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Womanism in Perspectives: A Discourse Study of Selected WhatsApp Chats

Aisha Umar Muhammad[1] & Aisha Usman Wara[1]

[1] Department of European Languages and Literary Studies, Federal University Birnin-Kebbi, Kebbi State, Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper is a womanist-discourse study of selected WhatsApp chats. In contemporary imaginative literature, Women Studies conveys women writers' perspectives, identity, cultural and ideological inclinations via the major literary genres: drama, prose and poetry. Thus, communalism, complementarity and other gender-driven themes impinge on the narrative insights of women literary writers. Discourse is 'language in action/use'. In this study, the analysis of selected WhatsApp chats as a body of discourse is an investigation of the ideological underpinnings of writers' language and message. Like in WhatsApp chats, imaginative literature communicates gender-related themes. In the context of this study, WhatsApp chats can be construed as a form of genre for literary expression because the corpora of this study are possible micro structures from any work of imaginative literature; this is the rationale for examining the data within the purview of women studies. The writers are females, who like women literary writers, have experienced the issues they bring to the fore in the articulation of their identity. Ofure Odede Maria (2010) rightly notes that '... a discourse on women's literary identity is only feasible on others who have the identical characteristics of 'oppression'. Thus, identity entails the metonymic selection of such characteristics as race, gender, history and culture.' Arguably therefore, the view of women studies as 'being about women-related discourse' is more encompassing and rewarding than viewing the notion as strictly 'being about women-related literary discourse'. In terms of the former, this study is germane. Two theoretical frameworks anchor this study: Gynocriticism and Gender Mainstreaming. Propounded by Elaine Showalter, Gynocriticism is a theoretical framework for elucidating women literary writings from authorial cultural background. On the other hand, Gender Mainstreaming is a broader feminist perspective which targets different forms of gender bias, and agitates for cross-facet gender equality. This study concludes that in language and message, the writers of the analyzed corpora reveal their individual and collective experiences. In doing so, language

essentially performs three main functions: it describes phenomena; it condemns societal practices; and it conveys writers 'message.

Keywords

Women literature, Women Studies, Gynocriticism, Gender Mainstreaming, WhatsApp chats, discourse, literature

1. Introduction

'A woman burns to death in a village in the state of Rajasthan in India. The news made it to the front page of the New York Times – as had some years earlier the news that a woman had been stoned to death for adultery in a Middle East country. The monolithic Third World Woman as subject instantaneously becomes an overdetermined symbol, victim not only of universal patriarchy but also of specific third world religious fundamentalism.' Rajeswari S.R. (1993, p. 15)

WhatsApp chats are corpora of natural human communication in the social media. It is a form of discourse given the fact that the participants explore the resources of language in topic-driven situated interaction. This study examines womanism as captured in women writings, using selected WhatsApp chats/conversation as a case study. Women writers believe strongly that man's (generic use of the term) inhumanity to man (or female subjugation is not only connected to colonialism (the golden age captured by male writers) as African traditions had been deeply rooted in oppressive practices against females even before the advent of colonialism. In addressing female subjugation and male-dominance, women writers capture different themes and practices including postcolonial subjects, thus evolving concepts such as 'womanism', 'motherism' and 'femalism'. The society in which women and men live is a place where a wide range of practices exist. It is therefore logical to construe research on 'women writings', 'women literature' or 'Women Studies' as multidimensional investigation of societal vices including those that women suffer; in this sense, society is a platform for redefining women through different categories of writings including literature and WhatsApp chats.

2. Literature Review

This section of the paper examines 'womanism', 'feminism' and 'discourse' to give the investigation theoretical footing.

2.1 Womanism and Feminism

'Womanism' is a literary construct with similar but extended feminist ideological underpinnings. It is about the plight of women in the social structures and value systems that deprive them of position, place and essence. Conveyed via verbal artistry, womanism in Women Studies is a consolidated and articulate intellectual endeavour motivated and delivered via the basic genres of literature. The similarity between feminism and womanism is obvious in the definition of feminism as in *The Oxford English Dictionary* which states that feminism is 'a state of being feminine or womanly.' The literature acknowledges that feminism is a form of Women's Movement, traceable to the 1960s. Whether literarily or politically

motivated, feminism and womanism are ideological agitations for gender equality. Rajeswari S. R. (1993, p.101) submits that '… the experience of women's movements, especially in Third World countries, has increasingly pointed to the need for more direct control of policy and praxis by women's interest groups. Though the success of women's movements in South Asian countries, in recent decades, and especially the impact of the International Decade for Women (1975-85) has resulted in gains for women through better laws and increased opportunities, these have not significantly improved the basic indices of women's status (literacy, wealth, life expectancy, employment and physical safety … Women activists therefore have increasingly begun to perceive that it is only by gaining access to decision-making that women can influence issues.'

Feminism is a literary term that refers to literature with female-related themes in relation to society and traditions. Ideologically motivated, feminism captures female concerns. Peters *et al.* (2008, p. 8) submits that 'Charles Fourier (1772-1837), a French philosopher and utopian socialist, is credited with having coined the word *feminism* in 1837 for supporting women's suffrage … The word 'feminist' also first arises with 'feminism' … The first international congress held in Paris in 1892, used the word 'feminist' … Feminists act, speak, write, and advocate on behalf of women's issues and rights, and identify injustice against females in society.' Peters *et al.* (ibid, p. 8) aver that 'a feminist approach allows that the origin of oppression is not personal but very much about power, men as well as women, may experience the effects of oppression…' Like feminist writings, women literature can be categorized and understood in terms of their basic concerns. For example, feminists, as depicted in their writings, can be: humanist feminists, radical feminists, socialist feminists, separatist feminists, liberal feminists, democrat feminists, and so on. Peter *et al.* (ibid.) submit that '…. from the earliest eras of human civilization, it is seen that feminism is one of the oldest social activities that try to abolish or reduce discrimination and establish gender equality in society … The roots of feminism are buried in ancient Greece. Athenian philosopher Plato (427-347 BC), in his classic '*Republic*' advocates that women possess '*natural capacities* equal to men for governing and defending ancient Greece', but everyone had not agreed with Plato…'

2.2 Discourse

Discourse can be regarded as any communication activity involving human beings. It is often with analyzable structure, irrespective of its genre. For example, WhatsApp chats are a form of discourse; they are context-driven language use with one or more topics. Brown and Yule (1983, p. 1) define discourse as discourse as 'language in use.' Ibileye (2018, p. 1) states that disourse is 'the theoretical basis of the emergence of the field of discourse analysis is a pervading phenomenon, which governs human lives and daily activities sometimes in an unconscious way. Discourse has been variously conceived by scholars as the authentic product of human interaction as well as being the concrete aspect of the abstractness of communication. Scholars such as Stubbs, Coulthard, and Gee submit that discourse defines the human essence as it reflects what a speaker wants, who the speaker is and what the speaker does…' Discourse involves participants and operates as a situated instance of language use; this explains why the literature

often uses the term in relation to 'text'. Therefore, the literature acknowledges the notion 'discourse text'. A text is a topic-laden communication. WhatsApp chats constitute discourse because they do not only indicate speakers, but also indicate the place, reason and manner in which such speakers use language. This view corroborates Ruth Wodak and Martin Resigl cited in Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen and Heidi E. Hamilton (2001, p. 385) who note that 'we obviously need to think about what our 'text' is about, since clearly what a person is talking about has a bearing on what is said and how it is said. We also need to think about who said it, or who wrote it or signed it, who is thought, in its particular socio-cultural context, to be responsible for what it says, who the intended audience was and who the actual hearers or readers were, because who the participants in a situation are and how their roles are defined clearly influence what gets said and how. We need to think about what motivated the text, about how it fits into the set of things people in its context conventionally do with discourse, and about what its medium (or justify a certain social status quo (and 'racialized', 'nationalized' and 'ethnicized' identities to it). Third, they are instrumental in transforming the status quo (and 'racializing concepts', nationalities, ethnicities related to it). Fourth, discursive practices may have an effect on the dismantling or even destruction of the status quo (and of racist, nationalist, ethniticist concepts related to it). According to these general aims one can distinguish between constructive, perpetuating, transformational, and destructive social macrofunctions of discourse.' Feminist and Womanist dimensions of discourse reveal discourse as a social and ideological construct. Discourse is shaped by relations of power, and invested ideologies.'

3. Theoretical Frameworks

Two theoretical frameworks anchor this study: Gynocriticism and Gender Mainstreaming.

3.1 Gynocriticism

Women literary writers are products of the environmental issues they bring to the fore in literary texts. A literary theoretical framework, Gynocriticism contends that women writings can be evaluated from authorial backgounds. Ofure Odele Maria (ibid, p. 12) reports that 'Gynocriticism was formulated by Elaine Showalter, as the theoretical process to examine women's writings from the writers' cultural perspective. The common theoretical framework used to evaluate women's writing is the popular feminist theory. It is an approach that 're-visions women's identity to disclaim customs and traditions that repress and oppress women – custom's that have often been regarded as patriarchal in structure by a community of African and black literary critics … It has been criticized for its silence on the history of racism and sexual marginalization defined by culture. With this drawback, several movements emerged. However, they are grouped into two interpretative approaches: the feminist theory from a reader's interpretative approach and the feminist theory from a writer's interpretative approach. According to Gayle Green and Coppelia Kahn, the task of the feminist theory for a reader is 'deconstructing predominantly male cultural paradigms and reconstructing of a female perspective and experience in an effort to change the tradition that has silenced and marginalized us (women). It is concerned with the exploitation and manipulation of female sexuality, the omissions and misconceptions about women in criticism.'

Within the framework of Gynocriticism, women writers attempt to evolve different models for the analysis of domain-based individualistic and collective experiences of women. It is therefore a critical theoretical paradigm for explaining feminist issues that evolve as a continuum in society. Gynocriticism is fuelled by cross-disciplinary insights from history, sociology, anthropology, psychology, etc. where women-related hypotheses are formulated and tested. Ofure Odele Maria (ibid) asserts that '… Gynocriticism came into being because of the shortcomings of the feminist theory. It identifies distinctively feminine subject matters in literature written by women – contexts of domesticity (experiences of gestation, giving birth, or mother-daughter and woman-woman relations). Also, it highlights distinctive feminine modes of experiences or subjectivity in thinking, feeling, valuing and perceiving one's self and the outer world … Gynocriticism thus emphasizes that women's writing is a reflection of their oppression, repression and expression defined by culture and location. Drawing upon culture and location, it recognizes women's dynamic nature and complementary involvement in a general culture through the various contexts of lived experiences. The theory is a conflation of four theoretic models – the biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural variants – in the exploration of female literary expressions and experiences. Culture and location are major interpretive parameters of the Gynocritical theory. Michelle Rosaldo views culture as an institutionalized mode of behaviour or thought expressed in socially recognized rules in which members of a given society conform.'

3.2 Gender Mainstreaming

Gender Mainstreaming is immersed in the consolidation and articulation of the ideologies involved in female struggle for emancipation from male-dominance. Sarah Delaney McDougall's (2012, p. 153) provides insights on Gender Mainstreaming:

… gender mainstreaming can have a greater impact on the generation of more gender-equal society to the extent that it is capable of incorporating feminist perspectives in the political debates … Gender mainstreaming implies shift towards a broader concept of gender equality, that explicitly targets patriarchy by tackling the multiple interconnected causes that create an unequal relation between the sexes in the areas of family, work, politics, sexuality, culture and male violence … It rquires a focus on gender and not only on women, which implies that changes in men's lifestyles are also necessary … Reference on gender issues and considerations on how to limit the differential impact of provisions on women and men should be found in all policy areas. There must be evidence that the mainstream political agenda has been reoriented by rethinking and rearticulating policy ends and means from a gender perspective and prioritizing gender over competing objectives...

4. Presentation and Analysis of Data

The data of this study are extracts from male-female conversations. Selected utterances (henceforth *Utterances 1-4*) are examined from a womanist-discourse perspective. This study holds the view that the selected samples will suffice for making conclusions on the features, concerns and underpinnings of women writings in general.

4.1 Presentation of Data

Four utterances by a man (henceforth *M1*) and two women (henceforth *W1* and *W2*) constitute the data of this study. They are presented as follows:

Utterance 1

M1: The female manager was still holding meeting with her staff that late hour. Her husband's phone calls were quite numerous, but the meeting was inevitable. The lord of the house managed to soak the children's school uniforms, and wanted his wife to wash them before the sun goes down. There was also the lunch issue.

Utterance 2

F1: He is also lord of her certificate. I can see that she is not to work with her hard-earned certificate. It is also for the man's custody. *Na una be oga na*. *After you na you*. She should remain at home and give birth to one dozen of children. Females for sale… You all have the problem of thinking women do not have the right to power or personal development. As a complete human being, I have the right to make choices. Those primitive traditions which state that I am no longer a woman if I do what men do are mostly African traditions.

Utterance 3

F2: We are nothing, yet you imitate us. You do things the female way. You plait you hairs, and you wear earrings. You are confused human beings. You guys are not really different from your colonial masters who treated you as inferior humans. The same so-called crimes you punish us for are the ones you commit mindlessly. You can't keep seeing us as sex objects and kitchen symbols. We are more than your pots and foodstuffs. We build homes and nations.

Utterance 4

M1: All we are saying is 'Let there be peace in the home. Reduce the rate of divorce and untimely death of our beloved husbands. You don't even know the statistics. Accept things the way God created them. Baseless agitations do not make you a real woman.

4.2 Analysis of Data

The analyses of *Utterances 1-4* are done below:

Utterance 1:

There is no justification for addressing the manager as 'female manager' as in *utterance 1*. It is believed in African societies that some professions or positions belong to men or are better under men's leadership. This is the psychological underpinning of *Utterance 1*. The writer is bias, gender-centric and discriminatory by transferring norms of society into language use. If it were occupations such as being a nurse or a cook, the pre-modifier or qualifier 'female' will not be used with 'manager'. The writer does not really think staff of an establishment or organization should be under the leadership of a female. The idea that only males can hang out, even as long as possible, is depicted in *Utterance 1*. Despite the fact that the manager's reason for not being at home was official, her husband was still angry. African societies do not think there is an acceptable reason for women to return home late. As for men or even boys,

returning home late is not a big deal. The mentality that 'A man is a man' or '*Man no dey small*' underpins this discriminatory attitude. Male dominance in Africa is quite worrisome to women literary artists. The expression 'lord of the home' in *Utterance 1* captures the extensive negative effects of patriarchal traditions on women. By being 'lord of the home', the man (husband of the manager) can decide to maltreat his wife without conscience. The serial phone calls (non-verbal communication) communicate the husband's anger, ego and resolve. Arguably, the home is not just for the husband. It is also for the wife. Many people hold the view that wives even priotize the welfare of the home more than husbands. As far as complementarity is concerned, husbands can assist wives who may not be available to cook or do some home chores. If the children are hungry even though there is food at home, the husband is guilty of not performing complementary role. Many husbands, influenced by gender-based beliefs and traditions, do not think it is proper for them to enter the kitchen and cook. They view their wives not only as sex objects, but also as symbols of kitchen, pot, foodstuffs, and so on. Ofure Odele Maria (2010, pp. 56-61) notes that 'the pre-comprehended suppression or effacement of the clitoris relates to every move to define woman as a sex object, or as a means of reproduction – with no recourse to a subject function except in terms of those definitions as imitators of men … investigating the clitoris's effacement is therefore a passage into understanding the historical and theoretical suppression of women … To the extent that male domination is based on women's sexual subordination to and within the family…'

Utterance 1 conveys worrisome gender-driven connotations. There is nothing wrong if the husband washed the soaked school uniforms; it is not relegating for the husband to do so for his own children. To unleash male ego, the husband abandons the school uniforms of his own biological children, who definitely, are not beyond middle-age. He was waiting for the wife to return home and do the washing. Since many husbands neither believe in complementarity nor practice it, high-class housewives engage housemaids to cope with house chores, and this has resulted in marital infidelity and marriage breakages. *Utterance 1* does not indicate that the husband's phone calls were not picked. Refusal to pick the phone calls could result in more trouble in the family. Complementarity is central in African women's writings. It stresses communal life, supportive roles, mutual existence and interdependence within and outside family circles. Within the context of complementarity, female bonding and personal development is emphasized. Women literary writers have the herculean task of hanging the psyche of men who already believe very strongly, in their patriarchal mentality. According to Mahnaz Afkhami (1995, p. 225), 'because virtually all existing (countries) are structured patriarchal mentality, the standard for being human is being male – and female human beings *per se* become 'other', and invisible...' The limitations placed on women are attacked by women writers even via WhatsaApp chats. Such attacks become inflated and comprehensive through the instrumentality of literary writings. This is because of the pains suffered by females in general. As el Sadaawi, Nawal (2002, p. 3), rightly notes, 'words should not seek to please, to hide the wounds in our bodies or the shameful limits in our lives … they may give us pain but they can also provoke us to question what we have accepted for thousands of years...'

Utterance 2

F1: The encoder of *Utterance 2* agitates against society-imposed limitations that women suffer, and views such limitations as threats to female capacity-building and occupational/professional fortunes of women, who as part of God's creation should enjoy the right to make choices. The aspects of women's existence that males unleash dominance are the stress points of female agitations, solidarity and projection of self-worth. The link between 'power' and 'personal development' is that the latter fosters the former, and in Africa, where there is less female participation in politics, access to power or political positions is not widely viewed as women's 'portion'. The encoder of *Utterance 2* uses an indirect speech act to express her disgust over male-induced oppression of females. She condemns the practice of not allowing married women to work with their hardly acquired certificates. So long as there are men who work with poor certificates, women with good certificates should not be prevented from working with such certificates. Preventing women from working with their certificates is as bad as denying them access to western education. So long as *Utterance 1* does not state that the husband is in custody of something, the utterance 'It is also for the man's custody' is extraneous, but communicates the encoder's condemnation of male-dominance in marriage. In *Utterance 2*, '*Na una be oga na*' is Nigerian Pidgin (NP). It is used to ridicule men/husbands for over-emphasizing their pride of place in family life. By incriminating her interlocutor (*M1*) in the practice of female-subjugation, *F1* does not believe that there can be any husband that is innocent of the wrong practice. Nigerian Pidgin is often potent in the communication of messages across domains of life, including family domain.

It is not surprising that Nigerian Pidgin is used in WhatsApp conversations. The language is potent in casual/ informal communication, where the socio-cultural nuances of the Nigerian speech community are often engaged. In terms of population and spread of speakers, Nigerian Pidgin keeps gaining ascendancy. Spoken in the Nigerian speech community, Nigerian Pidgin is a regionally used Pidgin. According to Okafor Amaka Yvonne (2022, p. 1), 'the word pidgin was first reported in English in 1807, when English was accepted as Canton's (Guangzho's) industry and commerce language. Business English was commonly written as Pidgin English at the time, a spelling that reflected the local sound. The need for communication in order for English and Cantonese to trade effectively led to the formation of Chinese Pidgin English. As commerce grew, it became clear that translators were in short supply among local Cantonese businessmen and their European counterparts. Many local traders put what little English they had from their brief interactions with others who spoke English more fluently to good use. This brought about various varieties of Standard English in Canton. As it relates to Nigeria, the trade contact between the British and the local people led to the advent of Nigerian Pidgin in the seventeenth century.' Obviously, *F2* does not doubt the fact that her addressee understands what is meant by '*After you na you*' and '*Na una be oga na*'. As used by the encoder in the context of male-dominance, the utterance '*After you na you*' means 'absolute men-control of women' as women are only placed within the limits of religion and tradition in African societies. The encoder means that husbands are like 'Alfa and Omega' in their families. Child-bearing in terms of number of children to give birth to, is viewed by the encoder of *Utterance 2* as a subject that should be based on husband-wife consensus. There are

economic implications of giving birth to so many children. Indeed, in a monogamous home, one dozen of children is too much, partly as a result of the health implications on the wife. Arguably, for economic reasons, making adequate provisions for twelve children may not be easy for couple who are not rich. Unfortunately, in African societies, many husbands do not consider the child-bearing-related problems that women suffer. The expression 'dozen' conveys the encoder's disgust. It is supposed to be used to make reference to non-human subjects/referents. In using the expression, the encoder is not only being comic, but is also condemning the practices (oppression and repression of women). The encoder is aware that in some societies, female children are regarded as source of money and gifts during marriage. The encoder is also aware that some husbands insist that child-bearing cannot stop until a male child is born; this is a wrong practice. The encoder explores comic language in agitating against male-dominance and female subjugation. Like the expression 'dozen', 'sale' is a deviant form of language use. In conventional language use, non-humans can be for sale rather than a human being. Ofure Odele Maria (2010, pp. 40-56) avers that 'gender gaps between males and females predate the postcolonial period. Interestingly, women in traditional Afrian societies before British rule were highly visible, influential, and acted as custodians and transmitters of cultural heritage (Note 1). From this traditional frame, pioneer African male Negritude writers developed their concepts of the feminization of Africa's cultural identity by addressing Africa as 'Mother Earth', 'the hub of culture' and 'the black woman'. The relevance of African women in traditional societies is documented in essays by anthropologist like Niara Sudarkasa as one of complementarity … the traditional African definition of woman as culturally delineated and further reflected in male child sex preference. However, such preference was subject to cultural norms. In the Igbo ethno-cultural locale, the male child was preferred to the female due to the occupational interests. The traditional occupation of Igbo women was 'relegated' to cassava farming, while yam cropping was a male-dominated activity.' The encoder of *Utterance 2*, like other women writers, contend that the era of patriarchy or male-dominance is gone, and replaced by a more dynamic, flexible and civilized models of male-female existence, which includes co-existence in marriage. In the contemporary post-colonial era, women can develop themselves along educational and career lines as they manage their homes with standards that are more universal than traditional. In many womanist 'literatures', these tendencies are conveyed as themes. For example, in her classical/pioneer texts, Flora Nwapa's female characters are in control of their worlds, as evident in Efuru and Idu which show Flora Nwapa's attack on the claim that African women are invisible. Women literature attempts to address unacceptable status-quo (womanism) alongside its appendages such as ethnicity and race. Ruth Wodak and Martin Resigl, cited in Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen and Heidi E. Hamilton (2001, p. 385) posit that 'discursive practices are socially constitutive in a number of ways: first, they play a decisive role in the genesis and production of certain social conditions. This means that discourses may serve to construct collective subjects like 'races', 'nations', 'ethnicities', etc. Second, they might perpetrate, reproduce, or justify a certain social status quo (and 'racialized', 'nationalized' and 'ethnicized' identities to it). Third, they are instrumental in transforming the status quo (and 'racializing concepts', nationalities, ethnicities related to it). Fourth,

discursive practices may have an effect on the dismantling or even destruction of the status quo (and of racist, nationalist, ethniticist concepts related to it). According to these general aims one can distinguish between constructive, perpetuating, transformational, and destructive social macrofunctions of discourse.'

Utterance 3

The encoder of *Utterance 3* does not think men have genuine justifications for their discrimination against women. This encoder's argument is that if men regard women as less intelligent, less reasonable and less logical, there is no basis for men to do things widely believed to be feminine ways of life. The encoder's stance on male-dominance is clear in terms of how it relates with colonialism. The most painful effect of colonialism on its victims (Africans), is that it dehumanized Africans, and portrayed them as inferior human beings. By stigmatizing females and restricting them to home-related activities, patriarchal African societies are not better than colonial Africa; the encoder of *Utterance 3* strongly holds this view. Women writers align in their beliefs concerning women's position in society. *F2* demonstrates gender fraternity. The practice of reserving certain professions for females or thinking that females are better in such professions is wrong. In work places, performance is the ultimate, and there are several cases of females performing very effectively at work places. The belief that certain jobs are suitable for men is not natural. It is error of society transferred from generation to generation. If there is any place where a female should not be the head, it is the home, not work places. To buttress her claims, *F2* cites examples of women who performed excellently in different walks of life. The encoder imagines and hopes for a dethronement of male-dominance since by imitating female dressing, males expose their inner thoughts that females are honour-worthy beings.

Utterance 3 shows women's critical mindedness in feminist discourses. Women literature is in tandem with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as it elucidates gender-based perspective of status, roles, power and positions in patriarchal societies. CDA elucidates social structures in terms of power, ideologies and the sociolinguistic underpinnings of these variables in societal value systems. Thus, discourse shows extra-linguistic nuances that are linked with language use. Stubbs (1983, p. 1) posits that 'discourse is defined as (1) concerned with language use beyond the boundaries of a sentence/utterance, (2) concerned with the interrelationships between language and society and (3) concerned with the interactive or dialogic properties of everyday communication.' *Utterance 3* shows that womanism and feminism are essentially about ideologies. Dahunsi Toyese Najeem (2016, p. 174) notes that 'the central focus of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is to see ideology as inherent in language use, and to see language use as a reflection of certain ideologies, beliefs, perceptions and affiliations.'

Utterance 4:

The encoder of *Utterance 4* cannot withstand the resultant agitation from his interlocutors who are do not accept the identity imposed on them by patriarchal society. Groups in any human society have common inherent socio-cultural features that count as their identity. In this sense, beliefs, norms, value systems of such a group are essentially their identity markers. The notion of identity transcends biological features; identity is also immersed in environmental underpinnings of a people's existence. The encoder

strongly holds the view that male-dominance is the product of creation; God's order. He is not sympathetic with females on the subject of gender discrimination. He thinks female agitation against creation order is uncalled for and anti-cultural. The encoder blames women for family woes including divorce, domestic violence and the untimely deaths of many husbands. It is clear that the participants do not want to shift grounds on their gender perspectives revolving around gender equality. Mahnaz Afkhami (1995, pp. 219-225) posits that '… the male-dominated society holds that nothing is more ridiculous than a woman who initiates a male activity and is therefore no longer a woman … sexual differentiation must be rightly upheld by whatever means available, for men can be men only if women are unambiguously women. In spite of men's tenacious hold on patriarchal tendencies, women have strong resolve to be emancipated through the power of words conveyed via literature. Nasta Susheila (1991, p. xv) reports that 'in countries with a history of colonialism, women's quest for emancipation, self-identity and fulfillment can be seen to represent a traitorous act, a betrayal, not simply of traditional codes of practice and belief, but of the wider struggle for liberation and nationalism…' Realizing the potency of words or the power of language in women's struggle for emancipation through literary writings, Showalter (1988, p. 345) asserts that 'the ways in which women conceptualize their bodies and their sexual and reproductive functions are intricately linked to their cultural environments. The female psyche can be studies as the product or construction of cultural forces. Language, too, comes back into the picture, as we consider the social dimensions and determinants of language use, the shaping of linguistic behaviour and cultural ideals.' Interestingly, Stephanie N. (1997, p. 194) submits that '… Chinua Achebe's and Cyprian Ekweni's constructions of women's experience as tangential to the 'masculine' world have been challenged in the Novels of Flora Nwapa and Buchi Emecheta, whose heroines are vital and viable individuals, engaging in a world shared with men, defining their own spaces and contributing the social reality of that world. The present the woman-as-insider's experience of the world and are therefore able to portray women's struggles and triumphs as they intersect with the reality of that world, not only through sexual roles but also through other self-actualizing ventures.'

5. Discussion and Conclusion

This study examines women writing as conveyed in selected copora of WhatsApp chats. Being about females, women writing is not poles apart from feminist writings. Ofure Odele Maria (ibid, p. 10) submits that '… in Africa, 'female' is used in a different sense from 'woman'. Though the two terms refer to the same sex and are often used interchangeably as gender reference, the former is a biological label while the latter is a social construct. Woman as a social construct evolves from traditional descriptions and involves a number of gender roles and responsibilities. In other words, the term 'woman' in Africa connotes submissiveness, obedience, maturity, and social responsibilities such as motherhood or wifehood. 'Woman' as a social concept in Africa is more encompassing than the term 'female' as a subjugated person, although it is from 'female', a biological label that femininity and woman evolved.' The analyses of *Utterances 1-4* reveal that women demonstrate gender fraternity on issues revolving

around pre-colonial and post-colonial gender discrimination, oppression and repression. Published works in African women literature accentuate this claim. Innes and Rodney (1997, p. 11) 'when women began publishing their works in the mid-sixties in Africa, they faced the problem not only of speaking for the experiences of women in their own right …but also of combating the orthodoxies of colonial and anti-colonial discourse.'

Given the fact that the data examined in this study are written by Nigerians, they count as samples of African women writing. African women have fixed position in their society. In their writings therefore, they try to dislodge unacceptable status-quo and attempt to re-define women's place in society, exploring family-related discourse. The analyses of *Utterances 1-4* reveals the controversial nature of gender debates, and its common topic relevance. Stephanie Newell (ibid, p. 11) submits that 'West African societies overflow with local, culturally specific constructions of gender which circulate in literature and popular representations. Novels, soap opera songs and newspapers regularly stage controversial gender debates, creating narratives around issues such as marriage and divorce, polygyny, love, female infertility and prostitution.'

This study subtly captures the link between the images of females and the external forces that shapes such unacceptable images across ethnicities. The participants in the WhatsApp chats are from different ethnic backgrounds in Nigeria, but are aware of the male-imposed image of African women. Ann Adams Graves (1986, p. 25) opines that 'whether from the Negritude movement with its romanticization of women or from the more recent years in which she is depicted with greater fidelity – the images (of African women) are … less than whole incompletely formed, images imposed on women by others, or otherwise unrealistic. All, however, are seen through the eyes of males who are the dominant figures in the literary works as well as in the lives of women characters in the works…' In the conversations, the participants' arguments are presented with referents (indices of female images) from the universe of discourse (their real world). Women writers have the huge task of recreating the true picture of women in spite of the traditions that relegate and subjugate them. Women writers establish backgrounds for incriminating men, and justifying women as a given conversation unfolds. The world-spoken-of can easily be ascertained by the interactants because of their shared knowledge of the subjects conveyed. See Allan (1986) for insights on the term 'world-spoken-of'. The points used by the two female interactants (*F1* and *F2*) to lampoon male-dominance are components of one literary theory or the other, within feminist or womanist theoretical frameworks. A womanist-discourse study of WhatsApp chats is a form of criticism, as it underscores not only language use therein, but also the unifying features of literary and non-literary women writings. According to Saadatullah Safi and Saeedullah Rahmatzai (2020, p. 2796), 'the word 'criticism' derives from the Greek *kritike*. It is the art of interpretation, analysis, classification and ultimately the judgement of the literary works …' (Note 2) Literary criticism has to do with the ideological and systematic explanation of literature to establish their common ground features especially in terms of thematic pre-occupation. Thus, the common terms in literary studies – 'literary theory', 'critical theory' and 'cultural theory' – are intertwined in the elucidation of the thematic preoccupations

of literary writings. Conclusively, in women writings, language is skillfully used to describe and condemn the individual and collective experiences of oppression, repression and subjugation that women suffer in patriarchal societies.

Notes

Note 1. The influence of women is captured by Lidwein Kapteins and Maryan Owner Ali (1999, p. 44), who report that 'in Somali orature, married women also found voice for their anger at men's power over them through the curse. Although the power of the curse was not only women's, it was one form of powerful speech used in their relations with men. Curses did not have a powerful literary form, but women often employed 'serious genre' and the favored genre for addressing intimate emotional issues was that o the Buraanbur.'

Note 2. In addition, Saadatullah Safi and Saeedullah Rahmatzai (ibid, p. 2797) posit that 'modern literary criticism is written in a variety of genres, including the article, review, survey, essay, literary profile, and bibliographical explanation.'

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