

The Portrayal of Female Characters in Attilio Tagalile's Endless Toil

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Abstract

This paper explores how Tagalile's Endless Toil portrays female characters in his novel following the varied people's attitudes and perspectives with regard to women and hence, their portrayal in literary works. The aim of the paper is to analyze the portrait with which female characters are identified in the novel. The inquiry is probed through a textual analysis of the novel. The data was collected through close reading of the primary text and analyzed in the light of African Feminist perspective. The findings from textual analysis show that some female characters are positively portrayed while others are negatively portrayed. Positive portrayals include challenging oppressive African traditional practices such as arranged marriages and harassing widows. Others are being hardworking, wise, tolerant, respected, generous and being a role model in good moral values. The negative portraits include women as prostitutes, slanderers, gossipers and victims of oppressive cultural practices. This negative image is influenced by societal gender stereotyping.

Introduction

Paulomi (2018) said “*male writers have been persistently attacked for stereotyping women in clichéd images of innocent virgin or the devilish whore, all reflected through male desire.*” The aforementioned indictment of Paulomi is a common commentary among many scholars and ‘feminist’ readers of male authored literary texts. Therefore, this paper attempts to explore how Atilio Tagalile, being a contemporary male author, has portrayed female characters in his novel *Endless Toil*. The main purpose is to examine whether the author subscribes to or negates the above indictment.

The portrayal of female characters in the world of literary studies has attracted special attention to many literary writers and scholars. This has been so significant, because of the dominant images with which female characters are being negatively portrayed as inferior, whilst male characters are positively portrayed as superior. This trend has been influenced by various factors ranging from cultural background in which the writer originates to cultural, religious and social values of the society which writers represent in their literary works. As such, some scholars argue that female characters are portrayed as idle gossips, weak, dependent on men, inferior, humiliated and objects of sexual satisfaction (Ohale, 2010; Peter, 2010; Chitando, 2011 and Simone, 1949). In addition, Gwajima (2011) observes that women are negatively portrayed as weak characters such that they do not stand on their own views.

However, it is generally claimed that such negative images of female characters are dominant in early African literary works authored by men such as Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Wole Soyinka, Cyprian Ekwensi, Elechi Amadi, Leopold Senghor and Sembène Ousmane (Ohale, 2010). It is further argued that despite the fact that the above-named literary writers have attained remarkable achievements in producing literary works, they have failed to present a balanced view of female characters in their works. In addition, it is argued that ‘Achebe’s novels have not presented a realistic portfolio of the woman, both in the traditional and modern settings in African society’. Thus, it is evident that female characters have not been fairly portrayed and, by so doing, these writers have overlooked the significant roles that women play in African societies Merun (1980:28). Stratton (1990:28) argues that female characters have been portrayed in a variety of ways, some of which are ‘gender stereotypes and gender inequality’. She further contends that female characters are portrayed as ‘mothers who are confined within the home, but

[and] have the responsibility of taking care of their household and their husbands'. She adds that the 'females' place is seen as the kitchen where they perform other kitchen chores. She finally emphasizes that 'many male writers have shown female characters as agents of moral corruption and contamination in their society'. In view of similar observations, Ogundipe-Leslie (1987:5) argues that female characters in male authored literary works are portrayed as 'the figure of the sweet mother, the all-accepting creature of fecundity and self-sacrifice'. The above scholarly reviews suggest that women are portrayed as objects of sexual gratification for males, procreative, submissive, as well as people without any contribution in decision making.

Furthermore, Davies (1984) examined female portraiture in Soyinka's works. Her findings show that Soyinka reveals enough female stereotypes, suggesting a definite sexist bias against women. As a result of such negative portrayal of women in male authored texts, it is evident that many African women writers and critics have reacted against this biased delineation of gender relations. For instance, Chukwuma (2003) asserts:

The female character in African fiction is a facile lack-lustre human being, the quiet member of a household, content only to bear children, unfulfilled if she does not, and handicapped if she bears only daughters. In the home, she was not part of decision-making both as a daughter, wife and mother even when the decisions affected her directly (219) (quoted in Ohale 2010:1-2).

The above comments reflect the bitterness with which women writers felt towards male writers regarding the negative portrayal of female characters in their works. Hence, with such misrepresentation of female characters, obviously, some African women writers were prompted to write various literary works from the female experience to show how female characters can be 'properly and fairly' portrayed. Some of such African women writers include Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Tsitsi Dangarembga Mariama Ba, Elieshi Lema and many others. For example, Chukwuma argues that Flora Nwapa's interest was 'female characters' and her motive for writing was 'to correct the disparaged image of women in male-authored novels' (Chukwuma 2006:3). It is evident, therefore, that these scholarly studies clearly show that generally, some male writers portray negatively female characters in their works whilst female writers deconstruct the trend by portraying female characters 'properly and fairly' in their works.

Conversely, it is obvious that not all male writers negatively portray female characters in their works and the vice versa is true. For instance, Ibinga studied the literary representation of female

characters in novels by three South African writers in which he focused on two male authors and one female author. The findings showed that the three novelists diverged from the dominant inclination of representing female characters in an idealized image of the archetypical role of the victimized female figure' showing 'women's actions and the ways in which they were challenging prevalent assumptions about gender'. Instead, the findings revealed that female characters were depicted as 'active agents of social transformation' ((Ibinga 2007:250)). This observation clearly shows that being a male or female writer does not necessarily mean that gender determines one to be a sexist as the male authors have not shown negative images of the female characters as reflected in the above findings.

Nevertheless, in life there are changes in people's mindset and perspectives that take place in everyday life. It is noted that such changes are a result of the discovery of new knowledge and other forces of change that influence transformations in any society. As such, Tanzanian society, like any other society in the world, has witnessed changes in people's mindset and perspective towards women. The changes have been influenced by factors such as the rise of feminist movements, gender studies, civil education through mass media, gender consciousness due to life experiences and many others. As a result of such dynamism in mindset and perspective some male writers have been writing their literary works in the light of these changes.

In the light of the above said changes, Atilio Tagalile, a male writer from Tanzania in which there is a widespread knowledge of gender studies and feminism, has so far written two novels of which *Endless Toil* is one of them reflecting issues of the 21st century era. This paper focuses on the portrayal of female characters in Tagalile's *Endless Toil* (2006). The focus of the paper is to examine how the author portrays female characters in his novel following the dynamics in people's mindset and perspective towards women in their societies. The aim is to examine whether or not the author interrogates the negative portrayals of female characters or he simply depicts the traditional trend.

Abraham (2010) reviewed *Endless Toil*. She mainly looked into some issues such as corruption and politics presented in the novel. She has highlighted the plot summary of the novel, where she talked about Swela, the protagonist who struggled to bring up his family amidst a controversial East African policy, where colonial power often interfered with the region's independence. Kasihwaki (2006) also reviewed the novel. His review focused on the link in the novel with the

torture that the ex-employees of the East African Community experienced. He argues that there were reflections of what is written in the novel and what was happening in 2006 with the Tanzanian Parliament. It was noted that the ex-employees of the former East African Community were demanding their terminal benefits. This was reflected in the Parliamentary proceedings when Cleopa David Msuya, a member of Parliament for Mwanga constituency was quoted saying 'Their money is there' (Kasihwaki 2006: vii). However, there is very little account on female characterization. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to focus on the portrayal of female characters in the above-named novel.

Research Paper Methodology

The paper relies on analyzing a literary text. As such, to achieve the objective of the research paper, the qualitative method is employed to facilitate an in-depth understanding of the novel. Myers (2009:241-242) argues that qualitative research method is 'the best method for researching social and cultural phenomena, since it is concerned with understanding people and

the social cultural contexts within which they live, why people behave as they do: their knowledge, attitudes, beliefs and fears'. In support of this view, Taylor (1984:141) contends that the qualitative approach is 'the best way for the interpretation and analysis of primary and secondary sources. In this paper, primary data refer to the primary text under study which is *Endless Toil*, while secondary data has to do with sources other than the primary text as they are reflected throughout the paper. The paper focuses on library research, where the data was collected through close reading of Tagalile's *Endless Toil*. By close reading, the researcher critically read the text under study using a Reader-response approach to collect the necessary information needed. This study is primarily literary and therefore, employing a qualitative research method that involved critical analysis, using sources such as journals, articles, papers and other relevant sources.

The paper used textual analysis method which involved both primary text and secondary sources. In this study, data analysis involved analyzing data by organizing such data into categories basing on related attributes, issues and themes. Hence, the study focused on the portrayal of female characters by critically examining how women are portrayed in the novel in aspects such

as gender stereotypes, women's roles, gender identity, and gender inequalities in society, as well as forced marriages. In the process of examining these aspects an association to the theoretical framework suggested in the study was done followed by conclusion about the study. The paper applied the Feminist literary theory in analyzing the text, *Endless Toil*. The choice of this theory was determined by the nature of the topic of the study as it directly relates to gender relations. As a literary theory, Feminism deals with 'the criticism of literary works from a historical awareness of gender imbalances between traditional patriarchal system and subservient females' Through challenging society's conception of gender, sexuality and perceived inequalities between men and women, the focus is to draw attention to the role feminist criticism has played in the study of literary works, so as to reveal and recover the understated experiences of women as the inferior other in different social and cultural contexts (Chitando2010:15-16). McDowell (1995) argues that the primary objective of Feminist literary theory is to evaluate how the gender quotient affects all phases of human existence. As opposed to the Feminist movement, Feminist literary theory does not only change the social stratum, but also focuses on inventing new substitute ways of reading and writing literary works. It also tries to determine the reasons behind the

condition of women in the contemporary world in modern literary works. Feminist theory motivates women to raise their voices together and fight for their rights to get rid of the stigma of female characters being portrayed as inferior in male literary works. It further suggests the campaigns at all levels, addressing various issues, most important being the literary works that have largely influenced perceptions towards female characters in literature. The paper used African feminism that Davies (2008:563) contents that it 'stresses issues such as marriage as an important social institution and condemns all forms of patriarchy which dehumanize women and portray them as second-class citizens'. It is obvious that African feminism is positive about men, hence, women do not consider men as "enemies," instead, they seek men's help so that, together, they can struggle against all forms of injustices perpetuated by patriarchy and neo colonial relations. They aim at having a fair play between men and women in various spheres of life, in economic, political, cultural and social domains. Hence, the study categorically, uses Davies's key points as they appear in her (1986) publication. These points clearly stipulate the following regarding a genuine African feminism:

Firstly, recognizes a common struggle with African men for the removal of the yokes of foreign domination and European/American exploitation. It is not antagonistic to African men but it challenges them to be aware of certain salient aspects of women's subjugation which differ from the generalized oppression of all African peoples. Secondly, recognizes that certain inequalities and limitations existed in traditional societies and that colonialism reinforced them and introduced others. As such, it acknowledges its affinities with international feminism, but delineates a specific African feminism with certain specific needs and goals arising out of the concrete realities of women's lives in African societies. Thirdly, recognizes that African societies are ancient societies, so logically, African women must have addressed the problems of women's position in society historically. Fourthly, examines African societies for institutions which are of value to women and rejects those which work to their detriment and does not simply import Western women's agenda. Thus, it respects the African woman's status as a mother, but questions obligatory motherhood and the traditional favoring of sons. Fifthly, respects African woman's self-reliance and penchant to cooperative work and social organization (networking) and the fact that African women are seldom financially dependent, but instead, accept income generating work as a fact of life. Sixthly, has to look objectively at women's situation in societies which have undergone a war of national liberation and socialist reconstruction. Finally, looks at traditional and contemporary avenues of choice for women (8-10).

The above stipulated points by Davies on genuine African feminism are applied as guidance in interpreting and examining the portrayal of female characters as reflected in Tagalile's *Endless Toil*. The rationale for its application is that the text focuses on authentic African societies specifically, Tanzania.

Research Paper Findings

The findings of the paper are twofold. It has been found that the author has portrayed female characters both positively and negatively as presented below.

The Positive Image Portrayal

In many chapters of the novel, female characters are portrayed as hard workers and respected women as well as generous. This portrayal is reflected through Catherine and Mudeke. Catherine is portrayed as a hard-working woman. Her diligence in work won her a lot of achievements. Her commitment to work hard generated enough income for educating her four children. She worked hard on her farm in cooperation with her husband not only to provide her family with food, but also, produced a surplus for selling to get money for paying fees and other costs in funding education for her children.

Apart from farm work, Catherine 'brewed komoni, out of which she got money which she used for financing her children's education' (Tagalile 2006:213-214). The cooperation between Catherine and her husband to produce for their family is well explained by Steady (1987:8), who insists that 'cooperation between women and men enhance sexual autonomy'. In this case, Catherine was autonomous as she had income to support herself and the children without necessarily depending on her husband. However, despite her economic autonomy, she does not despise her husband. This is a good moral attitude that needs to be maintained in order to keep marital ties strong and harmonious for the well-being of the entire family members.

Mudeke can be described as a replica of Catherine. She is the first daughter of Catherine and a sister of Swela, Mutwa and Mleke. Influenced by her mother, Mudeke is portrayed as a hard-working woman as the narrator says: 'Like her mother, Mudeke, never stopped working, even during eating! She would use one hand to eat and the second one would be engaged in some form of work, like removing chaff from seeds' (Tagalile 2006:72). This shows that it is through hard working and being considerate to others that made Mudeke's identity known to Mseke village. Mudeke generated sufficient income that enabled her to bestow needy persons and help solving people's problems in her village.

Like her mother, Mudeke developed love for work such that she was able to earn a substantial income needed to finance educational expenses for all her five children. It is these achievements that made Mudeke famous in Mseke village and receive significant respect. This female portrayal is accounted by an African feminist, Davies (1986:10) who explains clearly that

‘African women are seldom financially dependent, but instead, accept income generating work as a fact of life’. Davies’s observation is significant because it shows that women, like men, can as well generate income that helps to shoulder family responsibilities. And by so doing, women can assist their husbands in supporting their family financially.

Rose is also portrayed as a hard-working woman. The novel shows that after her marriage to Damian Munofu, together, established a farm. As such, Rose ‘dug numerous wells in the centre of their farm, whose water she used to irrigate her vegetable garden’ (Tagalile 2006:174). Her commitment to working hard helped Munofu to ‘save a lot of his earnings from his livestock and milk which would have otherwise been spent on vegetables’ (Tagalile 2006:174-175). With these attributes, Rose made her identity known to many people in Mseke village. As Davies (1986:10) emphasizes that a genuine African feminism ‘respects African woman’s self-reliance and penchant for cooperative work’, Rose cooperated with her husband to generate income for the development of the family. It is evident that Rose was not just cooperative, but also a hard worker. She was committed to hard working so as to become self-reliant on issues that did not necessarily need her husband’s support. In so doing, Rose won her husband’s love, care and approval to the extent that the husband was ready to change his horrific behaviour to better one.

In addition, Catherine is described as a ‘respected woman in the village’ (Tagalile 2006:203). She was ‘dark, lightly built woman who had decided to become a Christian three years after marriage to Munyalutogo’ (Tagalile 2006:158). Being in a polygamous marriage, Catherine was a senior wife to Munyalutogo who was not a reliable father, hence, not successful in his life. She is a trustworthy mother of four children, Mudeke, Swela, Mutwa and Mleke. But her family was successful because of the role she played. The narrator expresses that the source of Catherine’s achievement was a product of her commitment to ensure that all her children went to school. These children did not simply go to school to obtain basic education, but Catherine ensured that they studied up to the level of professional courses. As such, after completing their professional courses, Mutwa for instance, became a Medical Assistant worker, while Swela became a Parcel Officer and shortly, promoted to Parcel Manager in the East African Community. This shows that women in families can play very important roles in developing their children’s academic careers so that they become responsible for their future life. Thus, it was such achievements that won her respect in the village. Again, Catherine’s identity as a respected woman is well

manifested during her funeral ceremony, the moment in which many people attended in her recognition as the narrator says:

Many people travelled from neighbouring villages to attend Catherine's funeral. It was the best attended funeral in the entire Iringa district. Catherine had come to be regarded in the village, both by missionaries from Tosamanga Mission, and villages from Mseke, Yigwachanya and other neighbouring villages, as a woman who had set standards on how an upright citizen should conduct oneself. Although she could not herself read and write, she nevertheless recognized the importance of education to her children. It was such recognition that had given her the distinction of becoming the first parent in her area to send her children, Mudeke, Swela, Mutwa, and Mleke to school. Her sole, extremely important decision, had later turned her family into the most advanced in the village (Endless Toil, 200).

It is obvious that Catherine's identity as a renown and well-respected woman was a result of her commitment in living by her religious upright moral standards, as well as her natural ability in making wise decisions. In spite of 'seeing' no single class suggesting that she was unable to read and write, which is an important prerequisite for getting knowledge through reading various literatures; she had realized the significance of education in one's life. As such, she decided to ensure that all her children obtained sound education for their future life, despite the fact that her husband did not support her.

Mudeke is as well portrayed as a well-respected woman in the village. Her commitment to her moral standards made her identity and respect known than that of her mother. As a kind woman, she used to provide her villagers 'seeds on credit on the understanding that they would repay her after their harvest' (Tagalile 2006:219). To confirm that she was really a sympathetic woman, 'she never demanded interest on any of the numerous credits she extended to the villagers, both at Mseke and other neighbouring villages' (Tagalile 2006:219). Hence, it is this honest moral trait that made Mudeke famous like bush fire. Besides, during her funeral ceremony, the number of funeral attendants 'outstripped that of her mother's reflecting the enormous popularity she enjoyed in the area' (Tagalile 2006:219). Her popularity was a product of kindheartedness to her neighbours from her heart's spirit of giving. The novel portrays Mudeke as a generous person

who was known in her village. As such, she managed to make her identity known to others. Part of her trait is reflected through the following quote:

Mudeke earned her nickname, which extolled her self-less virtue, because she had, on many occasions, saved many villagers from famine and bankruptcy through her well-stocked granary. ... Her ability to solve other people's problems had made her appear more a man than a woman, in the face of many Mseke villagers (Endless Toil, 178).

The above quote shows that Mudeke was an important person in solving problems of hunger and shortage of money in her vicinity. Her trait was so outstanding to the extent that the villagers equaled her with men. This shows that women are as important as men in the society as they are equally useful in solving problems in a given society in which they live.

The Negative Image Portrayal

Portrayed as Sufferers of Oppressive Traditional Cultural Practices

In African societies there are some traditional cultural practices that oppress women. Such oppressive practices include whipping wives, confiscating widows' properties by relatives of the husbands and inheriting widows. In the novel, Mudeke is portrayed as a victim of such oppressive practices emanating from patriarchy. The novel shows that Mudeke was a widow who was oppressed by the relatives of her late husband as they demanded a Singer sewing machine which she received as a 'wedding present from her own brother' (Tagalile 2006:96). Under this circumstance, she was in a difficult situation to the extent that she decided to stop 'living in the house and tilling the land of her husband' (Tagalile 2006:96). However, instead of remaining a feeble victim of such situation, she decided to go to her parents. The narrator says:

One night, she packed and secretly left with her five children in her home, in Mseke village. She arrived in the village without a single piece of luggage on her head! The only things she had brought with her were her children's clothes. Her parents gave her a piece of land and few new cooking utensils with which to start her new life (Endless Toil, 97).

Being conscious of the problems related to widows, she decided to go to her parents. Fascinatingly, her parents were ready to support her as they offered her with cooking utensils to

start again a new life with her helpless five children. The cooperation she received from her parents reminds of the African feminist view that African feminism is aware of ‘certain salient aspects of women’s subjugation which differ from the generalized oppression of all African peoples’ (Davies 1986:9). Mudeke’s parents realized this subjugation and their daughter’s

oppression. To solve this problem Mudeke opted for going back home and, in turn, her parents supported her by providing her with arable land to sustain her and the five children. Instead of remaining to her husband’s relatives, she decided to go where she came from before marriage. Though this option can be viewed as failure to demand her right from the relatives of her husband, it is likely that this was the best option for her. This is because she realized that her parents were ready to support her to restart fresh life with her children. Additionally, given the fact that she had all the energy and good health, all that she needed was land on which she could till and produce for sustaining her five children. The realization of cooperation on the part of Mudeke’s parents, emphasizes the African feminist view that ‘cooperation between women and men, rather than promote polarization and fragmentation’ is important in fighting women's subjugation in patriarchal societies (Steady, 1987:8). Mudeke’s parents realized the importance of lending a hand to Mudeke to solve her problem of being oppressed by the relatives of her late husband, John Mwelu. Instead of marginalizing her so that she could solve the problem on her own, they realized the need for joint efforts to alleviate their daughter from her turmoil situation. The moral and material support received from her parents motivated Mudeke to work hard to the extent that she became one of the most prosperous people in the village. Part of what Mudeke did after having settled is narrated as follows:

She established a small shop where she sold sugar, salt, kerosene and matches, very important commodities for village life in those days. Her first born, was proceeding well with his studies at Tosamanga secondary school. Jenipher and Lucy were doing equally well at Geitini, where they were pursuing their Middle school education. Mudeke was able to meet all their fees, together with other up-keep expenses from income she earned from her shop and sales of her farm produce (Endless Toil, 97).

The above quote shows that it is the hard-working spirit that helped Mudeke get out of hardships perpetuated by patriarchal machinations. Apart from support derived from her parents, Mudeke was well determined to get out of bottlenecks of patriarchal machinations extended to her by the relatives of her late husband.

Grace is as well portrayed as a tolerant of oppressive cultural practices. The novel shows that Grace tolerated a lot of troubles from her husband as ‘the tug of war between Grace and George over money had gone for many years’ (Tagalile 2006:20). Nevertheless, Grace ‘could not abandon her irresponsible husband for fear of what the people, especially back home in Sikonge, would say about her’ (Tagalile 2006:20). This shows that Grace could not abandon her husband

due to social constructs towards marriages. She was worried to confront negative comments over her decision if she would abandon her irresponsible husband. However, it is important to note that Grace’s tolerance for an irresponsible husband was motivated by the fear perpetuated by oppressive cultural practices, but not her love for the husband. Understanding the influence with which these practices had over her life:

Grace feared the verdict of society rather than what would become of them as a family, if they finally failed to educate their children not for want of money; but because the lone, breadwinner and head of the family had elected to spend the money elsewhere, outside the family (*Endless Toil*, 21).

With that understanding in mind the narrator adds:

She knew that given the kind of society she lived in; they would definitely not hold Mjuaji responsible for whatever marital problem should crop up between them. They would always turn their suspicious eyes to her as the main culprit. That is, even if they knew Mjuaji was the source of the problem. After all, ‘men were always right’ as far as many Tanganyikans were concerned! That was, unfortunately, what the society had preached in the past, was presently preaching, and was likely to continue to preach in the future (*Endless Toil*, 21).

The above quotes show that Grace was oppressed, because of the established social system which associated marital problems with only women and not men. For example, it is not true that men are always right, because both men and women are imperfect. That being the case, men can equally mess up like women. In fact, Grace’s family faced problems that emanated from her

husband's weaknesses. As a head of the family, Gorge Mjuaji was responsible to ensure that his family was provided with food, clothes and the other needed social amenities. Yet, Gorge Mjuaji spent his income 'outside' home at the expense of his family, thus creating problems in his own family. Despite these problems, Grace tolerated to maintain her marriage as she feared the society's criticism if she exposed her husband's problems. This is because the society could not understand her since it believed that problems emanated from women should any break up of marriage occur. However, with reference to contextual criticism¹ as viewed by Davies (1986) from African feminism perspective, marriages are made stable through mutual cooperation between a husband and wife. Since both men and women can commit mistakes in decision making over daily matters, problems in marriage cannot just be linked to women. There are various cases 'out there' where marital problems are linked to mistakes committed by men and

not only women as the case with Gorge Mjuaji in this text. Hence, it is gender stereotyping to assume that Grace was the source of her marital problems with her case, while in actual sense, it was Gorge Mjuaji whose irresponsible behaviour to his family was accountable for such problems.

Unlike Mudeke, Grace's situation was difficult to solve her problem, except persevering the situation. This explains why African feminists call for 'recognition of the inequalities and limitations in traditional societies' (Davies 1986:9). That is, African traditional societies have some cultural aspects that undermine women, hence, the need to identify such aspects and eliminate them through joint efforts by both men and women. As such women and men are urged to unite for a common struggle against such kind of injustices perpetuated by patriarchal machinations. However, in the context of the novel, Grace was helpless in her struggle against her husband's ill behaviour as she feared societal criticism if she were to expose her husband's problems to the society. The novel shows that Grace's fear was intensified by women who 'had been made to believe that if what you called your husband did not, once in a while, lay a hand on you, then he did not love you... true marital love meant an occasional beating of one's wife. In a

¹ Contextual criticism realizes that analyzing a text without some consideration of the world with which it has material relationship is of little social value. See *Ngambika Studies of Women in African Literature*. Edited by Carole Boyce Davies and Anne Adams Graves. African World Press, Inc. 1986 page. 12

way, beating ... was akin to kissing!' (Tagalile 2006:21). This shows that women in Grace's society were supporters of oppressive practices. As such, it was extremely difficult for Grace to fight alone any injustice associated with patriarchy. Thus, it can be argued that Grace and other women in her village did not realize the point suggested by Dill (1983:1 as quoted in Kweka (2012) that 'sisterhood is an important unifying force in the struggle against male chauvinism and patriarchy'. Had the other women in the village realized the importance of unity fostered by sisterhood, they would have supported Grace to fight oppressive practices exerted on her by her husband. Moreover, Grace herself shows that she did not take any initiative to challenge such injustices inherent in her society. As a result, she joined the other women by simply tolerating the problem instead of fighting. This situation is explicated by Ogundipe-Leslie as quoted in Davies (1986:8) saying:

Women are shackled by their own negative self-image, by centuries of the interiorization of the ideologies of patriarchy and gender hierarchy. Her own reactions to the objective problems therefore are often self-defeating and self-crippling. She reacts with fear dependency complexes and attitudes to please and cajole where more self-assertive actions are needed.

Ogundipe's observations fit so well in accounting the problem that Grace encountered and the other women in the novel. Their negative self-image towards themselves against oppressive practices is a barrier to solve the problem. Again, Grace's reaction against the situation she faced was affected by her own fear. Her fear was motivated by her attitude to please her fellow women and the society at large at the expense of her own sufferings in a situation where self-assertive actions were needed. Faced with all these problems, both Grace and the other women in Sikonge nurtured oppressive cultural practices that undermined their dignity as women. Furthermore, Grace's tolerance for oppression perpetuated by patriarchal society implies that Grace was affected by fear which can be interpreted as a 'symbol of passivity and powerlessness' as suggested by Mahoney (1996:604 as quoted in Kweka (2012). Unlike Mudeke who fought against such oppression, Grace nurtured oppression through passivity which made her powerless as she tolerated the situation instead of fighting against it. Oppression can be removed through fighting against it but not persevering, especially when your enemy is there to perpetuate and defend it.

Conclusion

Contrary to the general observations by different scholars and ‘feminist’ readers who vehemently argue that female characters in literary works are negatively portrayed, as noted in the introduction, the general findings of this paper show both positive and negative portrayals. As noted in the findings, Atilio Tagalile in his novel has portrayed female characters showing the two sides of the coin. Thus, it can be argued that these findings suggest a plausible and realistic image of female characters as they are shaped by the society in which they live. So, to answer the research question, it can be argued that Tagalile’s *Endless Toil* portrays both positive and negative images of female characters reflecting a realistic picture of any human being as they are nurtured and shaped by any social system of a given society. Nevertheless, it should generally be noted that gender stereotyping in which the novel is set has had a strong influence in the shaping of the negative image of the female characters represented. Thus, the findings suggest that the

author does not lean on one side of female portrait; instead, he has shown the two sides of any ordinary human being with regard to women as viewed by the society in which the novel is set. These portraits advocate a realistic image of a real-life situation, because people have different views and perspectives towards women. In addition, all human beings have both negative and positive ideals. Although there are various forces that have positively influenced people’s attitudes and perspectives towards women, it remains an irrefutable fact that gender stereotypes have very strong influence in people’s mindsets as they are shaped by patriarchy. As such, it takes a long time to replenish the biases towards women with new perspectives as gender education is given continuously in our societies.

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