and subsequently articulate their experience, understanding and desire.

It is also worth mentioning that, both Beyala and Saadawi have shown deep concern about certain subjugating conditions that women undergo. In their concern are attempts to bring to our attention that subjugation of women is "a plague that cuts across African societies" (Frangyil 2012: 27). Therefore, this social evil that spread across the African continent calls for a concerted effort from women to join hands together and fight for their liberation. Since suffering is a common denominator that they share together, they need to unite so that they can stop it. As D'Almeida (1986) rightly points out, "a greater solidarity among women is needed to alleviate the agony women go through in [marital and social] situation" (162). However, as Mutunda (2007) observes, this solidarity cannot flourish without a good understanding on the part of women themselves that, in a patriarchal society, all women are second class citizen (118).

Finally, these two works reflect the novelists' particular vision for women's self-determination, their commitment to helping women rediscover themselves and embrace new identities.

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