

Research Article

Portraits of Subversive Females in Two African Texts: Real and Imagined Conquest

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Abstract

Received 12 May, 2026; Revised 18 June, 2026; Accepted 19 June, 2026 and Published 14 August, 2026

Most African literary texts and the critical responses to these texts have engaged extensively with the varied means by which women and men have been both complicit in and active perpetrators of gendered oppression, subjugation, and violence. Although the lives of female characters are often portrayed as affected by such challenges, postcolonial African literary texts consistently feature strong female characters who advocate for emancipation and empowerment. At the same time, they make choices that allow them to flourish individually and socially, leading rich, meaningful lives that showcase their conquest over subjugation and patriarchy as “real” and tangible achievements. In contrast, the notion of “imagined” conquest signifies the limitations of, especially, male characters’ efforts, which often fall short in dismantling patriarchal structures. This paper contributes to existing scholarly discourses on the representation of female characters in African literary texts. The analysis draws on the theoretical concept of feminist empathy, taking into account the Nigerian and Zimbabwean postcolonial contexts of the novels to address how Yejide Kilanko’s *Daughters Who Walk This Path* (2012) and Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *This Mournable Body* (2018) reflect deeply on ways in which these primary texts recognize, acknowledge and accept the pain and suffering of the female Other marginalized through the practice of patriarchal hegemony. Through close reading, I identify the strategies employed by revolutionary female characters as they subvert patriarchy and assert a constructive image and role for women within the societies depicted in the novels.

Keywords: Feminist empathy, identity, patriarchy, postcolonial novel, gender, conquest, African feminism, Nigerian literature, Zimbabwean literature.

1. Introduction

Yejide Kilanko and Tsitsi Dangarembga, both African third-generation female writers, explore various traditional, political, cultural, religious, and socio-economic norms through the experiences of female characters in their works, *Daughters Who Walk This Path* (2012) and *This Mournable Body* (2018). In these works, the personal challenges faced by female characters and their strategies for reclaiming independence and strength are examined

with insight and empathy. Both authors utilise retrospection through the symbol of the “mirror”, allowing the protagonists, Morayo and Tambudzai, to reflect on their identities from the past to the present. This introspection exposes the struggle to achieve visibility, audibility, autonomy, and personal growth amid societal barricades. Lionnet (1995) emphasises that when a female character’s “self-image” conflicts with the surrounding social and

cultural reality, she is in a tragic impasse (99). This study expands on Lionnet's insight by showing how the intertwined journeys of Morayo and Tambudzai embody this tragic impasse, as they grapple with the dissonance between their aspirations for personal autonomy and the burdens of societal expectations that seek to define their identities. Both characters, confined by patriarchal, racial, cultural, and socio-economic factors contributing to their suppression and oppression, begin to employ various strategies to surmount these difficulties with intelligence and sensitivity. Additionally, in these novels, some women attribute their suffering to the oppressive nature of patriarchal societies rather than to the preservation of culture by women. Men's influence significantly shapes the identities, personalities, and lives of female characters. *Daughters Who Walk This Path* (henceforth *DWP*) is set in Yoruba society, Nigeria, while *This Mournable Body* (hereafter *TMB*) unfolds in Zimbabwe; men exert dominance over women, as is characteristic of many African societies. For example, in *DWP*, Bros. T, a cousin to the protagonist Morayo, and in *TMB*, Shine, a neighbour to Mako, both sexually exploit these women without facing consequences, leaving the female victims to suffer alone. Due to classism and sexism, men escape accountability, whereas promiscuous women face criticism and condemnation from society, revealing the biases and prejudices against women in these societies.

Kilanko and Dangarembga use feminist empathy discourse to prompt empathetic engagement by portraying African women and men within their societies and examining traditional norms that perpetuate gendered oppression, particularly in *DWP* and *TMB*. Eze's conceptualisation of feminist empathy is further expanded by suggesting that readers should also envision and appreciate the moments of joy and resilience women experience. The depiction of African women's subversiveness alongside their pain and suffering in the novels serves to illuminate their potentialities within context, thereby rectifying the global understanding of Africa and her women. Okin (1999) asserts that "women should not be disadvantaged by their sex, that they should be recognised as having human dignity equally with men, and the opportunity to live as fulfilling and as freely chosen as men can" (10). This belief aligns with the goals of numerous other African [women] writers and activists. Thus, this discourse underscores the subversiveness of African women as crucial to re-orientating global narratives about Africa and her populace. This examination will be guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Dangarembga and Kilanko, as female writers, represent female and male characters with feminist empathy?
2. How do the characters negotiate for "real" and "imagined" conquests?

To facilitate a comprehensive understanding of the feminist empathy in the narratives, this study adopts a qualitative methodological framework. Through a close, critical reading of Kilanko's and Dangarembga's works, the research will focus on depictions of gender dynamics and the construction of feminist empathy, thereby enabling nuanced insights into the authors' portrayals of women and men in their narratives. Primary textual evidence will be derived from close reading of these texts, while secondary literature will further contextualise thematic discourses, enriching the analysis. By triangulating the primary texts with relevant scholarly discourse, the methodology aims to uncover the multiple layers of meaning related to feminist empathy and the oppression of women across cultural and political contexts. In what follows, I will analyse Eze's concept of feminist empathy.

1.2 Empowerment through Feminist Empathy: Analysing Subversive Female Narratives in African Literature

Chielozona Eze's (2016) concept of feminist empathy anchors the central theoretical framework for this paper. Eze suggests that when men cause unwarranted pain or suffering to women, they are disregarding their bodies and civil freedoms. He argues that when writers depict women's suffering, they aim to encourage readers to empathise with them by placing themselves in the women's position and imagining their experiences. Eze defines feminist empathy as "the ability to feel oneself in the experience of a woman in suffering because of her gender" (Eze, 2016: 7). He also emphasises that the purpose of empathy is to address the conditions that lead to such suffering and hinder human flourishing (7).

Drawing on Pucherová's (2022) analysis of Adichie's feminist stance, it delves into the theme of "freedom and happiness [outside] the oppressive systems of ... [women's] conservative cultures" (58). In literature, grappling with empathy is challenging due to its diverse interpretations (Taylor et al., 2016). Nonetheless, the most appropriate definition for this study is Barnett and Mann's (2013). Thus, empathy is "a cognitive and emotional understanding of another's experience, resulting in an emotional response that is congruent with a view that

others are worthy of compassion and respect and have intrinsic worth" (230). Based on this description, I posit that empathy is how readers perceive and relate to the characters and events in the novels they read. This serves as a means by which authors such as Kilanko and Dangarembga, as analysed by Eze (2015: 311), "interrogate the human condition" of women in Nigeria and Zimbabwe and invoke a sense of "responsibility from their readers" (Eze, 2016: 7). From this perspective, empathy is considered a crucial attribute for the socio-economic, political and cultural validation of individuals, allowing them to thrive within their social milieu. Hence, it is pertinent to the way readers engage with texts and strive to derive meaning from them as they identify with the characters in the narratives.

In literature, empathy often leads to a shift in perspective, especially regarding how men perceive women in society. Keen (2007) argues that "women writers very often promote the positive consequences of empathetic reading experiences, not only for women readers" (123-124). Conversely, Breithaupt (2019) suggests that empathy is evoked only temporarily. He notes that "fiction [encourages] ... our preference for time-limited empathy. Most [readers] ... step into the shoes of a fictional character for a short time, [even if that] character undergoes the most terrible sufferings" (92). This is because "works of fiction have an ending, at which point we can withdraw our empathy" (92). Whether a character is "likable or not" in literature, it serves as a tool for authors to explore the human condition (Eze, 2015: 311). Building on these ideas, the female and male characters and their situations in *DWP* and *TMB* may have only a temporary effect on readers due to the novels' thematic focus. I believe that portraying African female characters in *DWP* and *TMB* prompts readers to engage with them empathetically.

Drawing on Hoyt (2012) and a parallel scenario in Arab, I posit that the empathetic nature of the novelists' writing prompts African readers to think and feel, enabling them to envision themselves in similar situations (405). This quality helps to bridge the assumed divide between African subjects and their readers without negating cultural differences. Kilanko and Dangarembga establish a relationship with African readers characterised by emotional understanding and cultural harmony, emphasising the significance of cultural specificity. Eze's feminist empathy theory sheds light on the potential to create Nigerian and Zimbabwean societies that prioritise respect for all human rights and challenge inequality and sexism within African cultures. Viewing the novels through

the lens of feminist empathy allows readers to equally recognise the needs of women and men presented in the narratives, as well as the unwarranted suffering and pain of bodies occupied by happier female and male characters. The feminist empathy reading of *DWP* and *TMB* aims to subvert patriarchy by examining the socio-political, economic, and psychological aspects of both settings and portraying female characters as real victors. This feminist empathetic analysis will focus on the ideals of self-realisation, self-empowerment, and liberation from male dominance and sometimes from female dominance and abuse as well. I will also examine the behaviours of the female and male protagonists, shedding light on their perpetuation of sexism and patriarchal hegemony, which seem to subjugate the female characters.

My analysis, however, will show that these "conquests" are merely imagined within the confines of the patriarchal system, as the female characters skillfully navigate their circumstances with agency and cunning, ultimately leveraging them to their advantage. The authors convey these themes through an exploration of (i) the effect of sexual politics against women, (ii) the systemic degradation of women, and (iii) women as complicit within patriarchal structures. This investigation aims to reveal the nuanced dynamics of gender relations and the underlying societal constructs that govern them.

2. Analysis – Results and Discussion

This study employs feminist empathy to reveal how gender dynamics, sexism, socio-economic structures and patriarchy collectively marginalise women as second-class citizens. Rather than yielding to oppression, women assert their agency through resilience and determination, striving for triumph over their male counterparts. This underscores their strength in navigating systemic barriers to equality.

2.1 The Effect of Sexual Politics Against Women

Psychological pain, emotional torture, and suffering are inflicted on female bodies or identities when men sexually objectify women. This is a concern for Kilanko and Dangarembga. In showing female characters as objects of sex, the narrators from the two texts draw on women who are young and controllable. Achebe, in his novel *Anthills of the Savannah* (1988), portrays a man's sex craving as he metamorphoses into "the odorous he-goat," who implants "his plenitude of seeds from a huge pod swinging between hind legs into she-goats tethered for him in front of numerous homesteads" (104). In this syllogism, the man is

referred to in the active voice and accorded agency, whereas the female is constructed as a passive entity who is acted upon. Throughout these novels, female characters often exhibit a prevailing timidity, a trait exacerbated by the societal norms and expectations imposed upon them. This timidity is mirrored in their interactions with male counterparts, as seen in their relationships with male characters, where they frequently portray submissive dispositions that reflect their constrained roles. As a consequence, it emerges that in sexual issues, many daughters (women) “who have walked” through this brutal path of chauvinism and tradition have no choice. Although the victims (women) are hapless and helpless, they, that is, the victims themselves and, in some instances, their related women, employ some agentic forces to struggle merely to live in the context of subjugation, oppression, and patriarchy. In this, they arise as real victors over the patriarchal predators.

I. Rape and Silence in *DWP*

In *DWP* and *TMB*, it is always the male characters who have control over their sex lives. In *DWP*, the “villains,” Bros T and Chief Komolafe, respectively, rape Morayo, a “J.S.S 3” (51) pupil, and Morenike, when she “turned fifteen, her father’s friend, Chief Komolafe, ... raped her” (108-109). Morenike was in secondary school by then. In “PART ONE: Morayo and Eniayo 1982 – 1988” of the novel, we know that Bros. T is the wayward nephew of Morayo’s mother (Aunty Biseyo) who has come to live with her family so that Morayo’s parents, especially the father, can correct his immoral behaviour. Thus, his attitude of forcing “his way into her [a female student] bedroom late one night” (44). Luck runs out for Morayo when, in the absence of her parents from home, she moans, “My legs were thrown apart. I felt a sharp pain go through my centre. ... Bros T panted and grunted ... until he suddenly jerked and then was still. Without one word, he got up ... pulled his trousers and staggered out of the room” (76). To protect her younger sister, Eniayo, from suffering the same oppressive scenario, she survives sexual encounters with him as “he did it to me [Morayo] again and again” (82).

In a similar vein, Morenike, in “PART TWO: Morenike 1988” of the text, passes through the same oppressive rape situation: [THE NARRATOR SAYS] “Chief Komolafe grunted and moved his body away. As Morenike tried to wiggle out from under him, he slapped her across the face. ... When Morenike regained consciousness, Chief Komolafe was snoring next to her” (111). Morayo, like Morenike, is hesitant to share and afraid to disclose her

experience of being raped by Bros. T, fearing that she may be wrongly accusing a man and encroaching on traditional boundaries. Adding to her distress, her parents, particularly her mother, are unwilling to confront Bros. T after she reports the rape, and they also refuse to give Morayo an opportunity for a meaningful discussion or explanation. Her pain transformed into wounds when Eniayo was sent to a boarding school. Her parents believed that the experience of living in a boarding school would teach Eniayo independence and self-care. Morayo expressed her feelings to her younger sister, explaining that she was not just moaning but that it felt like “raining inside [her] eyes” (92).

The pain caused by Bros. T continued as she described feeling a “cold knot deep inside [her] that had come after that first night with Bros. T, pulled tight until [she] could barely breathe from the pain” (95). This persistent pain stemmed from her desire to talk about her experiences, yet she could not find anyone to confide in. The agony of the pain, exacerbated by these factors, left her wounds as the days “dragged on painfully” (87), ultimately resulting in traumatic experiences. Dodhy (2017) states that “trauma thrives in an atmosphere of silence and secrecy” (102), leaving visible scars on the victims’ psyche.

Despite experiencing trauma, Morayo challenges traditional expectations by courageously sharing her experience of sexual assault. “Aunty Morenike, Bros. T ... He raped me” (101). She further, in the first-person perspective, narrates, “As I said the words out loud, I felt an intense sense of relief. He did not just come to my room at night. He did not just “touch me.” He did not just lift up my skirts ... He raped me” (101). At this juncture, Morayo feels relieved of the wounds and trauma of rape by gathering the temerity to narrate her ordeal. The narrative process is believed to offer healing and recuperation for the traumatic wounds on Morayo’s psyche.

II. Sexual Coercion in *TMB*

Dangarembga parallels this dynamic in *TMB* by demonstrating the relationship between spatial proximity in living environments and the perpetuation of sexual violence perpetrated by men. In the initial section of the novel, titled “Ebbing,” Shine effortlessly assaults Mako, taking advantage of their proximity, as their rooms are adjacent in MaManyanga’s hostel. This intimate spatial arrangement not only facilitates Shine’s violent actions, but also underscores the intricate dynamics of power and vulnerability that emerge within shared living situations. Like Morayo, Mako reveals to Bertha, her hostel mate, that

in her room, “he [Shine] enjoyed himself behind me. And I thought only let him finish. Let it be finished. Let him go. So, I kept quiet” (54). Based on Morayo and Mako sharing details about their sexual encounters with the men to Daddy and Mummy Morayo, Auntie Morenike, and Bertha, it aligns with a statement in Ramatulaye's letter to Aissatou in Mariama Bá's *So Long a Letter* (1981), which confirms that “confiding in others allays pain” (1). Through the portrayal of these female victims, the two third-generation female writers, Kilanko and Dangarembga, highlight women's deliberate choice to stay silent as a survival tactic in the face of sexual oppression by male characters.

Drawing from the analogy, both novelists highlight the prevalence of sexual violence perpetrated by close male family members or men within a woman's community. This underscores the susceptibility of women to aggression from men who are in close proximity or are related, rather than solely from those who are distant.

III. Empathy and Resistance: Imagined and Real Conquests

The aforementioned female characters exemplify the necessity of feminist empathy, as proposed by Eze, as a fundamental prerequisite for advancing women's rights across Africa (Ethics and Human Rights). Both novelists suggest that addressing the challenges encountered by women like Morayo, Morenike, and Mako would entail listening attentively to their narratives of deep-seated anguish. Morgan (2003: 169) explains that it is crucial to listen “to the voices of women who have” experienced sexual abuse to evaluate the extent to which their needs have been met and to understand the impact of these experiences on the status of women in society. The connection between women and society can be strengthened by listening to women's stories and acknowledging their experiences.

Moreover, when other women endeavour to demonstrate empathy towards their related female victims, it reveals the intertwining of sexism and classism deeply entrenched within patriarchal frameworks and perpetuated by prevalent stereotypes. For instance, in *DWP*, the narrator portrays Mummy Ibeji (Morenike's mother) as providing unwavering empathy and assurance to her distressed daughter in contrast to Auntie Bisoye (Mummy Morayo): “Mummy Ibeji wiped the tears off her daughter's face and wrapped her arms around her. ... Your mother knows it is not your fault. And I am so, so sorry” (Kilanko, 2012: 121).

Additionally, Mummy Ibeji confronts Chief Komolafe for raping and impregnating Morenike; he shows irresponsibility and an unconcerned attitude. Thus, he blames Mummy Morenike: “My Morenike is pregnant. She tells me that you are

the father of the child in her stomach. ... And so? Is that why you think you have the right to come to my office uninvited? Just because you neglected to teach your wayward daughter how to keep her legs together” (119).

Furthermore, Morenike's father, much like Chief Komolafe, also assigns blame and reproaches his daughter for accusing the Chief of lying. He firmly believes that the Chief could not possibly be involved with a young schoolgirl he has been consistently dropping off at school for years. He questions, “When did you become a stone-cold liar? ... Ask your daughter to tell you the truth... did I not warn you? Did I not warn you that you need to pay more attention to your daughter?” (Kilanko, 120). Through the antagonism of these male characters, Kilanko and Dangarembga underscore the importance of both parents being responsible for the upbringing of children. It is difficult to understand why women are often blamed when children stray from the right path. Nutsukpo (2020) argues that “sexism is what encourages rape culture and the culture of silence ... which keeps sexual victimisation shrouded in secrecy, allowing perpetrators to go unpunished while the victims are traumatised and stigmatised” (86). Morenike is in pain and trauma, but finds solace in the support of her mother and grandmother.

In light of all this, in their works, Kilanko and Dangarembga explore the treatment of women in Nigerian and Zimbabwean societies, portraying them as objects for male gratification, lacking mutual pleasure and affection. Through this depiction, readers gain insight into the suffering women endure in the novels *DWP* and *TMB*. These works effectively shed light on the powerlessness and silence of female characters, highlighting the selfish and degrading sexual experiences imposed upon them by male characters.

Despite the preceding events, as the plot unfolds, Chief Komolafe “ask[s] for forgiveness” (138) from Morayo to assert his prior unacknowledged son, Damilare. The narrator observes: “Chief Komolafe placed a jewelled hand on Damilare's head. “Good afternoon ... my son.” His hand lingered for a long time. ... Chief Komolafe soon began to make demands. He wanted his son to live under his roof with his wives and daughters. He said that ... A child belongs to the father, and so Damilare rightly belongs to me” (141-142). Ironically, “this time, Morenike's father stood solidly behind her” (142) to affirm Morenike's rejection of her son, Damilare, living with his father, Chief Komolafe: “I will not send my son to live in a den of vipers. It will be over my dead body” (142). It is evident from the speeches that Chief Komolafe and Morenike's father have finally given in to Morenike, as depicted in the novel.

Morenike, representing all women, exudes strength and determination to assert herself against patriarchal figures. This resolve, shared by her mother and grandmother, epitomises her grandmother, Mama Omu's proclamation that

"We are the silent, strong women of Omu" (135). Morenike treads this transformative path from a young girl to a resolute woman, sociology lecturer, and political influencer. She advocates for "women to be politically active in the issues that affect their lives, or we [they] will suffer the consequences" (147).

Similarly, Dangarembga's *TMB* focuses on female assertiveness in the face of male domination. For instance, through the character Tambudzai, it is revealed that Nyasha, "who was a teenager, was herself brutally beaten by her father" (171). In the author's first novel, *Nervous Conditions* (Dangarembga, 1988), Nyasha develops a habitual eating disorder and attempts suicide. Her "nervous" sickness is bulimia, characterised by vomiting after eating, which serves as a poignant symbol of her distress and unease. As Nyasha's character evolves in *TMB*, her bulimia becomes a powerful metaphor for domination and resistance. Her struggles with her eating disorder depict the psychological battle against male domination and abuse towards women in the narrative. Through Nyasha's characterisation, the author shows the disparities in women's assertiveness and the "nervous" apprehension towards African culture. This demonstrates the cultural psychology of dominance expressed through physical symptoms, in contrast to the assertive behaviours of Morenike analysed in the preceding paragraph.

Kilanko and Dangarembga use the characterisations of Morenike and Nyasha to criticise the treatment of African women by men. They highlight the negative qualities of these male characters, who embody alpha male traits that perpetuate gender violence, which promotes gender violence and class discrimination. The portrayal of these male characters who are involved in gender violence and sex discrimination serves as a condemnation of traditional practices that are seen as a societal menace. Through a feminist empathy perspective, the authors prompt readers to put themselves in the position of the female sufferers, Morenike and Nyasha, and recognise the pain caused by the inherently unjust patriarchal tradition.

Given the preceding discussions, the patriarchal heads, Chief Komolafe, Daddy Morenike, and Nyasha's father, are depicted as symbols of male dominance and traditional norms. However, their authority is challenged and overturned by the determined actions of Morenike and Nyasha, making them (Morenike and Nyasha) the true victors in these narratives. Kilanko and Dangarembga, as feminist empathetic writers employing literary language, further illuminate the mistreatment of women. They focus on "the systemic degradation of women," and I will discuss how the male characters in their works relegate women to

secondary roles in terms of childbirth, marriage and status. Nonetheless, the women in their works exhibit feminist empathy and endeavour to free themselves from masculine oppression.

2.2 The Systemic Degradation of Women

In both *DWP* and *TMB*, socio-economic issues are examined, specifically the mistreatment and marginalisation of women by their male counterparts. Borrowing from Dooga (2019), who writes that socio-economic factors are among the "crucial factors ... at the root of the socio-political or economic inequality of women" (136), it becomes evident that these narratives highlight the systemic nature of gender discrimination. This is exemplified through the way some male characters, such as the unnamed husbands of unnamed young wives, ill-treat them because of barrenness and "falsehood" and dishonesty.

The two authors use acts of gender discrimination to represent women as second-class citizens in their traditional homes. These women endure denigration in the name of tradition and cultural reverence, silently bearing the burden of these threatening acts as part of their tradition. In the *DWP* narrative, a young, unnamed woman (a basket weaver) expresses her anguish over her inability to conceive a child after years of marriage. She, together with her husband, is advised to undergo a medical test. She questions: "But I know my husband will not go. He insists there is nothing wrong with him. How could there be when his father had ten children?" (126). Childbearing holds significant cultural importance in the Yoruba community, where infertility is viewed as a tragedy, and motherhood is a key source of a woman's fulfilment. Okereke (2014) posits: "A family and a society that has not many children are seen as heading for extinction. Thus, culturally, the inability to procreate signals tragedy not only for the individual but also for a larger society because it undermines the continuity that defines the interrelated worlds of the living, the dead, and the unborn." (45-49). This raises the question – why should a woman bear the burden of procreation alone while the man (husband) enjoys freedom and assumes he is naturally fertile?

In the novel, the mentioned young barren woman is portrayed as suffering from depression and trauma. Her monologue demonstrates this: "I was told to save myself for my wedding night, and I did. My mothers, what have I done wrong?" (126). Through an examination of the unnamed husband's attitude in the monologue, Kilanko shows how the established social roles for men can lead to

the oppression and suppression of women, as exemplified by the young, barren woman. This often results in the infliction of pain characterised by cultural discrimination, loss of dignity, and quietude trauma (Kaplan, 2005: 19). Through her lamentation and monologue, Kilanko depicts the pain of childlessness in the woman's marriage, imbuing her with language and structure to convey the agony in her matrimonial home. She "talked about the emptiness she felt, and the bitter tears that flowed in the quiet of the night while her husband slept peacefully beside her" (126). The distress she expresses evokes empathy in the reader, helping them understand the tragic experience of barrenness.

Another unnamed young married woman is accused of being untruthful by her husband and female in-laws after she "gave birth to a green-eyed boy with blond hair. The problem was that both parents had no white relatives in their families" (Kilanko, 124). As a consequence, the husband and in-laws "threw her and her newborn child out of their son's house" (124); also, they branded her as a "whore" (124) (emphasis mine). "Whore" as a noun derogatorily means "a prostitute," and "threw" as a verb means "leave." The choice of words used, such as "whore" and "threw" by the host of the investigative program, Akolawole Olawuyi, suggests that the family, especially the husband, considers the young woman to be "good for nothing", hence to "leave" her to be desolate or a wanderer. However, the novelist disapproves of this judgment, particularly when the woman's innocence is later proven by a priestess: "the woman, accompanied by her husband and family members, travelled to the shrine. True to her word, the young mother swore her innocence and lived" (125). Following her declaration of innocence at the shrine, the young mother can continue living with her husband and family members.

Contrarily, "everybody was shocked when the husband's mother fell to her knees before the shrine, pleading for her life" (125). Examining her actions, it becomes clear that the "husband's mother" represents patriarchy, although she is a woman. I will further explore this idea of women's patriarchal voice later in the discussion. In contrast, the priestess empathises with the young woman's pain of abandonment and desolation, effectively addressing the investigation that caused her anguish. Kilanko advocates embracing a "double-minded focus of attention" rather than a "single-minded focus of attention" (Baron-Cohen, 2011: 10) when empathising with individuals. The priestess, therefore, embodies fairness and goodness. The actions and inactions of the husband and female in-laws underscore the societal depiction of

women as meek and playthings who can easily be disposed of. Kilanko seeks to challenge this patriarchal status quo and humanise socio-cultural and political realities, fostering empathy towards women. Within this space, power dynamics would shift, enabling women to hold authority and be responsible for socio-economic affairs. Women are often viewed as playthings (disposable objects), easily "thrown" or "discarded" because they are submissive to men, whether it is their fathers or husbands.

In Dangarembga's *TMB*, Mai Taka lives with deep emotional pain due to the suffering inflicted by her husband, Silence, the guard. The narrator depicts that "Mai Taka routinely endures" abuse from her husband (156). Mai Taka expresses her fear to her employer, Leon, stating, "I must go if I do not want someone to kick me tonight like I am that someone's football!" (157). Additionally, she is gripped by fear over the potential consequences of her husband, Silence, if she fails to heed his summons, causing "her breath [to become] so shallow and quick that she can scarcely form the words" (157). My analysis reveals that Mai Taka is metaphorically "thrown out" (8) by the oppressive Zimbabwean system, paralleling the experiences of both the unnamed barren woman and the young wife who is unjustly branded a "whore" and subsequently "thrown" out of her marital home by her husband, as discussed earlier. These parallels highlight a patriarchal society that marginalises women, particularly in rural settings.

In a traditional Zimbabwean village, as depicted in *TMB*, the bleak reality of poverty becomes a shared experience among women, as seen in the lives of Tambudzai, Mai (Tambudzai's mother), Nesta (Tambudzai's sister), and Aunt Lucia (Tambudzai's maternal aunt). Notably, Tambudzai's plight depicts the paradox of her university education amidst systemic poverty. Despite her university education, she finds herself in a more precarious financial position than her mother, a situation revealed by Mai Manyanga, Tambudzai's landlord's painful inquiry: "How, with all your education, do you come to be more needy than your mother? End up less than a woman so dashed down by life that she tried to lean on her [sister] – who requires support herself, after losing a leg in the war" (Dangarembga, 37). Such questions emphasise the educational system's failure to empower women economically.

Additionally, Tambudzai's state of beggary compels the narrator to probe ethically important issues: "You wonder whether after all it is your [Tambudzai's] fate to become as indigent as your [her] father" (56). This statement invites readers to reflect on societal mechanisms that perpetuate

women's suffering and their marginalisation in the economic sphere. The text critiques the immorality of a societal structure that inflicts needless pain on women, as represented by Tambudzai's experiences of hopelessness stemming from both racism and sexism, leaving her feeling disgraced and dissatisfied with her own body. Through evocative imagery, Tambudzai identifies herself with a fish: "the fish stares back at you out of purplish eye sockets, its mouth gaping, cheeks drooping as though under the weight of monstrous scales. You cannot look at yourself" (5), which shows her sense of desolation and alienation. This metaphor underscores the rugged realities of her existence within the colonial country of Rhodesia, which imposes abject poverty and the negative impact of Western education and patriarchal practices on women's lives.

In patriarchal societies, control is exerted through established norms that prioritise male responsibility and leadership. This is because they are potential patriarchs, and in matters of headship. As the narrative reveals, Tambudzai is "birth[ed] into a poor family, ... [Her] uncle, Babamukuru, your father's elder brother and the head of the clan, returned from England to take up a position as headmaster... After [her] brother dies, he brings [her] to his mission for a superior education" (106). From this, "African men [are] higher on the ladder of colonial education [and] have ... learned to negotiate the precarious position of the "native" (Sugnet, 2005: 36). In the narrative, the colonial education favoured male characters over female characters, as shown in Tambudzai's difficult educational path. Uncle Babamukuru holds a key position as headmaster, and Shine is an accountant because of their higher educational attainment. This systemic rejection underscores the theme of male dominance, which dehumanises women and reduces them—especially Mai Taka and Tambudzai—to mere objects, akin to a football in the social arena. The narrative portrays the suffering and pain endured by female characters, whose bodies become sites of objectification and mistreatment, contrasting starkly with the privileges afforded to their male counterparts.

Based on this, it can be argued that the African woman's narration of their experiences and advocacy of resistance in the post-independence era are important and just acts. The representation of female characters' suffering and pain, which symbolises "wound" in Kilanko and Dangarembga's narratives, exposes the traditional hegemonic and cultural systems that hinder women's progress in Nigeria and Zimbabwe. This is evident in the titles of the texts "Daughters Who Walk the Path" and "This Mournable Body", which allude to the gratuitous pain and suffering imposed by chauvinism and patriarchy. The two

authors use the theme of introspection through the "mirror" to depict the struggles in which all the female characters, represented by Morayo, Morenike, Tambudzai, and Mai Taka, express grief over feeling restricted by society, which serves as "a composite of barricades towards [their] their journey of attaining visibility, audibility, autonomy, and growth" and which causes them to "still struggle to redefine and reconstruct" themselves (Otieno, 2019: 1). The characters acknowledge that their bodies are metaphorically caged, as depicted by the pain and suffering reflected in the mirror. This awakening prompts them to advocate for their rights and opportunities, resisting the societal oppression stemming from patriarchal, racial, ethnic, and economic factors in both Nigerian and Zimbabwean society.

In the novel *DWP*, Mama Omu, Morayo's grandmother, supports the young, barren woman. With reassuring words, Mama Omu tells her, "You have done nothing wrong." ... Remember that others have walked this path before you and now balance babies on their backs. Daughter, yours will not be an exception" (126). This encouragement strengthens the young barren woman's resolve to pursue her dreams of marriage and motherhood. In her community, the ability to bear children is essential for a woman's role as a wife and as a real woman. Ultimately, the young woman expresses gratitude and bestows blessings on the elderly women basket weavers, saying: "My mothers, may you all live long" (127). In this terrain, the unnamed barren woman's husband's patriarchal treatment towards her is effectively subverted, positioning her as the true conqueror over her husband's actions and inactions in her matrimonial home. Similarly, the priestess's impartial and just judgment in the investigation of the "branded whore" restores confidence and integrity in the young woman's husband and his family members. Like the barren woman, the young woman has also emerged as a victor over her patriarchal husband and family.

Moreover, in *TMB*, the narrator depicts Mai Taka confronting her husband with determination, asserting her independence by stating, "And if you are going where you want on your off, ..., I can go where I want too on mine. Today I know where I am going on my off" (158). Following her powerful speech, Silence nods in acknowledgement, "All right" (158), signifying his acceptance of her logical reasoning. This moment symbolises Mai Taka's strength in challenging Silence's patriarchal outlook, aligning her with the two young women of *DWP* who have defied traditional gender roles. Mai Taka is portrayed as a woman breaking free from her husband's dominance, poised to assert her independence.

Similarly, as the plot progresses to Part 3, "Arriving," Tambudzai undergoes a transformation that is characterised as her "arrival," mirroring her improved circumstances. She marshals her energy toward taking responsibility for her life, striving for equal acceptance and recognition to her male counterparts. This determination leads her to secure several jobs at prominent companies, such as Steels et al, and to inhabit a new business accommodation that "enables her to obtain appreciable tax benefits" (173), "sit[s] in a purple double cab, to which [she is] entitled" (230). With stable employment, adequate accommodation, a car, and the enjoyment of tax benefits, Tambudzai is empowered to sustain herself in ways that were unattainable during her upbringing as the daughter of impoverished parents.

Through the characterisation of these female characters – the two young unnamed barren women, Mai Taka and Tambudzai – the authors demonstrate a collective triumph over patriarchy. These characters embody a new self-image of resilience and strength. Dangarembga and Kilanko juxtapose their former selves with their newly empowered identities: "After your period of troubles, events are finally conspiring for you and not against you. This development that you desired so strongly is due, of all things, ... your new cheerfulness is further encouraged by your growing relationship" (Dangarembga, 2018: 181). In this context, the emergence of the black woman's self is marked by recognition and acceptance, as her desires and expectations are fulfilled, thus granting her a fulfilling life akin to that of her male counterparts. Importantly, these developments do not inflict either pain, suffering or wounds on the bodies of these women, reinforcing Suzanne Keen's (2007, 123-124) assertion that "women writers [like Dangarembga and Kilanko] very often promote the positive consequences of empathetic reading experiences." This narrative consequently fosters a deeper sense of feminist empathy.

It is evident that the female characters in Kilanko's *DWP* and Dangarembga's *TMB*, including the unnamed barren woman, the unnamed young woman labelled as a "whore", Morayo, Mai Taka and Tambudzai, are depicted with a conscious and deliberate effort to rectify the unbalanced portrayal of their characterisation, addressing the authors' concern of "the degradation of women". Despite being portrayed as submissive, these women ultimately emerge as victors over their chauvinistic male counterparts. It is important to note that men do not solely exhibit patriarchal tendencies; some women also perpetuate patriarchal norms. Therefore, in the succeeding segment, I will examine "women as complicit within

patriarchal structures" as another concern in Kilanko's *DWP* and Dangarembga's *TMB*.

2.3 Women as complicit within patriarchal structures

Based on the preceding discussions in both *DWP* and *TMB*, it is evident that while male characters predominantly benefit from patriarchal practices, there are female characters whose actions demonstrate that women can perpetuate patriarchal norms to the same extent as men. Consequently, both women and men suffer the repercussions of the negative limitations associated with patriarchal beliefs and practices. The participation of women, whether voluntary or involuntary, continues to uphold this phenomenon in various African societies, such as Nigeria and Zimbabwe, where these texts are set.

The prologue of *DWP* sheds light on patriarchy's societal and cultural impact, as seen in the birth of Eniayo, Morayo's younger sister, an *afin* child (albino). It exposes how even women contribute to the subjugation of other women. The use of language further demonstrates that Iya Agba, Morayo's father's great-grandmother, not only embodies patriarchy but also upholds its principles. According to Yoruba traditional belief, the birth of *afin* children is considered a bad omen, for "all they bring is bad luck" (11) to their families. The pigmentation of Eniayo's skin leads to accusations, hatred, and torrents of emotional and psychological suffering for Mama Bisoye, Eniayo's mother. Iya Agba, upholding patriarchy, "scold[s]" (12) Bisoye, "Your disobedience has brought bad luck to this poor child and our entire family." She also tells her son, Bisoye's husband, "Your wife has shown that she does not respect my words. They ... have no elders in her home" (13). Bisoye cries "softly in her bedroom" (13). Iya Agba's use of language against her own gender undermines the fight against the mistreatment of women and male dominance. Her actions could be attributed to the patriarchal society in which she is a custodian of culture. She abuses her authority by failing to protect Bisoye from societal superstition and, by implication, regarding Eniayo (another female) as "unwanted" in her family and Nigeria at large. Her primary concern should be supporting Bisoye in fulfilling her desires as a nursing woman and consoling her after giving birth to an "undesirable" child. Here, it is established that Kilanko's strategy, as illustrated through Iya Agba's characterisation, shows how women can often inadvertently contribute to the negative aspects of their own lives.

It is evident that Iya Agba's deeply ingrained patriarchal beliefs prevent her from accepting her son's

apology for being with his family – “Please don’t go. We are sorry” (13). Iya Agba disapproves of this gesture of reconciliation, highlighting the role that women themselves can play in upholding societal expectations. Bisoye’s husband’s agentic actions depict his resistance to Iya Agba’s patriarchal control over his wife and Eniayo. He is portrayed as a positive male character due to his considerate, compassionate nature and unwavering love for his wife and his “superstitious” daughter, who later in the plot becomes a paediatrician (228) and engages with Tunde Alabi. I, therefore, contend that the actions and inactions of Bisoye’s husband (Iya Agba’s grandson) show that fewer men actively challenge the structures of patriarchy. He is depicted as a victor and, therefore, has achieved a “real” conquest within the narrative. Additionally, Mama Bisoye defies Iya Agba’s superstitious beliefs by explaining to Morayo, “your sister is not a spirit child. She is an *afin* due to some things the doctors call recessive genes” (14). Over time, “Eniayo’s features, ... became as familiar and welcome to me [Morayo] as the sun in the sky” (15). The simile “as the sun in the sky” functions as a significant literary device, portraying the warmth and comfort that Eniayo’s presence brings into Morayo’s life. By comparing her sister’s features to the sun, Morayo not only emphasises the brightness and positivity that Eniayo brings but also subverts the prevailing superstitions propagated by characters like Iya Agba. Additionally, Mama Bisoye’s choice of diction in her explanation to Morayo reveals her determination to challenge her society and the prevailing norms. She prioritises the well-being of her children and her husband over prevailing cultural beliefs, asserting her agency as a mother and a partner. This determination reflects her strength as a character, positioning her as a triumphant figure in the narrative.

Tambudzai’s mother, like Iya Agba, also perpetuates a culture in TMB. As deduced earlier, in Zimbabwe, there is a prevailing preference for educating boys over girls within families. Tambudzai’s mother exemplifies this by “refuse[ing] to vend at the market for [her] you as she had done for your brother. This you do not say, because who can speak ill of a mother? (106). This gender discrimination results in Tambudzai being pushed to the background. This practice of patriarchal dominance causes Tambudzai to feel disconnected from her family due to the pain and the psychological trauma she experiences. As a result, Tambudzai’s mother’s actions undermine the possibility of solidarity between them. This lack of identification with Tambudzai encourages the reader to empathise with her.

Besides, Dangarembga draws attention to the negative aspects of African village motherhood and the

failure of African culture to recognise Tambudzai’s social right to education. Nevertheless, Tambudzai remains unwavering in her pursuit of education. She funds her schooling by tilling a maize farm and selling the produce from a young age (106). Despite the challenges, she focuses on the positive aspects of her journey. Tambudzai’s determination empowers her to overcome the obstacles she faces on her educational journey. As known in the earlier paragraphs, as the narrative resolves, she secures employment with companies such as AK Security, achieving a sense of personal fulfilment. She is now able to acquire “the things that make [her life] ... better” (108). However, it becomes evident that despite some progress, women continue to play essential roles in upholding patriarchal beliefs, actions, and ideals that perpetuate their separations.

From this analysis, women in *DWP* and *TMB* (including Iya Agba and Tambudzai’s mother) are depicted as the “Other”, reflecting the specific way they are perceived in the African world from both objective and subjective perspectives (Moi, 1999: 68). The characterisations of Iya Agba and Tambudzai’s mother’s behaviour towards Bisoye and Tambudzai, respectively, inflict emotional wounds and pain, revealing the pervasive influence of patriarchy. Their actions would not be endorsed by any woman who aligns with feminist principles of empathy.

In relation to the above accounts, Oyewumi (2003: 2005) critiques the subordination of women and the privilege enjoyed by men, highlighting how these unequal social structures perpetuate imbalances that marginalise women. Whether in the pre-colonial era or in these post-colonial days, characters like Iya Agba and Tambudzai’s mother seem to inadvertently or consciously uphold patriarchal beliefs, which drive them apart instead of uniting them against their common target: patriarchal figures who, as husbands, chiefs, male cousins, and sons, do little to ensure their well-being. I posit that, within socio-cultural norms, the great-grandmother and Tambudzai’s mothers consider themselves “great” women who uphold cultural values. Nevertheless, they fail to fulfil the broader requirements of true custodians of these values. Much like Morayo’s father, Morenike’s father, Chief Komolafe, Bros. T, Nyasha’s father, Shine, and Silence, they have shifted from a grounded reality to an imagined sphere in which their beliefs inadvertently bolster patriarchal constructs, as evidenced by the character analyses provided. In this context, these mothers see themselves as champions of cultural integrity; ironically, their aspirations often reinforce the very patriarchal practices they may seek to challenge.

In light of all this, feminist empathy reveals how these women's identities and actions, while entrenched in cultural traditions, may inadvertently perpetuate the very systems they seek to preserve and protect.

Conclusion – Feminist Empathy: Resilience of African Women

This paper has sought to analyse the depiction of women as submissive and as subjects of conquest over patriarchal figures in Kilanko's *Daughters Who Walk This Path* (2012) and Dangarembga's *This Mournable Body* (2018). The paper sheds light on how patriarchy has historically sought to legitimise its control over women, spanning from the pre-colonial period to the post-colonial era. The study demonstrates how women experience emotional and psychological pain as well as trauma due to the dominance exerted by male figures such as Chief Komolafe, Bros. T, Nyasha's father, Silence and Baba waTaka within the realms of sexual politics and denigration of them, especially female victims who are young and controllable. The study foregrounds that the prevalence of sexual violence often emanates from close male relatives or men within a woman's community, underscoring the imperative for both parents to take responsibility in the upbringing of children.

By contrast, the presence of fewer men, represented by Morayo's unnamed father and Iya Agba's great-grandson, portrays instances of agency that challenge Iya Agba's patriarchal control over his wife and his "superstitious" daughter, Eniayo, thereby resisting traditional patriarchal norms. The findings reveal that, while many men perpetuate these dynamics, there exists a minority, like Iya Agba's great-grandson, who demonstrate compassion and consideration towards the adversities faced by women as a result of the actions of certain men.

Furthermore, the study affirms that some women, notably Iya Agba and Tambudzai's mother, can perpetuate chauvinistic practices to a degree comparable to that of men. All these acts of marginalisation lead to unfair treatment of women by both men and themselves, which ultimately harms interpersonal relationships. The relationships and non-relationships among the female characters, such as Morenike's mother, Mama Omu, the priestess, and Bertha, demonstrate empathy as they actively listen to the victims' narratives of profound anguish and provide unwavering support. The findings highlight that empathy entails a double-minded focus of attention rather than a single-minded one when addressing victims' suffering.

The paper posits that adopting feminist empathy reveals the interplay between sexism and classism that is deeply rooted in patriarchal societies. Additionally, feminist empathy can shift gender dynamics within African contexts. This underscores the necessity of feminist empathy as a critical component in advancing women's rights across Africa. Conversely, the female victims, such as Morenike, Nyasha, and Tambudzai, embody a dominant stance—courage, strength, determination—to uphold cultural traditions. These positive traits empower them to assert their agency against the patriarchal figures and those women who perpetuate oppressive norms.

This empowerment enables women to articulate their concerns, demonstrate moral sensitivity, stand on equal footing alongside men, and advocate for their dignity and development, ultimately positioning them to prevail over male antagonists. Recognising and challenging these chauvinistic traditions while acknowledging the evolving roles of African women equips them to contest patriarchal dominance. An analysis of Nigerian and Zimbabwean cultures, as portrayed in the selected texts, shows the potential of embracing feminist empathy—an essential aspect of feminism—to highlight and enhance women's strengths for the betterment of society at large. Furthermore, it is essential to explore the empathetic portrayal of female characters by male writers, particularly in the works of Nuruddin Farah. Identified by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o as Africa's first male feminist writer, Farah exemplifies a remarkable capacity to inhabit female subjectivity, thereby enriching the narrative landscape and contributing to a broader understanding of gender dynamics in African literature.

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