

Valiant Women in the Arena: A Reading of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Sammy Akombi's *The Woman Who Ate Python and Other Stories*



Nyaa Hans Ndah (PhD)

Department of English Modern Letters
Higher Teacher Training College, Bambili
University of Bamenda
Republic of Cameroon

ABSTRACT

*In this paper entitled "Valiant Women in the Arena: A Reading of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Sammy Akombi's *The Woman Who Ate Python and Other Stories*, one sets out to analyze how male authors like Hawthorne and Akombi are passionate about the cause of women emancipation. This paper is premised on the hypothesis that Nathaniel Hawthorne and Sammy OkeAkombi are committed to the cause of women empowerment as depicted in their works under study. The Feminist theory and New Historicism are the theories applied in*

the analysis of this paper. The major finding of this study hinges on the fact that both authors consider the economic empowerment of the women folk as a condition sine qua non, for stability, development and equality in a world that is driven by the spirit of capitalism. One also avers that the rights of the women that have been violated by the men, can only be secured if the women valiantly fight for their rights.

KEY WORDS

Valiant, Arena, Subjugation, Emancipation, Challenges



ISSN : 2584-1963

RESEARCH PAPER

Women's voices have been restricted and in some cases silenced over the centuries by the ever dominating and intimidating presence men's voices. These female voices in their large majority were not heard by the world, and even when some forced their voices to be heard, they were not taken seriously. Patriarchy or male chauvinism have been the order of the day, until only in the 20th century that women increasingly found their voices and became more audacious to rise and advocate for their rights that were supposedly violated by the opposite sex. It is worth noting that even in the face of male chauvinism, some male writers left their comfort zones and brought to the limelight, the plight of women in their works of art. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* and Sammy Akombi's *The Woman Who Ate Python and other Stories* are exemplary stories that bring to the limelight, the bravery of some women, and how these women alter the status quo in their patriarchal communities.

The choice of Nathaniel Hawthorne's and Sammy Akombi's works for this study is particular although both of them come from diverse geographical backgrounds, and the fact that the period they published both works under study are far apart from each other. The main reason for bringing both authors together borders around the fact that both authors are deeply concerned about the marginalization or the oppression of women in their communities. They however set out to create valiant female protagonists in their artistic productions with the aim of revealing the strength and the incredible potentials of women which if harnessed, would be beneficial to the communities they hail from.

More still, bringing both authors from two different continents, two different races and different historical periods, will give us the opportunity to assess how the women folk are treated in different communities and the progress made by women to assert themselves by not only making their voices heard, but also by taking action to fight for their rights.

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804 - 1864) was an American novelist and short story writer. Most of his works had a recurrent religious and historical undertone. He was never comfortable with the hypocrisy of the puritans, and thus set out in his fictions like "Young Goodman Brown" and *The Scarlet Letter* to castigate the excesses of the puritan and the corruption that prevailed in 19th century American society. Coming from a puritan background himself, he always dissociated himself from his puritan ancestry because he was ashamed of the barbarism of his puritan ancestors on the Red Indians in the New World for the purpose of forceful conversion to Christianity. This caused him to slightly change his name from Hathorn to Hawthorne so as not to be identified as a member of one of the notorious families that spearheaded the famous witch hunt or trial in Salem - Massachusetts in the 17th century. He was a veritable voice of the voiceless on his generation with regard to the corruption in church and in the secular world.

On the other hand, Sammy OkeAkombi is one of the prominent Anglophone Cameroon writers who has to his credits several publications and winner of many literary awards. Born in Tinto, Manyu Division in the Republic of Cameroon in the 1960s, Sammy Akombi has major



ISSN : 2584-1963

© Seagull Journals. All rights reserved.

preoccupations in his works of art like corruption, marginalization of the women, moral decadence etc. He is also very interested in children's literature and has published many literary works in the category of children's literature. He is most famous for his 2006 publication entitled *The Woman Who Ate Python and other Stories*, which has been selected as our case study for this paper.

The main objective of this paper is to show how male authors like Hawthorne and Akombi are passionate about the cause of female emancipation as depicted in their fictions under study. Another objective is to critically present the long trajectory of the quest for women empowerment from ages past to the present dispensation wherein much success has been registered with regard to female emancipation, equity and empowerment. It is interesting to note that, we will be looking at what obtains in two different races, two different places and two different periods in history; so as to effectively assess the progress made with regard to the empowerment of the women.

We will be guided by the following research questions in this paper: How do both authors present women in their fictions? Who are the valiant women in the arena that both novelists seek to portray? How do the actions of these female protagonists enhance the struggle for women empowerment?

This paper is premised on the hypothetical contention that Nathaniel Hawthorne and Sammy OkeAkombi are committed to the cause of women empowerment as depicted in their works under study.

Definition of Key Terms

In order to have a better understanding of this topic, it will be good to define some key words and situate them in the context in which they will be used in this paper. The words "valiant" and "arena" will be defined. According to the *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, valiant is defined as "possessing or acting with boldness and bravery". This adjective comes from the Latin word *valere* which means "to have strength, or be well."

The word "arena" has several meanings. Originally, according to the *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, this word was used to refer to the Roman Amphitheater for gladiatorial combats. The same dictionary further defines arena as an enclosed area for public entertainment. For this paper, the word will be used figuratively to refer to the American and Cameroonian societies which are depicted in the works of Hawthorne and Akombi under study.

In a nutshell, we set out in this paper to portray the bravery and audacity of some female characters portrayed in *The Scarlet Letter* and *The Woman Who Ate Python and Other Stories*.



ISSN : 2584-1963

© Seagull Journals. All rights reserved.

Theoretical Framework

In order to give this topic the critical analysis it deserves, one will apply the Feminist and the New Historicist theory. At the level of the feminist theory, focus will be on the first wave of feminism in America (1848 – 1920) which focused on empowering the women who up to that point in time were tired of oppression and inequality. It focused on empowering the women in their responsibilities in the family, economically and educationally. Leading feminist authors of this period whose contributions would be useful for this paper include Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Fanny Fen.

Marxist Feminism is also another wave of feminism that will be applied in this study. Marxist criticism views literary works as reflections of the social institutions from which they originate. According to Marxists, even literature itself is a social institution and has a specific ideological function, based on the background and ideology of the author. Terry Eagleton, further amplifies the definition of Marxist criticism in his 1976 publication *Marxism and Literary Criticism* thus:

Marxist criticism is not merely a 'sociology of literature', concerned with how novels get published and whether they mention the working class. Its aim is to explain the literary work more fully; and this means a sensitive attention to its forms, styles and, meanings. But it also means grasping those forms, styles and meanings as the product of a particular history. (159)

Prakash Karat in his article *Marxism in the 21st Century: Alternative to Neoliberal Capitalism and Imperialism* states that, “Marxism in the 21st century has to make a break from this theoretical straitjacket as it is an essential part of making Marxism a living theory and an accurate guide to practice” (1). The theory and practice of Marxism in the 21st century also requires the integration of gender issues into the main stream analysis of class exploitation and social oppression.

Very significant to this study is the Marxist feminist theory. Marxist feminism is a sub-type of feminist ideology which focuses on the dismantling of capitalism as a way to liberate women. Marxists state that economic inequality, dependence, political confusion and ultimately unhealthy social relations between men and women are the root of women’s oppression in the current social context. Marxist feminists view the capitalist drive for profits as responsible for women’s second-class status and other forms of oppression such as racism and homophobia. Helen Gilbert avers in her work, *An Introduction to Marxist Feminism* that women workers are exploited at a higher level than males, with women of colour suffering the highest degree of exploitation because of gender and race discrimination. Engels described the powerlessness of women as ‘the world historic defeat of the female sex.’ However both Marx and Engels viewed women’s entry into the unpaid labour force as the first step toward liberating women from stifling dependence on men.



ISSN : 2584-1963

© Seagull Journals. All rights reserved.

This researcher considers the application of Marxist critical theory in this study very important because it enables one to better assess the inequalities that prevail in the American and Cameroonian society and how the resilient women depicted in the works of Hawthorne and Akombi under study attempt to alter the status quo.

Another theoretical tool to be used in this study is New Historicism. New Historicism - pioneered by Stephen Greenblatt, is a literary theory based on the idea that literature should be studied and interpreted within the context of the history of the author and the history of the critic. New historicists aver that the past needs to be constantly *re*-figured and *re*-presented for the life of the present and future.

Michael Warner, while explaining New Historicism to an audience in the early days of its emergence made it clear that “the people the New Historicists are reacting against are the New Critics, and historicism seems an important term for that purpose because it emphasizes that meaning is established in concrete historical situations and ought not to be abstracted as though it didn’t matter who was reading or when or where or why” (Brook Thomas 6). Warner adds that New Historicism has as motto: ‘The text is historical; and history is textual.’ In conclusion, one can assert that as a summary of new historicist assumptions, Louis Montrose’s lofty formulation that the goal of New Historicism to examine both ‘the historicity of texts and the textuality of history’ is an apt description of the theory or practice.

The historical ramifications of both works by Hawthorne and Akombi would be glanced through a new historicist lens so as to better assess the resilience and audacity of the women depicted in these works of art.

This paper will be analysed under two sub-headings namely: (i) the challenges of Hawthorne’s and Akombi’s women, and (ii) overcoming challenges. The conclusion which is the last part of this paper will focus on the findings of the study.

I. The challenges of Hawthorne's and Akombi's women

Nathaniel Hawthorne is a revolutionary author who breaks the tradition of focusing mostly on men as protagonists, to creating his main character who is a woman in his 1850 masterpiece entitled *The Scarlet Letter*. Coming from a background in which men have always been the main actors in the arena, Hawthorne can be described as a veritable advocate for the empowerment of the weaker sex - the females in the pre-independent American society. Although his novel under study was published in 1850, the story is set in the 17th century when the puritans still had a solid grip of New England. Not only does he investigate and castigate the hypocrisy of the puritans, he also x-rays the plight of women in that society.



ISSN : 2584-1963

© Seagull Journals. All rights reserved.

Sammy Akombi on his part takes his readers into the heart of a typical African village, in which we are exposed to the culture and traditions of the Bonakunda community located at the left slope of the Cameroon Mountain. The reader is made to discover a society in which the male folk occupy all important positions in the traditional administration of the village while the women and the girl children are relegated to the background. Like Hawthorne, Akombi seeks to expose this injustice and brings women to the limelight by also projecting a female valiant character in his collection of short stories titled *The Woman Who Ate Python and other Stories*.

To begin with, Nathaniel Hawthorne presents a 17th century American Puritan society in which punishment for crimes committed is strictly followed up. The plight of women in such a male dominated community is brought to the limelight as seen in the portrait of Hester Prynne the protagonist in the novel. Hester is said to have been "abandoned" by her husband called Roger Chillingworth. It should be noted that, Hester has never been in love with Roger Chillingworth. Their marriage was not informed by any mutual or true love. Being just a woman in a male dominated Puritan society, she had no choice but to accept the old Chillingworth's hand in marriage. This is evident in the interview in chapter four of the novel when Chillingworth suddenly shows up to interview Hester in prison:

...Nay, from the moment when we came down the old church-steps together, a married pair, I might have beheld the bale-fire of that scarlet letter blazing at the end of our path!" "Thou knowest," said Hester—for, depressed as she was, she could not endure this last quiet stab at the token of her shame — "thou knowest that I was frank with thee. I felt no love, nor feigned any." "True," replied he. "It was my folly! I have said it. (60)

Coupled with Hester Prynne's lack of love and affection for Chillingworth even before marriage, he abandons her after their wedding (when she is still childless and young) to pursue his studies and training in Alchemy. Her situation is somehow complicated because she is exposed to temptation from men, and as a "single" woman, she needs someone to help her meet up with her cost of living and of course someone she truly loves that can make her to feel like a woman. Her stunning beauty could also be interpreted as a gateway to her misfortune. This is how Hester Prynne is described at the beginning of the novel when she stands on the scaffold at the market-place as punishment for her sin of adultery:

The young woman was tall, with a figure of perfect elegance on a large scale. She had dark and abundant hair, so glossy that it threw off the sunshine with a gleam; and a face which, besides being beautiful from regularity of feature and richness of complexion, had the impressiveness belonging to a marked brow and deep black eyes. She was ladylike, too, after the manner of the feminine gentility of those days; characterised by a certain state and dignity, rather than by the delicate, evanescent, and indescribable grace which is now recognised as its indication. (*The Scarlet Letter* 42)



ISSN : 2584-1963

© Seagull Journals. All rights reserved.

From the above excerpt from the novel, one is of the opinion that the man who is responsible for Hester's pregnancy, Reverend Master Dimmesdale spotted her from the many ladies in Boston who attend his church because of her beauty. Living in a deeply Puritan society, Mistress Prynne embraced the church not only as a place of solace, but also as a place where she can receive spiritual, moral, and material assistance from her fellow Christian brethren. Unfortunately, temptation comes to her from a personality that she and her society least expected. Influenced by her deep feeling of abandonment from her husband, and coupled with the overwhelming charm and spiritual authority of the spiritual leader of her local church, she could not resist the sexual luring from Reverend Dimmesdale (her pastor). The personality of the young and intelligent Dimmesdale is by far more appealing to Hester than that of her husband. This is how Dimmesdale is described in chapter three of the novel:

...the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale—young clergyman, who had come from one of the great English universities, bringing all the learning of the age into our wild forest land. His eloquence and religious fervour had already given the earnest of high eminence in his profession. He was a person of very striking aspect, with a white, lofty, and impending brow; large, brown, melancholy eyes, and a mouth which, unless when he forcibly compressed it, was apt to be tremulous, expressing both nervous sensibility and a vast power of self-restraint.(53)

From the above description of the young pastor in the person of Reverend Dimmesdale, Hester could not resist his charm considering the unhappy marriage she finds herself in with a man who is not even living with her. Her being pregnant for Reverend Dimmesdale and the eventual birth of her illegitimate daughter -Pearl, set the stage for the dramatic turn of events in the novel. She has no choice than to brave these challenges alone.

Another challenge that Hester Prynne faces is that of coping with the burden of single-handedly bringing up her daughter Pearl and bearing the stigma of wearing the scarlet letter A. Apart from putting on the scarlet letter A, the provocations and insults she receives from the crowd especially the women of Boston, are heart-breaking. This is what some of these women bitterly tell Hester Prynne when she mounts the scaffold at the market-place:

"Goodwives," said a hard-featured dame of fifty, "I'll tell ye a piece of my mind. It would be greatly for the public behoof if we women, being of mature age and church-members in good repute, should have the handling of such malefactresses as this Hester Prynne. (40)

The strict laws to regulate morality and spirituality in the Puritan society depicted in the novel give one the impression that the American Puritan society was a spiritually and morally upright society. However, when one discovers that the terrible crimes committed in that particular society are perpetuated by Christians and church ministers, one is disappointed at such an alarming rate of hypocrisy. Nathaniel Hawthorne sets out in *The Scarlet Letter* to expose such hypocrisy because, being a descendant of a notorious Puritan family, he himself was not comfortable with the hypocritical activities of his forefathers. The women presented at the



ISSN : 2584-1963

© Seagull Journals. All rights reserved.

beginning of the story especially those who are present in the market place are disappointed with Hester, and are not also happy with the fact that the man who makes her pregnant does not suffer the same punishment like her.

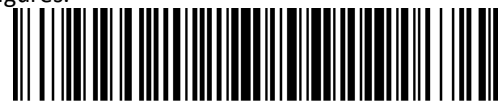
It is worth noting that class difference further increases the pain of Hester Prynne. She suffers more because she is from the lower rung of the American stratified society depicted in the novel. Reverend Dimmesdale can be considered as a member of the higher class. He uses his class and position in the society to exploit the poor and desperate Hester sexually. When he commits the sin of adultery which is severely punishable by law, he tends to hide his identity and urges his secret sex partner Hester not to declare his identity. Hester suffers public humiliation for many years. When she is ironically questioned by Dimmesdale in the presence of the top hierarchy in Boston namely: Governor Bellingham and Mr John Wilson (the eldest clergyman in Boston), she is adamant to reveal the identity of the man who makes her pregnant so as to protect him because of the high class the he hails from. Prakash Karat¹ maintains that the theory and practice of Marxism in the 21st century also requires the integration of gender issues into the main stream analysis of class exploitation and social oppression. From a Marxist standpoint, one opines that Hester's dilemma and oppression are not just because she is a woman, but also due to the fact that she is from the lower class. She is representative of the workers who bear the burden imposed on them by the aristocrats in her society.

Furthermore, we come across another female character in *The Scarlet Letter* that faces a lot of challenges because of her birth. She is called Pearl. This girl is the product of the adulterous relationship between Hester and Reverend Dimmesdale. The same rejection that Hester faces due to her crime is transferred to her daughter Pearl. What is most disheartening is the fact that even the women of Boston treat the innocent Pearl as an outcast because of her adulterous birth. Pearl does not grow like the other children in her society because her mates see her as an illegitimate child who must not be associated with because she is a product of sin. Perhaps, this may be one of the reasons why Pearl grows up to cherish nature as seen in her love for the natural environment like the forest, the streams and animals. She must have realized that the intimacy and love that she could not receive from the people in her society, she could indeed feel fulfilled if she embraces the beauty of nature in all its diversity.

Through the passion of Pearl for nature, we tend to also see the transcendentalism² of Nathaniel Hawthorne who was in support of the transcendentalist movement spearheaded by Ralph Waldo Emerson, David Thoreau amongst others. By exposing Pearl to the natural environment, and by making her to cherish her adventures in the wild, Hawthorne is passing through the message that nature is self-sufficient and one can actually feel happy and fulfilled if one decides to seek for pleasure in the natural environment. Despite all the challenges, Pearl is

¹Author of the article titled "Marxism in the 21st Century: Alternative to Neoliberal Capitalism and Imperialism."

² Transcendentalism was an idealistic philosophical and social movement which developed in New England around 1836 in reaction to rationalism. Influenced by romanticism, Platonism, and Kantian philosophy, it taught that divinity pervades all nature and humanity, and its members held progressive views on feminism and communal living. Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau were central figures.



ISSN : 2584-1963

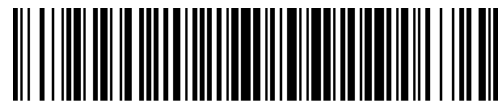
© Seagull Journals. All rights reserved.

presented as a successful character in the sense that she ends up getting married and living a fulfilled life.

In Sammy Akombi's *The Woman Who Ate Python and Other Stories*, we also meet other valiant women in the arena of male chauvinism and subjugation. In the first story of the collection titled "The Woman Who Ate Python", we are exposed to Bonakunda village situated at "the foot of the left slope of the Cameroon mountain" (*The Woman Who Ate Python and Other Stories* 2). The first woman we come across is Ndolo – the mother of Ebenye who is the protagonist in the story. Ndolo is married to MolaEsunge. Mola is married to many wives and has many children. Unfortunately for Ndolo, she has just one child, and to make things complicated for her, her lone child is female. In a society in which preference is given to male children, having a lone child who is a female already puts one in an uncomfortable situation. Ndolo is not a happy woman due to her status as a mother of a talkative and inquisitive daughter like Ebenye. She finds herself always alone because Ebenye and the children of other wives of MolaEsunge cherish the company of her step mothers and step siblings. At one moment, Ebenye questioned the practice of polygamy to her father, especially when she realized that her mother's apartment was not always visited by the children of her husband's other wives who gave birth to many children. Although, Ndolo does not do anything to alleviate her plight because she chooses to worry in silence, her very valiant daughter Ebenye later on in the novel, fights her fights and those of other women who for long have been silently suffering under male hegemony and subjugation in Bonakunda.

Another victim of male hypocrisy and wickedness in "The Woman Who Ate Python" is Beauty. Beauty is a character in the story narrated by Ndolo when her step-children come to spend time with her one evening. Beauty is said to be a very beautiful girl who turns down the request of several suitors. Her case is very particular because in her community, no lady has ever had the audacity to turn down a suitor or the advice from parents to marry a particular man. Due to Beauty's choosy attitude, she kept refusing the hands of many men from her locality in marriage. She wants to get married but not to any kind of man. In anger and frustration, her mother questions her choosy attitude thus: "My daughter, it appears, if men were made by carpenters, you would have given them specifications to make the type of man you want for a husband" (*Python* 7). In response, Beauty said to her mother, "Mama... I won't go as far as that but I can assure you that when the one I would willingly address 'My Lord and only one' comes by, I will readily accept him. All it takes is time and patience" (*Python* 7). It should be noted that she really had that patience, "for she kept turning down suitors for the following ten years (7).

The arrival of MrFineboy in the village to seek Beauty's hand in marriage marks the beginning of the tragic end of Beauty. It is sad and heartless on the part of MrFineboy to come and marry Beauty, only to destroy her life later. Although Beauty has been turning down the request of many suitors, we are not told that she is flirtatious. She was only looking for someone that she will truly love and happily live with. Unfortunately for her, a demon transforms in the guise of a handsome man and she innocently falls for him. When the marriage is hurriedly contracted and she leaves to follow Fineboy to his home or country, she meets her doom. She finds herself amongst strange creatures with heads without limbs, hands or bellies.



ISSN : 2584-1963

© Seagull Journals. All rights reserved.

MrFineboytragically exploits Beauty. This again can be interpreted as the evil perpetuated by men towards women. Fineboy cares only about his happiness. He does not care about the wellbeing and happiness of his newly wedded wife. This is the dilemma of women in a world that is dominated if not manipulated by the men.

While defending New Historicism in its early years of its inception, Louis Montrose emphasized that the lofty goal of New Historicism is to examine both the " historicity of texts, and the textuality of history" (*The New Historicism* 20). It is worth noting that Sammy Akombi's story under scrutiny vividly reflects the culture and history of the coastal regions precisely the villages around mount Cameroon in the Southwest Region of Cameroon. In the past as stated in the story, girls did not choose their spouses. They were only given to marriage most at times without their consent. According to Akombi, things used to go well as the family unit remained united. The attitude of Beauty to turn down suitors can be interpreted as breaking the tradition and customs of the Bonakunda people. Her attitude or action to choose her own husband thereby breaking tradition met with tragic consequences. Till date, the process of choosing a spouse is not only based on the opinion of the couple but also on the opinion of parents, close relatives and friends. The opinion of these stakeholders is very important because their advice is to ensure that better choices are made for the marriage to be fruitful and sustainable. Humbly following these practical steps to contracting a marriage will definitely prevent any potential spouse from experiencing the tragedy that Beauty experiences in his marriage with MrFineboy asdepicted in Akombi's "The Woman Who Ate Python."

ii. Overcoming Challenges

The American society of the 1850s when Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet letter* was published was a society in which women did not have the right to vote, and Slave Trade was still to be abolished. Although the story of Hester Prynne dates back to the 17th century as indicatedby the narrator of Hester's story, one senses that Hawthorne was very much inspired by the stark realities in America from the 1840s with regards to women struggle for equality, and of course, the question of abolition of Slave Trade in America that would be the main cause of the American Civil War that started in 1861 – just eleven years after the publication of *TheScarlet Letter*.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton was an early leader of the woman's rights movement. Born in 1815 in Johnstown, New York, she later became a valiant fighter in the arena of women's struggle for equality. Just two years before the publication of *The Scarlet Letter* in 1950, Elizabeth Stanton with several other women, held the famous Seneca Falls Convention in July 1848. At this meeting, the attendees drew up its "Declaration of Sentiments" and took the lead in proposing that women be granted the right to vote.During the American Civil War, Stanton threw her weight on the cause for the abolition of slavery. She is representative of first wave feminism whose character traits are similar to those of Hester Prynne, the protagonist in Hawthorne's novel under study.

The situation of women's rights in Africa remained a great cause for concern because right up to the 20th century, African women were still finding their voices in the desert of male



ISSN : 2584-1963

© Seagull Journals. All rights reserved.

chauvinism. However, in September 1995, the United Nations Organization organized the 4th World Conference on Women captioned, “Action for Equality, Development and Peace.” This landmark conference took place in Beijing, China from September 4 -15, 1995. This conference served as an eye-opener to women everywhere especially to the African women who were significantly represented at this conference. Just eleven years after the Beijing Conference, Sammy Akombi in 2006, published his collection of short stories titled *The Woman Who ate Python and Other Stories*. This publication can be seen as a prompt response to the Beijing Conference that was convened by UNO to advocate for women’s equality in a world that has been overwhelmingly dominated by men. The actions of Akombi’s protagonist, Ebenye, in “The Woman Who Ate Python,” are very telling of a valiant woman who fights for her rights.

Helen Gilbert avers in her work, *An Introduction to Marxist Feminism* that women workers are exploited at a higher level than males, with women of colour suffering the highest degree of exploitation because of gender and race discrimination. Frederick Engels described the powerlessness of women as ‘the world historic defeat of the female sex.’ However, both Karl Marx and Engels viewed women’s entry into the labour force as the first step towards liberating women from stifling dependence on men. In this part of the paper, we shall focus on the actions taken by some valiant women in the works of both novelists under study to show how they face the challenge of female victimization and poverty, and how they overcome these challenges.

To begin with, Hester Prynne in Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, is spited and tormented because he commits adultery and gives birth to an illegitimate child. The circumstances under which Hester gets pregnant are tempting, owing to the fact that she was abandoned by her husband Roger Chillingworth. The society sanctions her severely for committing this sin of adultery by obliging her to undergo public humiliation. Despite the fact that the society treats her and her daughter scornfully, this does not deter her from treating her baby with love and dignity. Her courage to name her baby Pearl, rather comes as a challenge to those who punish her, and those who see her and her baby as outcasts. Pearl is associated to a person or thing of great rarity and worth. For Hester Prynne to name her daughter Pearl shows the great value and love she has for her daughter despite the stigma that her Puritan society attaches to her birth. She can be aptly described as a valiant lady who shuns societal criticism and judgment and decides to jealously care for her baby. She loves and treasures her baby so much so that, she is bent on doing everything to ensure her healthy growth and development.

More still, Hester Prynne continues to take audacious actions notwithstanding the arena of humiliation that she finds herself in. At the beginning of the story when all the dignitaries of Boston assemble at the market place to urge Hester to disclose the father of her illegitimate daughter, she deliberately refuses to reveal the identity of the person. It is shocking that, the person who makes her pregnant is actually the one telling her to reveal his identity in the presence of the people of Boston. In utter surprise, Reverend Dimmesdale exclaims on sensing her vehement refusal to reveal the identity of the man she commits the sin of adultery with. It is worth noting that Reverend Dimmesdale takes his time to profoundly preach to Hester on the subject of sin and its consequences. This is an excerpt of the dialogue between Dimmesdale and Hester on the occasion which the latter is expected to call the name of Pearl’s father:



ISSN : 2584-1963

© Seagull Journals. All rights reserved.

So powerful seemed the minister's appeal that the people could not believe but that Hester Prynne would speak out the guilty name, or else that the guilty one himself in whatever high or lowly place he stood, would be drawn forth by an inward and inevitable necessity, and compelled to ascend the scaffold.

Hester shook her head.

"Woman, transgress not beyond the limits of Heaven's mercy!" cried the Reverend Mr. Wilson, more harshly than before. "That little babe hath been gifted with a voice, to second and confirm the counsel which thou hast heard. Speak out the name! That, and thy repentance, may avail to take the scarlet letter off thy breast. "

"Never," replied Hester Prynne, looking, not at Mr. Wilson, but into the deep and troubled eyes of the younger clergyman. "It is too deeply branded. Ye cannot take it off. And would that I might endure his agony as well as mine!"

"Speak, woman!" said another voice, coldly and sternly, proceeding from the crowd about the scaffold, "Speak; and give your child a father!"

"I will not speak!" answered Hester, turning pale as death, but responding to this voice, which she too surely recognised. "And my child must seek a heavenly father; she shall never know an earthly one!"

"She will not speak!" murmured Mr. Dimmesdale, who, leaning over the balcony, with his hand upon his heart, had awaited the result of his appeal. He now drew back with a long respiration.

"Wondrous strength arid generosity of a woman's heart! She will not speak!" (55)

This excerpt reveals the courage of Hester who decides to keep her lover's identity secret despite the intense pressure mounted on her to do so. She is very conscious of the consequences of her action, and when she is punished to wear the scarlet letter A all her life, she does so without any opposition. The fact that she is not remorseful about the sin she has committed can be interpreted as her disapproval of the puritan ethic which is put in place but not respected even by the religious leaders of her society. She is punished by one of those who is her partner in crime. Through the audacious action of Hester Prynne, Nathaniel Hawthorne is passing through the message that, the hypocrisy of the puritans of New England should no longer be tolerated, and their excesses should be brought to the limelight.

On the other hand, one may as well judge Hester Prynne's behavior as being arrogant, because humility warrants one to be repentant of a crime committed. Although hypocrisy is the order of the day in the puritan society depicted in the novel, she herself is guilty of sin, yet she does not feel remorseful about it. Like Elizabeth Cady Stanton who is representative of first wave feminism in the first half of the 19th century in America, Hester can be seen as a symbol of female assertiveness in a society that is dominated by men. She takes a firm decision contrary to the canons of her puritan society, and is ready to valiantly face the consequences of her actions.



ISSN : 2584-1963

© Seagull Journals. All rights reserved.

Again, Hester Prynne's decision and struggle to singlehandedly fend for herself and her baby is also suggestive of her courage and strength to forge ahead despite all odds. When she senses that she has been left all on her own and her baby, she mustered courage and resolved to toil harder than before to provide for herself and her baby. The attitude of Pearl also contributes to her frustrations. Pearl sometimes behaves abnormally, and she is referred to, by some people as an imp. The questions she always poses to her mother about the scarlet letter A she wears, are always very disturbing to Hester because the questions remind her of her sin and punishment. Hester however resolves to bear the entire burden with a firm conviction and determination to bring up her daughter in the best way possible.

Being a very creative and industrious lady, she is very good in stitching dresses. Despite her rejection in her society, her services as a dress maker are highly solicited by many people including the top leadership of Boston. It should be noted that even the governor solicits her services. In chapter seven of the novel, one learns that Hester Prynne goes "to the mansion of Governor Bellingham, with a pair of gloves which she had fringed and embroidered to his order, and which were to be worn on some great occasion of state." (82).

The puritan spirit of hard work can be seen as one of those attributes that Hester Prynne incarnates. Although, she lives like a single mother due to the irresponsible attitude of her husband Roger Chillingworth, she is able to thrive in her embroidery business to the extent that she is famous in her state. She ends up being rich and being able to singlehandedly raise her daughter. She is also seen giving help to other needy persons in her community.

Frederick Engel opines that the entry of women in the labour force significantly liberates them from poverty and dehumanizing dependence on the men. Marxist feminists like Helen Gilbert laments on the violence and discrimination against women. She contends that, the economic empowerment of women is a gateway to their freedom and equality in a world that has been plagued by male hegemony.

Nathaniel Hawthorne emerges as an advocate of women empowerment as depicted in the exploits of her protagonist, Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*. Not only does he snobs the hypocrisy of the puritans, he goes further to economically empower Hester Prynne thus passing through the message that, the economic empowerment of the women folk is a condition sine qua non, for stability, development and equality in a capitalist society like the United States of America. Under such favourable conditions of economic and religious freedom, any American, no matter the sex, can possibly achieve the cherished American Dream.

In Sammy Akombi's *The Woman Who Ate Python and Other Stories*, we equally come across valiant women in the arena who grapple with the exigencies of their society for survival. Ebeneze can be described as a tomboy. From childhood, she has always exhibited masculine traits. He questions many things about the status quo, but the most spectacular action she takes is



ISSN : 2584-1963

© Seagull Journals. All rights reserved.

with regard to her bitterness with the taboos or customs that denigrate the woman in the Bonakundan community.

Ekinde is the husband of Ebenye. He is a skilled hunter. In the story, he returns from hunting with a big python that he kills. Ebenye is overwhelmed and scared at the magnitude of the python. Unfortunately for Ebenye, she can only cook but cannot eat the tasty and delicious meat of the python because it is royal meat which “must be eaten only in the palace by distinguished elders of the community – all of them men of course.” (*Python* 12) When Ekinde goes to report the news of his game to the palace, he is given instructions to have the python prepared and brought to the palace the following day. He chooses three women to cook the python with Ebenye being their leader. These women know the customs and tradition of Bonakunda, and they are aware of a vital part of the python that must be eaten only by the chief of the village. The chest of the python can only be eaten by the chief, and if a woman eats that part, it is believed that, the “children she would bear will live to crawl on their bellies.” (18)

The story gets to its climax when the python is ready to be eaten, the elders (all men) of the village are seated, and the women who prepared the special meal are called to serve the food. The first important part to be served to the chief is the chest. Surprisingly, this part is nowhere to be found. All the women who prepared the meat are summoned, but two of them confess that, the part was reserved but they don't know who has taken it or eaten it. When Ebenye is asked about the where-about of the chest of the python, she nonchalantly has this to say:

“My lords, I'm not sure for how long you'll continue to treat us like some precious property of yours. The way you treat our mothers and us their female children is as if we are simply instruments of your amiable pleasure. Some sort of pearl that is exhibited to show other people, how wealthy you are and after such exhibition, it is tucked away until another occasion arises.” She continued...

“I couldn't imagine how I would continue to serve people, as a matter of fact, cook for people and not have the pleasure of tasting what I've cooked. Naturally, I don't like eating snakes but I had to eat the chest of that python. I ate it and it is lodged right here in my stomach. The so-called repercussions, I'm waiting for anxiously. Let me give birth to kids that will crawl on their bellies. I think, I personally have had enough of this meanness!” She ended stamping her right foot on the floor.

For good sixty-seconds, the room remained silent. None of the men could find his voice. Not even Ekinde. Shortly after, an elder found his voice. He coughed slightly and asked quietly. “Do you really mean to tell us that you, a woman, ate the chest of a python?”

“Yes I did!” Ebenye replied firmly and seditiously.

“Can you eat another piece of the python, so that we all can be living, and authentic witnesses of a python eating woman?” He requested.

“Yes of course,” she said and moved to the pot that was still standing open. She picked up a piece of python, tore it in smaller pieces and ate them one by one. (14-17)



The spectacle displayed by Ebenye is unbelievable considering the fact that no women in her time could have the audacity to do such a thing in the presence of the elders of the village. Her husband Ekinde felt disgraced and humiliated because he too is present and amongst the selected men to partake in the special meal. Ekinde is shocked as the whole drama is performed in front of him. When he could no longer hold his patience, “he got up and like a lion he roared at his wife: have you got out of your mind? Eh Ebenye? What’s gone into you woman?” (17) The account below further narrates the confrontation between Ekinde and his wife in front of the chief, elders and the two women who prepared the python.

Without waiting to get an answer, he lurched towards her and swung his right arm. Ebenye ducked and Ekinde lost balance and found himself staggering to the ground. But before he got down completely, Ebenye stooped and picked him up like a hawk would do an unguarded chick. In one startling movement, Ekinde was wriggling on the left shoulder of his wife. The whole assembly was dumbfounded as they watched the award winning hunter desperately wriggling on the shoulder of a woman.

Suddenly, Ebenye held Ekinde gently and placed him buttocks-down on the floor. Everyone thought Ekinde would get up and walk out in shame but far from it, he roared like a hungry lion that had just missed its prey and then rushed at Ebenye like an elephant which had just got a bullet between its eyes. Just then, the chief found his voice and called out firmly, “Ekinde! Ekinde! Stop! Stop it!”

It should be noted that, at the end of the story, the chief declares that what has just happened has opened his eyes to see what his forefathers refused to see, generation after generation. No one had the courage to eat, so they all returned home. The chief concluded that they should all keep their minds open to see whether the children Ebenye would give birth to, will live to crawl on their bellies.

Prakash Karat in his article *Marxism in the 21st Century: Alternative to Neoliberal Capitalism and Imperialism* avers that the theory and practice of Marxism in the 21st century also requires the integration of gender issues into the main stream analysis of class exploitation and social oppression. In this light, one contends that Ebenye can be seen as a victim of social oppression. Like Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter*, she chooses to valiantly assert her rights and alter the status quo. She is fed up with the oppression of the female sex in the Bonakunda community. She dares to trample on taboos or beliefs that have kept the women in bondage from generation to generation. The traumatizing scene that the audience is made to witness the humiliation of Ekinde by his wife in a fight that Ekinde himself starts, is a strong message with regard to the struggle for women emancipation. Power is not given on a platter of gold. It is fought for. The power or rights of the women that have been confiscated by the men can only be secured if the women valiantly fight for it. The eating of the special part of the python reserved for the chief by Ebenye, and the humiliation of Ekinde by his wife (Ebenye) are very telling of the fact that the 21st century woman is ready to go any length to fight for her emancipation.



ISSN : 2584-1963

© Seagull Journals. All rights reserved.

iii. Conclusion

In this study titled “Valiant Women in the Arena: A Reading of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* and Sammy Akombi’s *The Woman Who Ate Python and Other Stories*” we set out to discuss how Nathaniel Hawthorne and Sammy Akombi present the challenges of women in their respective works of art, and how these valiant women grapple with the challenges they face in order to survive. Not only are these women burdened by the load of religious restrictions, they are also saddled with the burden of traditions and customs that perpetually keep them as second class citizens.

One can therefore validate the hypothesis that that Nathaniel Hawthorne and Sammy OkeAkombi are committed to the cause of women empowerment as depicted in their works under study. After the analysis on the subject of women empowerment in this paper, one comes out with the following findings:

Firstly, we find out that not only does Nathaniel Hawthorne in his *The Scarlet Letter*, snobs the hypocrisy of the puritans, he goes further to economically empower Hester Prynne thus passing through the message that, the economic empowerment of the women folk is a condition sine qua non, for stability, development and equality in a capitalist society like the United States of America. Under such favourable conditions of economic and religious freedom, any American, no matter the sex, can possibly achieve the cherished American Dream.

Secondly, we also find out that Sammy OkeAkombi in his story “The Woman Who Ate Python” joins the cause for women emancipation through the creation of a valiant female character like Ebenye. One avers that the power or rights of the women that have been confiscated by the men can only be secured if the women valiantly fight for their rights. The eating of the special part of the python reserved for the chief by Ebenye, and the humiliation of Ekinde by his wife (Ebenye), are very telling of the fact that, the 21st century woman is ready to go any length to fight for her emancipation.



ISSN : 2584-1963

© Seagull Journals. All rights reserved.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

AkombiOke Sammy. *The Woman Who Ate Python and other Stories*. Nyaa Publishers, 2006.
Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. Alice & Books, 1850.

Secondary Sources

Ambanasom, Shadrack. *The Cameroonian Novel of English Expression: An Introduction*. LangaaRpcig, 2009.
Ashuntantang, Joyce. *Landscaping postcoloniality : the dissemination of Cameroon anglophone literature*. LangaaRpcig, 2009
Eagleton, Terry. *Marxism and Literary Criticism*. University of California Press, 1976.
International Bible Society. *The Holy Bible*. (NIV) International Bible Society, 1984.

Lambert, Frank. *The Founding Fathers and the Place of Religion in America*. Princeton University Press, 2010.
Veeder, Harold (ed) *The New Historicism*. (1st Edition) Routledge, 1989.

Online Sources

Elizabeth Stanton. National Women's Hall of Fame:
<https://www.womenofthehall.org/inductee/elizabeth-cady-stanton/> Accessed 10 May 2024
Helen Gilbert. *An Introduction to Marxist Feminism*.
<http://www.feministezine.com/feminist/philosophy/Introduction-to-Marxist-Feminism.html> Accessed 25 May 2024
Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/lock. Accessed 11 June 2024.
Prakash Karat. *Marxism in the 21st Century: Alternative to Neoliberal Capitalism and Imperialism*. <https://cpim.org/marxism-21st-century-alternative-neoliberal-capitalism-and-imperialism/> Accessed 2 June 2024
The Original Puritan Work Ethic. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-89/original-puritan-work-ethic.html> Accessed 11 June 2024



ISSN : 2584-1963

© Seagull Journals. All rights reserved.