

From the Cradle to the Grave: A Feminist Stylistic Reading of Select Poems from Juka Jabang's *The Phoenix*

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Abstract: This study examines the use of poetic artistry as a contribution to social reformation in Juka Jabang's *The Phoenix* to highlight the cultural and social tendencies that contribute to the oppression of women in the Gambian context. It draws attention to the oppression of Gambian women not just as a general societal predisposition, but as a phenomenon deeply rooted in the most fundamental unit of the family. Using Sarah Mills' model of feminist stylistics, the article aims to explore the use of point of view, agency, metaphor, and transitivity to expose the socio-cultural beliefs and practices that perpetuate the oppression of women in Gambian society. The study adopts a qualitative, linguistic-cum-literary analysis based on four poems purposively selected from the collection on the basis of their thematic preoccupation with the plight of women in a male-dominated society. The analysis also pays attention to the literary devices appropriated by the poet in a bid to poeticize the experience of Gambian women at the hands of an unrelenting male hegemony. The analysis reveals that cultural beliefs in the so-called superiority of the male child, the ostensible impurity of uncircumcised women, the submissiveness of women particularly in marriage, and the professed right to multiple wives as major factors that legitimize the oppression of women in Gambian society.

Keywords: oppression, patriarchy, poetry, African feminism, feminist stylistics

Introduction

Female oppression as a form of subjugation and abuse is hinged is a common feature in a predominantly rural, traditional, patriarchal society such as The Gambia.¹ The phallogocentric bias of a rigid patriarchy has left Gambian women vulnerable to spousal abuse and other forms of marital, sexual, and gender-based violence. Certain cultural constructs such as the male-child preference have suppressed the status and value of women with unequal access to decision making, education, and financial freedom. In addition, as Isatou Touray laments, culturally sanctioned practices such as polygamy and female genital mutilation doom women to traumatizing sexual and reproductive lives.² Such deeply entrenched social and cultural practices condemn many Gambian women to life-long psychological as well as physical oppression.³

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Oppression and injustice have challenged African woman writers to bring women's issues to the forefront of the debate.⁴ In response to this inescapable task, feminist poets such as Juka Jabang have developed a poetic style sympathetic to the plight of the ordinary woman because they are conscious of the critical relationship between literature and society, as well as of their inextricable ties to their own societies. Jabang is a Gambian poet whose work is driven by the realization that Gambian women need to find their own voice to tell their own story. Her poetic vision is directed mainly at those responsible for the oppression of women. Her anthologies—*The Repeal* (2006) and *The Phoenix* (2012)—connect her poetic artistry to African feminist debates and reflect her consciousness of the African feminist writer's vision.

As a prominent figure in Gambian poetry, Jabang finds her place in the vibrant fabric of Gambian literature, specifically within the third generation of Gambian poets. She is recognized as a contemporary writer who navigates the complexities of societal issues, capturing the essence of societal struggles, particularly the plight of women. The collaborative nature of *The Repeal*—including fellow poets such as Matilda Johnson and Ann Therese Ndong-Jatta—positions her within a rich lineage of collective artistic endeavors. This resonates with the profound sense of community often found in African literary traditions, where voices come together to address common issues. Delving into comparable themes of social critique and activism, Jabang follows in the path of her predecessors Lenrie Peters and Tijan Sallah, challenging societal norms and advocating for meaningful social transformation.

Jabang's poetic imagination intertwines with the ongoing discussions that shape the African literary realm. Her poetry carries a social function that resonates with the thoughts of African scholars who emphasize the power of literature to ignite social transformation.⁵ Her poignant exploration of the treatment of African women, the exploitation of the African continent, and the pervasive injustices of society firmly situate her work within the broader discourse of African literature that seeks to inspire social change and ignite activism. In both the social anchorage of her thematic concerns and her stylistic preference for lucid, accessible poetic expression, Jabang adopts the alter/native trend of African poetry distinguished by a strong social commitment and a return to African poetics.

According to Magaji, poetry thrives on the manipulation of linguistic elements to produce spontaneous and powerful emotions that, through the employment of suitable literary techniques and diction, are rendered in a distinctive artistic color and flavor.⁶ This creativity implies the deployment of stylistic features which bring out the artistic function of poetry. Leech and Short argue that the stylistician's interest in the link between linguistic features and literary function is not merely to identify the stylistic features of a text, but to determine their contextual relevance to the purpose of the text.⁷ The fact that women continue to fight against inequality and oppression in different ways in the 21st century, indicates that gender issues still need to be addressed. To this effect, Montoro suggests that the methodical approach common to feminist stylistic analysis offers a good approach for dealing with this challenge.⁸

Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore—beyond the mere description of the linguistic elements and stylistics features used to capture the oppression of women—how point of view, metaphor, and transitivity are used to depict cultural beliefs that support suppression of women. It concentrates on a selection of poems from Juka Jabang's collection *The Phoenix*.⁹ Besides that it is iconic among feminist works of poetry in the lean body of Gambian literature,

this collection provides a rare and radical stage to engage in a duel that could change societal expectations about male-female relationships and help us in our critical understanding of African feminism.

Various studies have attempted to highlight feminist issues depicted in literary works around the world and Africa in particular. In light of feminine stylistics, Arikan analyzed the use of lexico-semantic elements and the gendered sentence (*écriture féminine*) in Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*.¹⁰ Arikan draws attention to Carter's attempts to deconstruct the classical fairy tale as a patriarchal construct intended to sustain the prevailing gender stereotypes of women characters as weak and docile. Similarly, Zahra and Shahwar reveal a parallel attempt in Maya Angelou's "Phenomenal Woman" and "Woman Work" as the poet sets out to challenge and subvert the stereotypical misrepresentation and oppression of women in her society.¹¹ They emphasize the poet's preoccupation with the plight of women depicting their struggle to survive the culturally imposed, socially sanctioned perils of subordination, marginalization, and oppression.

Using Halliday's transitivity model, Kayani and Anwar explore how male and female characters are represented through the choice of process types and their accompanying participants in Tariq Ali's *The Book of Saladin*.¹² They discover that female characters are accorded more power of agency than the male characters. However, since their analysis was based only on romance scenes from the novel, the extent to which female characters enjoy power and control in other aspects of life is not highlighted. Hussain and Jabeen in their analysis of *Broken Verses* by Kamila Shamsie, notice that male characters are given holonymic agency whereas women characters are given meronymic agency.¹³ The body of women characters are dismembered and presented in a fragmented way that focuses on separate body parts as acting alone—a mode of presentation that depersonalizes women, highlighting their lack of control even over their own bodies and their experiences as irrelevant. Thus, the power of agency that female characters enjoy in Ali's romance scenes is contradicted by their lack of control and agency in other, more important activities of life portrayed in Shamsie's work.

In the context of contemporary African society, Makama explores the influence of socio-cultural and political institutions such as marriage, religion, culture, education, economics, sexuality, and male dominance as manifestations of patriarchal ideologies that support unequal gender relations, discrimination, and oppression of women.¹⁴ Bamgbose opines that this oppression has been a subject of passionate engagement by women African poets.¹⁵ It is therefore necessary for critical attention to interrogate the relevance of the issues these poets textualize.¹⁶ To this effect, several attempts have been made to theorize African feminism. However, Eze suggests a theory of feminist empathy which argues for an engagement of African feminist literature with introspection and empathy reflecting on African patriarchal traditions and political, socio-cultural and intersubjective realities beyond the anti-colonial or post-colonial write-back ideologies.¹⁷ This concept provides a sound theoretical standpoint that anchors the article's focus on self-examination of indigenous socio-cultural establishments within the feminism debate of African literary circles.

Okoronkwo-Chukwu demonstrates the aptness of applying introspection and empathy to the works of third generation female African writers, emphasizing the relationship between culture and gender relations.¹⁸ In as much as he observes that these writers depict the pain and

despair that African women face in various forms of rape, female circumcision, prostitution, polygamy, and battery, he also emphasizes the role of gender, status, and belief as cultural factors that influence a people's way of life. Ufot utilizes various theoretical frameworks—including Sara Mill's model—to conduct a comparative lexico-grammatical study of *Pride and Prejudice* and *The General's Wife*.¹⁹ His study demonstrates that feminine stylistics is a suitable approach to engage the linguistic aspect of women's struggles to liberate themselves from oppression as depicted in African women's literary works.

The application of Mill's model of feminist stylistics in African literature is not very common, due probably to the fact that Western feminist ideology is described as radical and imperialist in nature by African feminists. Politically, such feminists challenge the presumed universality of Western feminist theories that may not fully reflect the subtleties and complexity of African women's lives. They contend with the imposition of Western standards, arguing that these standards may not be consistent with the actual realities of African women. Epistemologically, the challenge is against the dominant narrative that elevates Western feminist thinking to the status of the norm. Instead, these feminists create alternative theories which they argue are more grounded in negotiation, collaboration, and cultural awareness. For instance, Ogundipe-Leslie's "stiwanism" challenges the binary thinking that is frequently present in Western feminist ideologies and represents a call for social transformation in which men and women have complementary potential.²⁰ To represent African social reality, Acholonu proposes terminology like "motherism," "patrilocality," and "matrilocality" to challenge Western conceptions of patriarchy and matriarchy.²¹ Nnaemeka's "nego-feminism" highlights common principles across African civilizations, including compromise and stability.²² Adimora-Ezeigbo's "snail-sense feminism" promotes African women's survival tactics inside patriarchal institutions.²³

Western feminist theories such as Mill's model, however, can yield a subtle understanding of African gender dynamics when applied carefully. It provides specific tools of stylistic analysis that can be used to examine especially where a vital sense of commitment to highlight and address social concerns overrides political and epistemic concerns. Its successful application on an African literary text by Ufot is proof of its potential in highlighting urgent issues that confront ordinary African women. It is particularly relevant to the collection selected for this study—Jabang is preoccupied with the sole concern of revealing the oppression of women and, in doing so, laying bare the socio-cultural beliefs that legitimize that oppression. The model is therefore a suitable framework for an introspective engagement of texts that is aimed at exposing these socio-cultural beliefs and practices as purely social and cultural constructs.

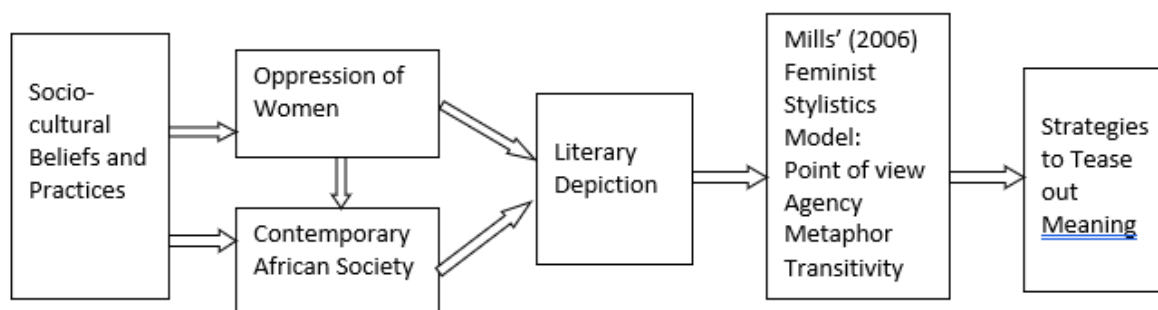
From the foregoing, it is evident that several studies have looked at—both from a linguistic and a literary perspective—unequal gender relations, discrimination, and oppression of women as depicted in both poetry and prose in modern African literature. However, despite the patriarchal nature of Gambian society, analysis of feminist issues in Gambian literature in particular remains unexplored. A feminist stylistic investigation is therefore important, exposing the socio-cultural beliefs and practices that promote unequal gender relations but also contributing a missing perspective on the Gambian situation to the existing body of African feminist criticism. In this light, the research problem revolves around the poetic representation

of ordinary African women's experiences as crafted by contemporary African women writers such as Juka Jabang. The oppression and pain they convey underlines the necessity to devise strategies that tease more meaning out of their literary texts to interrogate the inherent patriarchal ideology. Thus, the study aims to test the applicability of Mills' model of feminine stylistics to explore the hitherto uncharted territory of feminism in Gambian literature.

In pursuit of a greater understanding, the research seeks to accomplish a number of important objectives to highlight and critically examine the oppression of women Gambian society as depicted in the poems under analysis. The study aims to identify the themes of the selected poems, identify the linguistic and literary devices employed by the poet to convey these themes, and explore how these devices express the social and cultural norms that perpetuate the oppression of women. To achieve these objectives, the article seeks to answer pertinent questions about themes addressed in the selected poems, how the poet appropriates linguistic and literary devices, and to what extent socio-cultural beliefs and practices are highlighted as sustaining the subjugation of women.

In the context of our inquiry, we anchor our analysis in a conceptual framework that serves as fundamental basis for evaluating the socio-cultural factors that impact gender relations and inequality in the literary work under investigation. Socio-cultural beliefs and practices have strongly affected the lives of women all around the world. In contemporary African society, women have been subjugated and oppressed by certain socio-cultural beliefs and practices prevalent in a predominantly patriarchal context. In response, African women writers have used language to portray in literary depictions the oppression of contemporary African women. Highlighting the relationship between language and socio-cultural forces, feminist stylistics explains that texts are invaded by socio-cultural beliefs and practices that legitimize the subordination of women. Sarah Mills' model of feminist stylistics indicates that the oppression of women has linguistic correlates and sets out to identify these correlations. It investigates the use of point of view, agency, metaphor, and transitivity as linguistic and literary devices to uncover the socio-cultural consciousness from which the text is constructed and understood. From a feminist standpoint, this will constitute a commitment to tease more meaning from texts in order to make social structures less oppressive to women.

Figure 1: Visual illustration of the conceptual framework



Source: Author generated (2024)

The data for the study consist of selected poems from Juka Jabang's *The Phoenix*. The motivation for selecting this collection is its focal engagement with the oppression of Gambian women. A sample of four poems is selected based on the criterion that they highlight the most common severe forms of oppression and depict the subordination of women in Gambian society. These poems deal with issues such as male child preference, female genital mutilation, commercialization of the female body, and polygamy—all critical issues in Gambian feminist debates. For this reason, the selected poems are representative of the poet's feminist concerns. The poems are then subjected to a close reading to select the most relevant portions that draw attention to these forms of oppression. A form of textual analysis that pays close attention to how linguistic and literary features are used in the poems in relation to the social and cultural context is conducted in order to uncover the socio-cultural beliefs and practices that support these forms of oppression.

Analysis

In "She Is Nothing," Jabang dedicates a five-stanza poem to depict the plight of female children born in an unforgiving patriarchy. Beginning with the birth of a girl child, the poem depicts her unwelcome arrival, subsequent servitude, enforced subjugation, compliance, and helplessness. Addressing this against the inordinate preference for a male child, the poem describes how the birth of a female child comes at a time when everyone is expecting a boy. From the beginning of the poem, the subject matter is that cultural beliefs about the insignificance of the female gender are manifested right from birth. These beliefs form the basis for oppressive gender relations that last a lifetime. The poem begins with the birth of a girl in this manner:

Hurled from the celestial abode
Her first vision was
The murky light that enveloped
Her callous world
Greeted with no exaltation
No joy, no jubilation²⁴

From the beginning, the projectile image depicted by "hurled" as a metaphorical expression of the birth of a girl-child suggests a painful arrival in an unwelcome world of insensitivity and pain. It also depicts a transgressive view of giving birth to a baby girl instead of a boy. Thus, the metaphor of "light" which could have referred to opportunities in relation to a bright future implies instead a "murky" world of deprivation and oppression.

But more germane here from a feminist perspective is the consciousness from which this view of the female gender is related, requiring the application of narratological categories to reveal the message of the poem. The deployment of narratological categories such as focalization and point of view in the analysis of poetry highlight a number of issues. It is an innovative approach albeit one that raises the question of whether poetry as a distinctive genre can be approached with analytical tools conventionally utilized for other literary and cultural forms. According to Mills, the essence of focalization is to identify the consciousness through which an event is presented in a text, while point of view refers to the vantage point from which

the message of a text is conveyed. In the analysis of poetry, these categories can be deployed to explore how poets construct their narratives, how they deal with narrative elements in their poetry, and the perspectives through which poets convey these narratives to elicit emotions. Poetry frequently involves storytelling elements, and both focalization and point of view can provide the analytical means to unpack how narratives are constructed in poetic expression. Furthermore, the deployment of narratological categories in the analysis of poetry allows for the disentanglement of the subtle ways in which poetry connects with other literary traditions such as narrative genre. It also highlights the way in which poetry draws upon other literary forms and emphasizes the task to seek a delicate position in deploying analytical tools that recognize the uniqueness of poetic expression and yet draw upon the multifaceted nature of poetic composition.

Returning to ‘She is Nothing,’ the poet strategically employs the external focalizer to reveal the cultural value of the girl-child reflected in society’s cold reception of her birth. What is focalized is thus the society’s point of view regarding the girl-child. Mills theorizes that the interpretation of a text is closely related to the point of view which is constructed to influence the reader’s empathy by means of the vision that is focalized.²⁵ In that light, the society’s point of view about the girl-child is summed up in the title of the poem ‘She Is Nothing.’ The use of the feminine pronoun in a stereotypical slot is compelling as it reveals a patriarchal view of inferiority embedded in the sexist use of the feminine pronoun ‘She’ in a stereotypical slot. This slot refers to the cultural concept of low status and value associated with the girl-child.

Thus, the expression “They preferred a boy-child,” is a simple, matter-of-fact statement of the cultural belief in the superiority of the male child that underlies all the prejudice and discrimination against the girl-child. “They” becomes a pronominal deictic representation of society. In that sense, what is presented is not merely a male point of view on the female gender but an indication of the extent to which the patriarchal ideology that leads to oppression of women is rooted in the cultural psyche of the society. This is evident in the fact that even women themselves, as part of society, partake in the prejudice against the girl child and preference for the male child.

The poet then reveals how this cultural preference is manifested in the socio-cultural system of gender relations and power as captured in the following extract from the second stanza:

The essence of everything
Belongs to him, not her
He owns the world
He controls everything
He
Eminent possessor of the goats
The land and the women²⁶

Turning our attention to the opposing point of view regarding the male child, the poet focalizes the patriarchal world of absolute male dominance in which the girl-child must grow in the shadow of the male. The poet’s predilection for the free verbal repetition of “He” as a deictic reference to the male child is a significant rhetorical device. His absolute authority and right of

ownership are stylistically depicted not only by his textual power to command a whole line in the poem, but also by his total ownership of the cultural artefacts of wealth and eminence. The poet thus depicts a world in which men own and control everything including women and draws attention to an acculturated sense of supremacy of men over women. On the flip side, however, the extract highlights the extreme level of a pervasive form of discrimination that leaves women in a cycle of poverty and powerlessness, reproducing the unequal power relations that heighten their vulnerability to oppression in a socio-cultural setting that limits the essence of their existence to domestic service and childbearing.

Therefore, these lopsided gender relations also result from the socio-cultural limitation of the essence of women as producers and reproducers of the lineage. As Mills argues, this stereotypical view of women as capable of fulfilling only certain roles as housewives and mothers has been the basis on which women have been restricted from participating in many activities potentially helpful in their emancipation. One can sense the suppression in the following extract from the third stanza:

Tomorrow's exalted offspring
Must all be earned today
Only by the service, honour
And worship of her Keeper²⁷

There are two stylistic features that are relevant in the picture of oppression painted in this extract. At the lexical level, the material process "earned" is suggestive of the housewife's condition of toil and labor. In addition, the nominal groups "service," "honour," and "worship" could be read as material and mental actions that depict servitude. Although the subject of these actions is not explicitly mentioned, it is easy to deduce that the housewife is the implied subject, and that the metaphorical "Keeper" is the explicit object. In that sense, highlighting the cultural requisite that women must endure a master-servant type of relationship with their husbands as a condition for the blessing of their children. From the level of discourse, the use of "Must" firmly anchors the deontic modality that locates the housewife's obligation to obey this cultural dictate and her husband.

Cultural dictates often serve as justification for practices that have come to be perceived as oppressive to women. "The Injunction" is a soliloquy of three stanzas in which the female victim speaks for herself. With a profound glare of pathos that is heightened by use of powerful imagery and the first-person voice to elicit sympathy, the poem confronts the serious issue of clitoridectomy as a perennial gender problem that has been the subject of long-standing condemnation. In the beginning stanza, the poet raises the issue in this manner:

Proclaimed by the omnipotent
Patriarchs
That the venomous inferno
Must be extinguished
The burning flame concealed
Inside the serpent's accomplice
Has to be smothered, as licentious

Nymphs, if unbridled, breed
Instability and chaos for man²⁸

The poet's elaboration of various metaphorical expressions constitutes an important literary device in conveying the ideological apparatus that is used to legitimize this practice. The use of "inferno" and "burning flame" as metaphorical references to women challenges the patriarchal view of women as out of control and incapable of obedience to moral dictates against pre- or extra-marital sex. This image of untrustworthiness is worsened further by the metaphorical association of women to serpents and nymphs portraying them as sexually impure and particularly lascivious. Given Mills' argument that metaphors often reflect a pre-existing system of beliefs, these expressions are figurative depictions of the prevalent socio-cultural belief in much of Gambian society that women must be ritually cleansed not only to ensure their virginity and marriageability, but also to prevent them from corrupting the moral fiber of society.²⁹

The effects of this supposedly cleansing ritual on women, however, are exposed as profoundly disabling in the next extract from the second stanza:

The uncanny blade
Of the eccentric ancestors
Raw and flawed
Clips off the bud and robs me of my sensuality
Leaving a dark desolate hole in my element³⁰

As Mills argues, the use of internal focalization is a stylistic mechanism that allows the reader access to the focalizer's internalized psychological point of view.³¹ We might analyze further that the point of view in the extract is projected from the consciousness of a female personality who has first-hand experience of the effects of this ritual—as indicated by the first-person pronoun. The construction of this point of view, coupled with the sympathetic rendition of the extract, conveys an aura of victimization against women that compels empathy.

Furthermore, it is easy to see how the mention of "blade" brings the image of cutting to mind. Apart from that, the association of the blade with the "ancestors" suggests a long-standing practice of cutting associated with women and their sexuality. Thus, one can now see the use to which the ancestral blade is put during female genital cutting. The cutting of "the bud," an agrarian metaphor which symbolizes the sensitivity of women, is thus presented as an act of cruelty and profound denial. The oppressiveness portrayed intensifies the feeling of emptiness it leaves behind as sensuality is taken away and along with it, sexual gratification so deeply inherent in human desire.

It is thus understandable why the poet continues to bewail the effects of what is considered a defilement of women's sex life through the experience of the homodiegetic victim in the following extract from the third stanza:

Like a cold wooden mortar
I shall passively endure

The sordid pounding
Of the virile pestle³²

The predominant stylistic marker is the use of a cultural metaphor to depict the numbing effect that denies women the human quality of sexual pleasure. In addition to numerous reproductive and psychological effects, the metaphor of the mortar and the pestle portrays a male active/female passive type of asymmetrical sexual relationship that suppresses women's sexuality into mere containers—simply recipients of male sexual activity.

We have already seen how the institution of marriage constitutes a socio-cultural space where women confront oppressive circumstances and patriarchal ideologies that dictate male domination and female submission.³³ "The Docile Wife" is a poem of five stanzas that challenges the endemic matrimonial abuse of women in contemporary Gambian society, bemoaning the systematic abuse and commercialization of an institution that has condemned women to dysfunctional marriages wherein they are regarded as men's property. The first stanza portrays a vivid description of the bone-deep fatigue that women suffer in marriage. In the second stanza, the poet hacks at the socio-cultural circumstances that condemn women to this situation:

The customary conjugal prescriptions
Ratifying the purchase
Of this vulnerable property,
Invokes normal sanctions
Of violence and control³⁴

The subject matter is clearly the cultural conceptions that define the terms by which the institution is established and the position of women within it. The mercantile language in which marriage is negotiated is revealing. Once more, the poet's penchant for metaphorical expressions as fundamental representations of the structure of our thoughts leads us to the cultural perception of women as commodities, highlighting their utilitarian value.

In addition, the poet identifies marriage as the platform that provides parents with cultural grounds for explicit control of their womenfolk. They prioritize financial considerations over dignity and moral fortitude when selecting husbands for their daughters. The lexical use of the items "purchase" and "property" depict commercialization of the female body that has turned marriage into an enterprise from which all profit—except the wife. Having been sold off like property, the wife has no claim to dignity or rights. She is reduced essentially to the rank of a house slave, trapped in a dysfunctional marriage in the context of a socio-cultural setting that justifies battering and other forms of intimate partner violence. The reader confronts an oppressive, dysfunctional marital institution where women are helpless victims.

Therefore, it may be assumed that the poet presents a separatist ideal as indicated in "I Am Leaving for Good." This poem is another soliloquy of five stanzas in the first-person voice that allows a homodiegetic persona to vent her frustration at the issue of irrational polygamy. The main subject is frustration and powerlessness that women experience in marriage compelling them to abandon the marriage institution. Relevant here is Mills argument that an analysis of transitivity choices in a text can explore how women's powerlessness is presented in language.³⁵

Specifically, this refers to how the process types associated with women depict their lack of agency and control. According to Mills, a character's power of agency and control are realized in material action intention processes.³⁶ Therefore, extracting these material action intention processes and identifying their actors can categorize which participant has more influence and control.

Altogether, the poem contains sixteen material processes. These processes are identified by counting the number of verbs which indicate 'doings' or 'happenings'. Out of these, six are material action intention processes in which there is an indication of a clear intention to carry out the process, as quoted below:

So I must leave
To end it all.
Let her know
Let her know that
We have made your journeys
Tonight, as I take leave of you³⁷

In lines 1, 2 and 6, the speaking female figure of the wife is the actor, that is the participant who carries out the process, whereas the male figure of the husband is the implied actor in lines 3 and 4. Thus, given the determination expressed by the wife to carry out the material process expressed in lines 1, 2 and 6 with the use of deontic modality indicated by "must" in line 1, we can see that she claims a considerable amount of decision-making power. However, the fact that her determination and subsequent decision are borne out of pain and despair undermines her agency and control in the marriage. Furthermore, the goal of the processes wherein the husband is the implied actor is a significant participant in the discourse of the poem as well as that of the marriage institution. This is evident in the in the third and fourth lines through the persona's constant reference to "her," a pronominal representation of her co-wife. It is thus clear that the poem highlights the cultural practice of polygamy — an institution so coveted to many Gambian men while a source of pain and distress for women.

Alluding to Halliday's analysis of Golding's *The Inheritors*, Simpson argues that attributing full-blown mental processes to a character portrays the character as thoroughly aware of what is going on in their environment.³⁸ This argument is relevant here as the homodiegetic persona in the poem is attributed mental processes which convey her as fully aware of her own status and value. Consider the following abstract from the last stanza:

Tonight, as I take leave of you,
I want you to know,
You, my you, that
I am your pedestal³⁹

However, what is paradoxical is her inability to impose herself over the marginalizing and oppressive patriarchal establishment. This is stylistically depicted in the hypotactic mode of projection which presents the mental processes "want" and "to know." The representation of the female character's thinking draws a logical semantic relationship in which the desiderative

mental process “want” projects a second mental space “to know” where the relational clause “that / I am your pedestal” is the object of the mental process “to know” since the clause is what the persona wants her husband to know. In this light, the stylistic significance of the pronominal “you” which refers to the husband in “I want you to know” is interesting. Positioned between the two mental processes “want” and “to know,” the husband functions as both phenomenon in the first process and as sensor in the second. He constitutes the point at which the content of the projected clause is validated and has the power either to honor or deny the assertion captured in the object relational clause “that / I am your pedestal.” The idea conveyed is that even while asserting her own self-worth and significance to society, the wife’s position is still inferior to her husband. This point can be extended as an indication of how women in Gambian society have been suppressed by patriarchal ideologies and practices that limit their potentials.

Conclusion

The analysis reveals certain findings in respect of the themes addressed by the selected poems, the stylistic appropriation of linguistic and literary devices in conveyance of these themes, and the degree to which sociocultural beliefs and practices have been portrayed as cornerstones of an oppressive patriarchal system. Generally, the poems draw attention to a variety of socio-cultural phenomena relevant to the suffering of women in Gambian society.

“She Is Nothing” calls attention to the societal preference for the male child as a cultural tendency situated at the root of the inequality and prejudice. The imposition of cultural norms such as female genital cutting on the basis of patriarchal impulses of control over women’s virginity and sexuality constitutes the thematic concern in “The Injunction.” The findings also indicate that both “The Docile Housewife” and “I Am Leaving for Good” are concerned with how the institution of marriage has become the strongest expression of patriarchal dominance, ideology, and oppression of women.

The poems’ overarching themes reveal a genuine sense of dedication, which signals a deep understanding of social obligations to bring attention to the underappreciated experiences of Gambian women. In this regard, the analysis reveals an underlying consciousness of the significance of cultural institutions in defining unequal gender relations—a consciousness that Okoronkwo-Chukwu associates with the writings of ‘third generation’ female African writers.⁴⁰ Thus, Jabang’s preoccupation with expressing the pain and despair that Gambian women endure through institutions (marriage), cultural practices (female circumcision, polygamy), and commercialization questions the unfortunate socio-cultural realities that belie these oppressive aspects of society and places her firmly within this generation. Her poetic vision is also relatable to the concerns of Margie Carter and Maya Angelou with the struggle of women striving in socio-cultural institutions and patriarchal structures of servitude, exclusion and oppression.⁴¹

With regard Jabang’s appropriation of linguistic and literary devices, our analysis of the chosen poems also reveals a creative use of specific linguistic and literary devices that expose crucial issues at the core of gender issues that constitute her thematic focus. A preponderant use of metaphor exposes the belief in inferiority of women that nourishes a system of control and oppression. This control and oppression find expression in patriarchal constructs that are ideologically transformed and naturalized into oppressive cultural dictates and social

obligations that women must meet. The deployment of metaphor in this manner intersects with Mills contention that from a feminist perspective, the use of metaphorical descriptions of women are often reflections of pre-existing systems of belief that reveal prevalent attitudes towards the female gender.⁴²

The analysis also finds a creative exploitation of focalization techniques that reveal society's point of view of women from both a detached, external heterodiegetic persona who has omniscient knowledge of the patriarchal system, as well as from a feeling, subjective homodiegetic female who is oppressed and victimized by that system. The heterodiegetic persona is external to the events but the message is conveyed from her point of view. The homodiegetic persona on the other hand is the victim, the first-person voice who conveys her own lived experiences to the reader. By use of both types of personae, the reader's perception of the oppressed status of women is influenced from different perspectives in ways that corroborate Mills' argument that focalization and point of view are techniques utilized inform reader's judgement. This echoes Makama's observation of widespread oppression of women through social and cultural institutions that individuals as well as the collective gender.⁴³

Additionally, whereas Kayani and Anwar discover that women are presented in *The Book of Saladin* in a position of power and control through transitivity choices that depict them as active participants in verbal processes, our transitivity analysis reveals that women are presented with little or no agency, as powerless particularly in the institution of marriage.⁴⁴ This discrepancy between the two findings may be due to Kayani and Anwar's focus on romance scenes.⁴⁵ However, the use of material intention processes with male actors instead of female ones—who are used more as sensors in mental processes in serious issues like marriage—indicates that men wield authority over women. These findings resonate with Hussain and Jabeen who highlight the fragmented representation of women which depicts their powerlessness in relation to men in *Broken Verses*.⁴⁶

Each of the themes that Jabang's poems address rests on the influence of specific socio-cultural beliefs and practices that are ideologically propagated to normalize unequal and oppressive gender relations. The preference for the male child has been depicted as a discriminatory tendency that feeds mainly from the socio-cultural belief that women are inferior to men. This belief is in turn nurtured by the patrilineal organization of Gambian society whereby knowledge, power, wealth, and consequence are all associated with the male gender whereas women are considered mostly as child-bearers and domestic workers. In addition, the cultural notion that women are an impure gender needing to be cleansed through circumcision rituals is presented as a justification for the practice of female genital cutting. The ideology is strengthened by a direct cultural association between circumcision and marriageability of women. The oppression of women in marriage is exposed as largely due to a cultural mentality that gives absolute authority to husbands over wife/wives who are expected to be totally submissive and compliant.

We examined the use of poetic artistry as a contribution to social reformation in Juka Jabang's collection titled *The Phoenix*—highlighting the socio-cultural tendencies that precipitate the oppression of women in Gambian society. Using Mills' model of feminist stylistics, we explored the use of point of view, agency, metaphor, and transitivity to draw attention to the oppression of Gambian women, deeply rooted in socio-cultural beliefs and practices. Our

analysis revealed that the themes of the four poems under study range from male-child preference and effects of female circumcision to the powerlessness of women in marriage in general, and polygamous marriages in particular. These themes have been presented in relation to how they function both as manifestations and instruments of a patriarchal social system. Thus, the study attempted to accentuate the poet's efforts to challenge the patriarchal ideology and prejudice that has haunted many Gambian women from the cradle to the grave.

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Notes

- ¹ Makama 2013.
- ² Touray 2006.
- ³ Touray 2006.
- ⁴ Osundare 2007.
- ⁵ Chinweizu et al. 1980; Ayejina 1987; Osundare 2007; and Nnolim 2009.
- ⁶ Magaji 2020.
- ⁷ Leech and Short 2007.
- ⁸ Montoro 2014.
- ⁹ Jabang 2012.
- ¹⁰ Arikan 2016.
- ¹¹ Zahra and Shahwar 2019.
- ¹² Kayani and Anwar 2022.
- ¹³ Hussain and Jabeen 2022.
- ¹⁴ Makama 2013.
- ¹⁵ Bamgbose 2012.
- ¹⁶ Udumukwu 2012, cited in Emmanuel and Aboh 2015.
- ¹⁷ Eze 2015.
- ¹⁸ Okoronkwo-Chukwu 2021.
- ¹⁹ Ufot 2012; Mills 2006.
- ²⁰ Ogundipe-Leslie 1994.
- ²¹ Acholonu 1995.
- ²² Nnaemeka 2005.
- ²³ Adimora-Ezeigbo 2012.
- ²⁴ Jabang 2012, p. 35 lines 1-6.
- ²⁵ Mills 2006.
- ²⁶ Jabang 2012, pp. 35-36 lines 20-26.
- ²⁷ Jabang 2012, p. 36 lines 29-32.
- ²⁸ Jabang 2012, p.14, lines 2-11.
- ²⁹ Mills 1995.
- ³⁰ Jabang 2012, p.15, lines 26-30.
- ³¹ Mills 1995.
- ³² Jabang 2012, p.15, lines 38-41.
- ³³ Garuba 2021.
- ³⁴ Jabang 2012, p.19, lines 15-19.
- ³⁵ Mills 1995.
- ³⁶ Mills 1995.
- ³⁷ Jabang 2012, p.12, lines 9-10, 26, 33, 37, 43.
- ³⁸ Halliday 1971; Simpson 2014.
- ³⁹ Jabang 2012, p.13, lines 44-47.

⁴⁰ Okoronkwo-Chukwu 2021.

⁴¹ Arikan 2016; Zahra and Shahwar 2019.

⁴² Mills 1995.

⁴³ Makama 2013.

⁴⁴ Kayani and Anwar 2022.

⁴⁵ Kayani and Anwar 2022.

⁴⁶ Hussain and Jabeen 2022.