

# Celebrating Female Sexuality in Baingana's 'Tropical Fish' and Adichie's *Americanah*

Japheth Peter Muindu<sup>1,\*</sup>, Erick Kipkoech Mutai<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Linguistics, Literature and Communication, University of Kabianga, Kericho, Kenya

<sup>2</sup>Kapkarin Secondary School, Bomet, Kenya

## Email address:

pejamuindu@yahoo.com (J. P. Muindu), mutaieric90@yahoo.com (E. K. Mutai)

\*Corresponding author

## To cite this article:

Japheth Peter Muindu, Erick Kipkoech Mutai. Celebrating Female Sexuality in Baingana's 'Tropical Fish' and Adichie's *Americanah*. *International Journal of Literature and Arts*. Vol. 4, No. 4, 2016, pp. 44-48. doi: 10.11648/j.ijla.20160404.11

Received: May 16, 2016; Accepted: May 31, 2016; Published: June 18, 2016

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**Abstract:** Simone de Beauvoir's prediction that the destruction of patriarchy will be realized when women dismantle their patriarchal objectification calls for a rethinking and a reconstruction in culture and feminist discourses of the female body which patriarchy packages as the woman's curse. This paper is an insurrectionary critique of Baingana's 'Tropical Fish' and Adichie's *Americanah* using the concept of the perverse dynamic advanced by Jonathan Dollimore, which is suffused with feminist ethos, to indict gender dichotomies and the limitations of patriarchal structures. The conflating of the politics of sexuality, dissidence and liberation has been overlooked by critics. I posit that sexual dissidence, which is conventionally an aberration, emerges in the texts as emancipating and as a strategy employed by female characters to subvert patriarchy.

**Keywords:** Female Sexuality, Liberation, Patriarchy, Subversion

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## 1. Introduction

Judith Butler asserts that the body is not a mute facticity, it is not a fact of nature but a production of discourses. She further posits that sex as well as gender 'can be performatively reinscribed in ways that accentuate its factitiousness...rather than its facticity' [1]. For her, there is no sex which is not gendered for 'there is no natural body that pre-exists its cultural inscription' (ibid). Her postulations, together with Beauvoir's claim of the woman as 'an historical situation' call to question the essentialist ideas about gender and point to a possibility of re-visioning of gender assumptions. Bodies become crafted into gender in mundane ways but this inscription is not passively done, it is a process that incites corporeal subversive performances.

Such corporeal subversion include sexual dissidence, what Jonathan Dollimore calls 'the perverse dynamic', the didactic between domination and deviation, a straying from conventions or from what is understood to be right, in our case, the continued objectification of the human female by patriarchy. Through subversive performance of gender, women can force a reconfiguration of the essentialist notions

of gender which will in effect undermine phallogocentric sensibilities and foster gender egalitarianism.

## 2. Material and Methods

Dollimore's notion of the perverse dynamic is apropos to the understanding of the changed sexual landscape characterized by more sexual freedom and reinsertion of female agency in sexual matters. Contemporary society is increasingly becoming more liberal and permissive. The modern woman is increasingly becoming aware of her rights as an individual and resists patriarchal constraints about sexuality. She is not averse to appropriating sex as a tool of protest against hegemonic masculinity. Hierarchical power is now contested as women realize that through their bodies they have power over men. The fight for supremacy has made women to combine their charm and intellect. More women are entering into consensus prostitution to fulfill their desires. It is my contention that women characters in both Baingana's 'Tropical Fish' and Adichie's *Americanah* indulge in sexual escapades as a way of celebrating their new-found liberation from patriarchal order.

### 3. Results and Discussion

Female sexuality is central to female power, whose quiet ubiquity, according to Chinweizu, 'acts like a camouflage. Its vastly greater might is so well entrenched, in both biology and social arrangements, that it does not need to call attention to itself, and so goes largely unremarked' [2]. I proceed to explicate this subtlety of female power in the celebration of sexuality by specific female characters in the two selected texts.

In Adichie *Americanah* Aunt Uju narrates to Ifemefula her first sexual encounter with the General. She says: 'I slept with him in the first night but I did not ask for anything' [3]. Using aunt Uju, Chimamanda, articulates the sexual dissidence and the concomitant promiscuity rampant in the society as women reclaim agency in sexual matters. That Aunt Uju slept with the General on her first night is a violation of patriarchal modesty and is here celebrated as the woman's power over men. Women exploit men's vulnerability to exercise their power over them and regain their identity and freedom. This notion is well exemplified by Rosa in Baingana's *Passion*. Rosa's sexual prowess is evident in the way she seduces and mesmerizes her high school teacher of English by performing a ritualistic experiment. The premise for Rosa's experiment was informed by the conviction that men are sexually weak.

Baingana explores the power of women based on their sexual prowess. She said that sex is what men wanted from women and the ability to give depends on the women. She further alludes to sex as a bargaining tool. Rosa thrives in comfort and is able to acquire material possession through sex. Modern society has produced several wild Rosas. These liberalized women use their bodies to get material pleasures. In the text, women appear to be retaliating over protracted oppression by men through taking more control of their bodies. Sexual freedom has produced more vibrant power contestations. Through sexual dissidence; women are seen to overturn the traditional gender dichotomy of strong masculinity and weak femininity.

Women's clamour for agency in sexual matters and their proclivity to hedonism is also mediated in the portrayal of Christine in Baingana's 'Tropical Fish'. When we meet her in her parents' room, a picture of naivety is portrayed. However, her innocence provides an inside into women freedom and longing.

She represents a new generation that mocks her mother's generation. Maama represents the old generation who conform to the society's patriarchal mores. They subordinate themselves to their husbands and condone patriarchal abuse but Christine's sexual dissidence contrasts this sense of untutored faithfulness. She expresses her desire for sexual liberty and perversion and disdains marriage. She views marriage as an oppressive institution. She says:

I'd spend the whole day preparing my body and wait patiently and beautifully for my husband the president no, no husband; I'd go to bars every night, like Taata or to the parties. Maama didn't go out at night, not to parties [4].

Christine's perceptions of womanhood contrast that of Maama. She is a free spirit, who desires to live her life to the full. The narrator juxtaposes the character of Christine and that of Maama. The old generation represented by Maama is that of conservatives while Christine represents the modern perverse women who celebrate their femininity by exercising their sexual prowess over men.

She refuses to get married. Her life's desire is to go to bars every night like her father. In the figure of Christine, we are ushered into the world of social gender inequalities; but these disparities are challenged by the construction of modern women that are more empowered and have more control over their lives. Commenting on this aversion to marriage and pervasive sexual perversion by the modern woman, Signe Arnfred observes:

women increasingly have been able to take the initiative and to negotiate extra marital sexual relations on terms, which are at best partially set by themselves.....Young women in Botswana may decide not to marry, or to postpone marriage plans in order to remain for a longer time in the more independent (but also risky) position of the extra-marital girlfriend, or informal second wife. The socio-economic basis for this strategy is a norm of informal sexual relations involving a transfer of economically significant gifts from the man to the woman... [5].

In contrast to her mother, Christine subverts the patriarchal objectification of women. She describes in a satirical but symbolic manner how her father gently passed the heavy green stones over her mother's hair and neck, a ritualistic immersion into patriarchy to which Maama acquiesces. She (Maama) is said to have accepted Taata's adoration with a smile in silence. For Taata, she is simply an object of his sexual pleasure and a subservient subject of patriarchy.

Sex is closely associated with freedom since it is among the great natural gifts of women given by God. The form of liberation of present day women is tied closely with sex, as a bargaining tool. Modern women have defied traditional patriarchal control of sexuality. There has been an urgent need to destabilize gender order structured by men where 'romantic love and/ or personal pleasure are proper motives for engaging in sex, while strategic materially oriented uses of sexuality are strictly tabooed' [5]. Liberated female sexuality seems to operate under the social exchange understanding of sex as 'a resource that men desire and women poses...and to obtain sex, men must offer women other desired resources in return, such as money, commitment, security, attention, or respect'[6]. This scenario is best articulated by Mumbi Machera who writes that: women tend to choose well settled generous, married men, so-called 'sugar daddies', rather than young and penniless ones, referring to their male partners as 'projects', 'business' or 'donor'. In this way, the women manage to maintain some degree of social independence and avoid the severe control often exercised by a true husband....Economically active women may prefer to navigate between 'various 'donors' rather than to risk the subordination to one particular husband [5].

Sexual freedom is also seen in Christine's actions as she

desires to regain her freedom from men. Having been relegated to the background for a long time, women have re-awakened to the need for their empowerment. Christine engages in a romantic relation with Peter. She is able to buy the comfort of life using her body. Through her relationship with Peter, she is able to acquire momentarily a life of affluence. She uses her body to obtain what no one could provide out there in a generally deplorable society. She says:

I was free to walk around the large, airy house naked, a gin and tonic melting in my hand. This made me a clean open, hanky wondering in the wind. I didn't have to squash myself into clothes full in my stomach, tie my breast up in a bra, worry about anything, be anything, who cared what Peter thought [4]

Christine successfully purchased a life of affluence using sex. Christine and Peter's relationship is at best mechanical. There is no emotional attachment, no bond, simply casual sexual intercourse. Christine is able to obtain material resources without stealing. She simply uses the resources within her in exchange of affluence, which acquires a barter trade status. In exchange for sex, Christine acquires gin and tonics. This seems to make her life complete, she knows too well that Peter had other relationships with different women. However, it doesn't bother her. Zac at some point indicated to her that Peter had visited Entebbe Sailing Club with another girl but her response startled us. She indicated that she didn't care about his promiscuous lifestyle. Naturally, one could expect a woman to rage with jealousy about such news, but not Christine. This indicates the mechanical nature of relationships, guided by a willing buyer and willing seller. To Christine, sex is like attending school, something she just did. She said that she took herself to Peter's house and no one forced her. Jeffrey Weeks views this perverse femaleness positively, asserting that these 'emerging sexual identities should be seen more accurately as a powerful resistance to the organizing principle of traditional sexual attitudes' [7]

Christine's admission that she took herself to Peter's house to have sex indicates sexual liberation. It shows that contemporary women have power over their bodies; in fact women seem to control men using their sexuality. When she first met Peter, Christine says that she had to bring into play her sweet simpering self-reserve for men. She is able to do this because of her lifelong training to catch a suitable mate. Apparently, Christine has mastered the art of seduction. She is able to use her sexual antics to lure Peter. She describes the sexual process, to have been devoid of joy:

Then he took my blouse and pants off methodically, gently. Like it was the best thing to do, like I was sick and he was a nurse. I just lay. He put on a condom, opened my legs and stuck his penis in. I couldn't bring myself to hold him in any convincing way [4].

Sexual dissidence and perversion as liberation is also evident in the hedonist lifestyles of university students captured in the figure of Rosa in *A Thank You Note*. She engages in sex as fun and to celebrate her freedom from oppressive womanhood. Listen to her:

We were young, beautiful, careless, open giving, we never

talked about the games we played overwhelmed by the fact of bodies, of desire, of willing flesh, so available, so sweet, so easy we could do what we wanted and we did [4].

Baingana paints a picture of uncontrolled romance. David and Rosa are interlocked in an endless passion where sex acquires a god-like image, a cult item of worship. The temerity and the vulgarity with which Rosa narrates this sexual encounter is a typical illustration of modern day sexual freedom. Rosa represents a group of women who in their quest for freedom use sexual orgies to assert their authority.

This high level of sexual perversity among university students is an eloquent statement of the celebration of female sexuality, their multiple sexual relationships, initially frowned upon as shameful and as an anathema in traditional setting is depicted here as celebrative. Their sexual dissidence is a protest against masculine oppression, an indication that contemporary African women have gained control of their bodies. Sex has been appropriated as a weapon of independence.

This celebration of female sexuality through insurrectionary sexual escapades is also the subject of Chimamanda Adichie's *Americana*. Ifemefula in Adichie's *Americana* embodies beauty and academic credentials. She used her academic prowess and beauty to lure men. Ifemefula is candid about her promiscuous sex life. To her, sex is simply an exciting adventure. She has no attachment or bond to any of the men she sleeps with. She cheats on her boyfriends and renders them psychological freaks as she basks in her glory.

Ifemefula realizes that with her body she can have fun and get any opportunity she wants. It is noteworthy that Ifemefula is not driven to promiscuity by economic deprivation since she is affluent, educated and talented. Her sexual perversion is therefore at once celebratory and rebellious. She can easily get any man of her choice and settle down for marriage but like Christine in Baingana's 'Tropical Fish', she abhors the idea of marriage. She dumps her boyfriend Obinze, despite the fact that he was ready to sacrifice anything for her. Like Christine, Ifemefula has an insatiable sexual appetite. As mentioned elsewhere in this article, the two can be read as representative of modern independent women who have more control over their sexuality. When she meets a university professor while in the United States, despite the fact that she was meeting him for the first time, she begins to fantasize having sex with him:

She began to imagine what he would be like in bed. He would be a kind, attentive lover, for whom emotional fulfillment was just as important as ejaculation. He would not judge her slack flesh; he would wake up even tempered every morning [3].

Her behavior in this first encounter with Blades is motivated by her high libido which she is not ashamed of and which she feels it is her right to satiate. She is not out to build a lasting relationship, but rather desires a wild sexual encounter. She craves for a fulfilling ejaculation, itself a bold statement on a woman's longing for sexual orgasm which is

silenced and denied by patriarchal order. Ifemefula's wild romance is a representation of how modern women desire to fulfill the desires of their bodies. They are no longer passive and have regained agency, so much so that they do not wait to be seduced but initiate seduction themselves. After exchanging contacts with Blade, Ifemefula kept calling him, and although he didn't receive her call, she never gave up. Ifemefula's persistent pursuit of Blade is a kind of sexual dissidence that subverts the model of traditional good girl who sacrifices her sexual desire at the altar of hegemonic masculinity.

This celebration of female sexuality is further insisted upon in the text in the narrative event where Ifemefula sleeps around with other men besides Blades. She dated Mr. Whites and without compunction cheats on him with a man living upstairs. Ifemefula approaches sex as a game and an aspect of fun, a radical departure from the traditional idea of sex for procreation. She engages with men and disposes them at will. When she returns to Nigeria despite Obinze having married, she sleeps with him and has the effrontery to tell him that while she was at the states, she was looking at the ceiling while making love with other men.

In the same text, Aisha, the Liberian, displays a materialist understanding of sex. Aisha is a saloon worker who dates different men. She tells Ifemefula that she wants to marry one of them so as to be able to acquire legal citizenship. She uses her body to acquire material comfort. The revelations that she is sleeping with two men mirrors a permissive society. She says, 'I want you see my men. I call them. They come and you see them. First I call Chesiok he work cab driver then Emeka he work security' [3]. Though her motivation is pecuniary, the absence of decorum and the effrontery that characterizes her sexual exploits, especially her polyandrous nature, point to the use of sexual perversion as liberation from male dominance, a perversion which Foucault views as 'out in the open, not sublimated and used as a vehicle of power, a 'construction which enables it to gain a purchase with the realm of the psychosexual' [8] and whose effects, according to Dollimore, 'reveals the coerciveness of the normal and the arbitrariness of nature' [8]. Perverse femaleness allows the female characters in these texts to unleash 'their selves' and has the potential to destabilize and provoke dis coherence. Aisha celebration of her sexuality is in tandem with the radical feminist conviction that 'sexual freedom is a fundamental prerequisite to women's liberation' [9].

Ifemefula is intrigued by Aisha's openness. She is amused at her willingness to call both of them and observes that she could create a good blog out of the same. Aisha's promiscuous nature is a large narrative of contemporary society's immorality. Through sex, women are negotiating their way; they are bargaining for affluence and material life while at the same time women like Ifemefula are simply rebels from a traditional construct. Osundu in "Our First American", confirms this school of thought using the character of Beauty as a projection of transformed gender relations. Beauty is described to be a prostitute who at the same time has a boyfriend called Mark. The neighbour talked

of Beauty's randy behaviour in the estate. She enjoyed wild sexual ecstasy with the whiteman without any care. Osundu says that Beauty maintains a romantic relationship with Mark while in the previous night she has been prostituting herself. Beauty exhibits a dominant control over her relationship with Mark. Finally, she chases Mark in a very crude way. These reverse tragic roles mirror a society that is increasingly coming under female domination. This is 'an affirmation of a negative identity and a revaluation of values' [10] through a celebration of liberated female sexuality.

The African gender social constructions have taken a new turn. Through the power of sex, women are gaining more dominance over men. They use sex as an act of rebellion. There is a challenge in traditional order of sexuality as more women take control of their bodies. The hallowed traditional perception of sex in traditional Africa has been contested in modern Africa. Sex is no longer a taboo as independent women seek to control the sex process. Obinze's mother who is a lecturer in the university represents an emerging group of modern elites. She advises Ifemefula to always use a condom, since in the event of pregnancy the woman will be the one to suffer. Her advice to Ifemefula reflects a traditional society where in case of pregnancy the women are left suffering. In most African communities, women who get pregnant are loathed and labeled as prostitutes. However, the new generation of women has taken upon themselves to manage and control their sexuality. It is for this reason that Ifemefula is advised to use condoms each time she engages in sex with Obinze. Sexuality is discussed in an open manner. This reflects an evolved society which has moved beyond taboos. Women have realized that in events of sexual mistakes they bore the greatest pain. They have decided to take an upper hand in regard to their sexuality.

Adichie further paints a picture of modern women in Obinze's maid. When Kosha, Obinze's wife opened the bags of the house girl, she stumbles on a packet of condoms. Upon inquiry, the house help reveals that her former boss sexually molested her. She had henceforth decided to walk around with condoms so that she is ever ready to protect herself. The house help has chosen to take control of her body through carrying condoms. Her resolve underscores not only sexual dissidence as liberation but also celebrates the modern woman's control of her sexuality.

## 4. Conclusion

The two texts analyzed in this paper speak to the growing need for women to have more control of their sexuality as a means of regaining power over their destiny. The sexual dissidence staged by the female characters in these texts point to new sexual paradigms adopted to transform female sexuality ethos. I have demonstrated that perverse femaleness and its concomitant sexual dissidence as presented in the two texts suggests a refashioning of a new femininity as a response to the ever transforming social cultural milieu in which patriarchy is an anachronism. Female characters use their perversion to question gender hierarchies and the

limitation of patriarchal order. The texts refuse to see this sexual dissidence as an aberration but as female liberation.

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## Biography



**Dr. Japheth Peter Muindu** is a lecturer in the Department of Linguistics, Literature and Communication, University of Kabianga, Kericho, KENYA. His research interests are in Popular Fiction, Postcolonial Studies, Medical Humanities and Gender Studies. He has published several articles in academic

Journals and a text, *Political Oppression and Individual Alienation in Wahome Mutahi's Fiction*.



**Mr. Erick Kipkoech Mutai** teaches English and Literature at Kapkarin Secondary School, Bomet, KENYA. He holds a Masters degree in Literature and he is currently undertaking doctoral studies. He researches on Gender Studies and Postcolonial discourse.