

Deconstructing the Paradigm of Female Subjugation: Dialectal Exploration of Resistance, Agency, and Embodied Experience in the Poetic Discourse of Koleka Putuma and Titilope Sonuga

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Abstract

This study engages with the pressing issue of gendered violence through a postcolonial feminist analysis of Koleka Putuma and Titilope Sonuga's poetry. By examining the poets' representations of embodied experience, resistance, and agency, the paper sheds light on the complex dynamics of power and oppression that underpin patriarchal and colonial contexts. Through their work, Putuma and Sonuga challenge dominant narratives that normalize gender-based violence, instead centering the voices and experiences of marginalized women. Their poetry serves as a powerful form of dissent, employing vivid imagery and symbolism to evoke emotional responses and challenge oppressive norms. By making visible the trauma, physical and psychological damage, and enforced silence experienced by victims, the poets underscore the need for accountability and transformative change. Ultimately, the study highlights poetry's capacity to serve as a vital tool for resistance, empowerment, and social justice. By reclaiming their voices and narratives, women can challenge systemic injustices and forge new paths towards healing, freedom, and self-determination. This research contributes to ongoing conversations about the intersections of gender, power, and violence, emphasizing the importance of centering marginalized voices and perspectives in our pursuit of a more just and equitable world. Through its nuanced analysis of poetry and resistance, the study offers insights into the complex nature of gendered violence.

Key Words: *Gendered Violence, Postcolonial Feminism, Resistance, Empowerment*

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Introduction

Poetry is presented as an ancient art form that has evolved in various manifestations and serves diverse purposes. Ancient scholars like Aristotle viewed poetry as a mimetic art, representing reality through language, rhythm, and imagery. Similarly, Wordsworth described poetry as the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings originating from emotions recollected in tranquility. This suggests that poetry stems from genuine emotions that are reflected upon and expressed calmly.

Poetry is also believed to have originated in magical spells and incantations used by traditional healers. In traditional African communication, orality has always been crucial for passing down meaning. Oral poetry predates written forms in Africa and was the primary mode of poetic expression before European colonization and the introduction of writing, even before the emergence of ancient writings such as the hieroglyphic. African oral traditions have been essential for transmitting folktales, stories, histories, spiritual lessons, songs, epic poems, proverbs, prayers, and survival strategies for generations. These traditions are deeply embedded in African societies, serving to celebrate heritage, preserve cultural memory, and provide continuity across black generations. Ancient African poetry, primarily spoken, served both religious and secular purposes, narrating stories of legends, warriors, leaders, and battles, including epic, pastoral, and lyrical poems (songs). Praise singers or griots played a vital role in retelling and interpreting these poems with music, ensuring their transmission across generations through word of mouth (Finnegan, 2012). For centuries, oral traditions have been the cornerstone of teaching important values and morals, explaining the mysteries of the universe and life.

Africa's diverse cultures, languages, and histories have fostered a multitude of poetic traditions that resist singular categorization. The African poetic landscape is characterized by significant evolution, reflecting a wide range of voices, themes, and forms emerging from its diverse societies. As African societies became more literate, precolonial African poetry was written down and preserved, when writing became the mode of communication, often in the languages of the colonizers (Unuafé, 2022). This shift altered traditional communication as poems began to be written in languages other than local ones. Ogunyemi and Kolawole (2015) note that African poetry uniquely expresses concerns relevant to understanding African ethos and traditions. Overall, African poetry, in both oral and written forms, vividly reflects the continent's diverse cultures and experiences. It explores metaphysical inquiries, celebrates communal values, and confronts colonialism and patriarchy using vivid imagery drawn from nature, identity, and memory to honour ancestry, celebrate love, and voice the struggles of black communities. Soyinka (1999) asserts that African poetry encapsulates history and reality. Ogunyemi (2007) supports this by affirming that African poems largely embrace the experiences of the African world, highlighting the varied voices within African poetry that grapple with different social, political, and cultural forces.

Contributions of Contemporary African Women Poets

Historically, female voices in literary publishing have not received adequate recognition. However, a dedicated group of women has been actively redefining and broadening contemporary poetics. Shenoda (2017) argues that many contemporary poets, both within Africa and its diasporas, have significantly contributed to the evolution of African poetic traditions by nurturing and celebrating the female voice as a crucial indicator of vitality and robustness. These women have fearlessly employed their artistic skills to challenge the enduring impacts of colonialism and patriarchy. Notable contemporary African female poets include Warsan Shire, Harriet Anena, Nayyirah Waheed, Liyou Libsekal, Titilope Sonuga, Lebo Mashile, Ijeoma Umebinyuo, Ketty Nivyabandi, Safia Elhillo, and Koleka Putuma.

African poetry also serves as a platform for addressing gender dynamics, where women challenge male dominance. Despite the numerical disparity between female and male poets, writers such as

Finuala Dowling, Malika Ndlovu, Mary Watson, Fatima Alkali, Lobogang Mashile, and Angela Miri utilize their poems to confront patriarchy, assert their womanhood, and advocate for equal rights across all aspects of life. Bamgbose (2012) notes that men have historically dominated socio-political, religious, cultural, and even literary spheres, therefore relegating women to the background. Recognizing this patriarchal order, women continue to use poetry as a catalyst to break free from the constraints of inaudibility and invisibility in all areas of human endeavour, thereby asserting their humanity. The act of women freeing themselves from these restrictions signifies a collective effort to break away from societal norms that have kept women in the shadows. By challenging and dismantling traditional power structures, women assert their rights and amplify their voices through literary activism.

Boswell (2016) contends that black women's poetry engages with gender justice, diasporic identity, and the re-memorization of history to produce a restorative ethic aimed at repairing histories and subjectivities fractured by colonialism and apartheid. These poems not only highlight the often-overlooked experiences of black women but also actively contribute to healing and rebuilding narratives distorted or suppressed by colonial and apartheid-era oppression. The act of re-memorizing history becomes a way of reclaiming and preserving a more accurate and inclusive account of the past, fostering agency and empowerment for black women in the present and future. The poetry of African women serves the dual purpose of deconstructing existing constructs to reveal their artificiality and constructing new, empowering narratives for women. By subverting traditional gender norms, these poets contribute to transforming gender relations, offering alternative perspectives that empower women and foster their resilience. Furthermore, Adetuyi and Adeniran (2018) observe that female writers are now far better represented in published African literature than they were before and shortly after independence. Contemporary African women poets are at the forefront of a literary revolution, challenging patriarchal norms and expanding the boundaries of their poetic artistry to serve as a vehicle for gender justice.

Koleka Putuma and Poetry

Koleka Putuma's work in contemporary African poetry challenges conventional narratives and amplifies suppressed voices in South Africa. Her poetic terrain delves into critical concerns that characterize her role in social justice advocacy. Postcolonial feminist theory often identifies social justice advocacy as a central concern, critiquing colonial legacies and patriarchal systems that perpetuate violence against women and silence their voices. Gender-based violence, a prominent issue of dissent in Putuma's work, encompasses physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse directed at women and girls due to their gender. Karjane (2002) further categorizes this into forms such as rape, sexual exploitation, statutory rape, and emotional manipulation, all of which undermine women's autonomy and dignity. South Africa's high rates of violence against women (Oparinde et al., 2021) underscore the urgency of these themes in Putuma's poetry. Through powerful literary techniques, Putuma's poetry collection, *Collective Amnesia*, critiques the socio-cultural and institutional structures that normalize violence and inequality, advocating for resistance, justice, and the empowerment of women's voices. Her work aligns with Narismulu's (2010) observation that African female poets use their art to challenge diminishing efforts in dismantling systems of oppression and advocate for meaningful change. Al-Wazedi (2021), a postcolonial feminist scholar, supports this by emphasizing that postcolonial feminism addresses inequalities related to power relations while critiquing gender roles shaped by colonial histories. Byrne (2014) also asserts that most African female poets utilize their artistic expression to challenge and dismantle patriarchal systems that suppress women. In this context, Putuma's poetry becomes a potent voice for many South African women, reflecting the grim reality that "being raped or dying at the hands of a man is not just a possibility but a matter of time" (Dlakavu, 2022). The resilience and strength

demonstrated by women who resist domestic violence, rape, and sexual exploitation in South Africa are poignantly echoed in Putuma's works.

Domestic Violence in Putuma's *Every Three Hours*

The poem, *Every Three Hours* is a nine-stanza free verse poem without a fixed structure, rhyme scheme, or meter, which can be interpreted as reflecting the formlessness and boundless nature of violence against women. Putuma employs various literary techniques such as repetition, anaphora, imagery, personification, and metaphor to convey the message of violence and oppression faced by women. The poem begins with a personification that emphasizes how societal structures seem to determine women's fate even before they are born:

This country buries us before we are born.
calls us by our obituaries before it calls us by our names.
makes us womn with nervous conditions.
nervous conditions with their guard up.
law enforcement with a broken system.
a broken system with too much power.
power in authority with guns that gun down their spouses. (l.1-7)

These lines suggest that societal norms and structures already condemn women to a life of suffering and danger, figuratively silencing and erasing them before they can fully exist. Male dominance in African family structures and cultural traditions has limited women's access to power and autonomy, often confining them to household roles (Mwetulundila, 2019). Putuma, as a feminist advocate, explores the constant fear, vigilance, and anxiety women experience due to societal threats, capturing the impact of injustice and violence on their emotional and mental well-being by exposing broader societal injustices. Her poetry embodies the tenets of Postcolonial feminist theory as she positions herself as the voice of the voiceless majority, drawing strength from its beliefs to explore the psychology of women and their lived experiences, rather than confining them to traditional patriarchal notions of human behavior and social relations (Lips, 2016). The flaws within South Africa's legal system exacerbate women's vulnerability to domestic violence, with instances of husbands killing their wives often going unpunished. This has been facilitated by a patriarchal system that silences women's voices and ability to defend themselves. The repetition of "a broken system" creates a rhythmic pattern that underscores the seriousness of these problems, as the persona laments the ineffectiveness and potential compromise of women's rights by law enforcement agencies. Putuma highlights a critical flaw in the justice system that contributes to the unsuccessful prosecution of perpetrators of injustice against women. This critique aligns with Govender's (2015) research, which suggests changing the present-day police response to gender-based violence to ensure equal treatment for both the accused and the victim. She emphasizes the daily killings of women without effective action from law enforcement agencies on reported cases. Putuma also touches upon the subjection of young girls to early marriage and servitude due to customs and traditions, denying them education and exposing them to exploitation, a point corroborated by Mbaku (2019), who highlights the exploitation and abuse of children in Africa by domestic and external factors. Lines eight to twelve of the poem further illustrate these issues:

telephones with missing person details.
missing person details with no follow up.
garages with toddlers who should be in school.
vehicles with evidence.
evidence with no power to prosecute. (l. 8-12)

According to Sarikaya (2024), gender-based violence in South Africa has been nurtured by the apartheid regime and the patriarchal ideology that victimizes, alienates, and restricts women in both domestic and public spheres, relegating them to a position of worthlessness. Putuma stresses that even when evidence exists, the system lacks the will, strength, or influence to hold perpetrators

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accountable, highlighting the frustration of survivors who see their pain documented but witness no legal action. Harris (2021) cites Reganass, Director of South Africa's National Institute for Crime Prevention and Rehabilitation of Offenders, to explain the historical disparity in justice system where "White men were not executed for raping Black women, but Black men were hanged for raping White women," to establish that violence against Black women was not seen as a serious crime due to discrimination by authorities and state institutions.

Further in the poem, Putuma draws attention to the disturbing reality of sexual violence within various institutions:

schools with paedophiles.
paedophiles with degrees in working with children.
Lecture halls with molesters.
terminals with predators.
construction sites with men old enough to understand 'NO!'
churches with men who use your prayers for safety to get you on your knees
with your arms raised. (l. 34-40)

The imagery of paedophiles and molesters in schools critiques the failure of institutions meant to protect children, exposing the vulnerability of girls to sexual exploitation and objectification even in supposedly safe spaces. Putuma also critiques the betrayal of trust by religious figures who exploit prayers for safety as tools of coercion. A study by Buthelezi et al. (2024) showed that gender-based violence occurs in places of worship and marriages, with most incidents being concealed to protect the institution and perpetrators. Putuma vehemently resists how violence permeates all aspects of life, leaving no place truly safe for women and children. She emphasizes the brutal murder of women every three hours in South Africa, with the repetition of "every three hours" serving as a haunting reminder of the frequency of these tragedies and adding rhythmic urgency to the poem's message. Harris' (2021) research indicates that a woman is raped and killed by an intimate partner every eighty-three seconds, confirming Putuma's assertion about the rapid timeframe of such violence.

The concluding lines of the poem further articulate Putuma's critique of women subjugation:

this country hangs our dignity at half-mast.
waves our bodies as lessons to be learnt
as moments that should teach us something.
as modules. tests. experiments.
my existence is not for your teaching
to dislocate my mother's throat six feet under
and compensate her grief with scholarships and amended policies.
policies that have gathered dust before they have even been drafted.
this country buries us before we are born.
calls us by our obituaries before it calls us
by our names. (l.42-52)

Postcolonial feminist theory helps to explore Putuma's assessment of how women's voices and experiences are reduced to mere cautionary tales that serve societal agendas while erasing their humanity. The fragmented structures in this poem serve to expose the disorganized lives of women who are victims of systemic violence and the lack of safety, autonomy, and effective policing for women in South Africa, mirroring general global postcolonial feminist concerns. It reveals Putuma's critique of how society is more interested in the didactic implications of women's tragedies than in solving the underlying issues of gender-based violence and oppression. Putuma critiques the superficial offerings of "scholarships and amended policies" as insufficient solutions. In these lines, she directly addresses readers to speak out against injustice and oppression.

Sexual Exploitation in Putuma's *Oh Dear God! Not Another Rape Poem*

Another significant poem by Koleka Putuma that confronts gender-based violence in South Africa is *Oh Dear God! Not Another Rape Poem*. This narrative poem unfolds in structured sections labeled "Preface, Introduction, Body, Conclusion", and "Addendum", employing free verse and a conversational tone to suggest the widespread implications of the issues it addresses. Literary techniques such as repetition, irony, anaphora, and imagery engage the reader to understand the pervasive nature of rape culture and its impact on families. The poem begins with stark images illustrating the sacrifices women are often forced to make to maintain family and social relationships:

- sometimes [hell] is a penis
- sometimes [girls] repent just to save themselves from encountering the devil
- sometimes [uncle] is a boyfriend, a random, a test you will keep taking but always fail
- sometimes [uncle] is a siren in some living rooms
- sometimes [uncle] is an aircon everyone is too lazy to adjust or switch off
- sometimes [daughters] are not left alone with him
- but [he] is not banned from family gatherings, either
- sometimes [collateral damage] is another way of saying:
- I am a coward (l.1-9)

Postcolonial feminist theory interrogates how patriarchal structures, rooted in colonial histories, continue to shape cultural norms that subordinate women and perpetuate gender inequality. These lines set the stage for understanding how patriarchy contributes to the subjugation of women. Patriarchy, as described by Johnson (2004), is a cultural system where manhood and masculinity are most closely associated with being human, while womanhood and femininity are relegated to a marginal position. Putuma illuminates the sacrifices women are forced to make within patriarchal societies, where their well-being is often secondary to the needs and desires of men, reinforcing traditional gender roles that sustain inequality. By equating male genitalia with hell, Putuma emphasizes the horrifying nature of sexual violence endured by many women and girls. The failure of families to address this threat allows abusers to roam freely, perpetuating a cycle of violence. This critique aligns with Harris' (2021) findings that South African women are vulnerable to rape and domestic violence due to financial dependence on men and suppressing customs and traditions.

Nevertheless, society often blames victims rather than confronting abusers. Rape cases involving women are often dismissed as allegations, consensual sex, or cultural practice, prioritizing the reputation and comfort of the abuser over the suffering of the victim, thereby downplaying the severity of sexual violence.

sometimes [rape] is placed in the same sentence as:

alleged
consent
culture

rape culture:

a term that makes the act seem like
something you could wear (voluntarily)
or wash
or take off
or drop off at the laundry
or buy tickets to see
or an experience you are excited to tweet about
or a meme that goes viral
or something whites anticipate to appropriate
or a zol passed around at a bonfire
or salt at the dinner table (l.19-34)

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Postcolonial feminist theory, as articulated by Spivak (1994), examines how women are rendered voiceless and reduced to “pristine nothingness” within patriarchal structures, erasing their agency and identity. This erasure resonates in Putuma’s critique of rape culture as a tradition women are forced to abide by, highlighting how society normalizes sexual violence, treating it as an inevitable burden. The voices of women are simultaneously silenced by societal norms and familial loyalty that compel them to maintain the status quo. The reluctance of women to take action against sexual violence, as Albanie (2024) suggests, points to a form of collective societal cowardice, where silence becomes complicity and the cycle of violence remains unbroken:

the womxn in the family would rather toil in the kitchen than crucify their husbands or brothers or sons
or respected elders
(sometimes) hell is burning between their thighs, too
(sometimes) they can no longer find salvation in their vows
but the gospel has taught them how to stay
even when the devil is the one promising eternity
it’s easier to hold the [child] accountable for a “lie” than it is to hold the [uncle] accountable for the truth
the [children] play hide-n-seek and find grown people’s things in forbidden rooms
the [family] is not interested in the nightmares they have thereafter (l.37-44)

In the poem, victims of sexual violence suffer psychological and emotional damage, often feeling invalidated, powerless, and isolated due to the lack of accountability for abusers. Societal silence and neglect erode victims’ trust in protective institutions, making it difficult to seek help. Religious and cultural teachings often encourage women to endure suffering silently, prioritizing endurance over the fight for justice and equality. Sexual molestation against children is often questioned and discredited, allowing the abuser to go unpunished. Ultimately, Postcolonial feminist theory emphasizes the importance of addressing gendered experiences within societal and institutional frameworks that often fail to protect women. This aligns with Jolly’s (2010) argument about the limitations of human rights frameworks in South Africa in fully accounting for gendered oppression. Putuma’s advocacy affirms these systemic shortcomings, calling for a transformative approach that prioritizes a serene environment where gender-based violence can be effectively addressed. Her poems advocate for providing moral and psychological support to victims rather than perpetuating victim-blaming narratives. By exposing the imbalance in the justice system, she demands swift action, greater accountability, and justice that transcends societal biases to confront injustice regardless of who is implicated.

Relegation of Status of Black Women in Putuma’s *On Black Solidarity*

To challenge oppressive systems that relegate the status of black women, Putuma employs various literary techniques to dismantle stereotypes and amplify the voices of women in South Africa. In *On Black Solidarity*, Putuma critiques the relegation of women and systemic gender issues that devalue the experiences and contributions of women in Africa. The poem is a free verse that uses confrontational tones to address the injustices, thereby making the poem a powerful example of protest poetry.

In lines:

Black solidarity does not include making my spine a doormat
So that you can stand or have a backbone.
Black solidarity at the expense of a black womxn’s anything, is a farce, a rip-off.
The kind of violence they shred into laughter at the police station and replay in front of you just to make
sure you got the joke.
You can assert your position without negating my presence.
You can take up space without making me invisible. (l. 1-6)

Historically, African women have been subjected to neglect, bias, oppression, discrimination, and exploitation, even when they make meaningful contributions to society (Chowdhury, 2021). African societal expectations and gender role stereotypes dictate that women should remain submissive and less vocal. South Africa, as a patriarchal society, exemplifies this dynamic, where men have historically and culturally dominated social, economic, and political spheres to the detriment of women's rights and equality (Mpunzana & Mofokeng, 2023). These scholars further argue that the roots of this system lie in the colonial apartheid laws and customary practices that marginalized women. Lubisi-Nkosinkulu et al. (2022) emphasize that while women constitute slightly more than half of South Africa's population, they are significantly underrepresented in politics, economics, and health sectors. Despite post-apartheid efforts to promote gender equality, patriarchal norms remain deeply embedded in societal structures and institutions, making the struggle for gender equity ongoing (Rustin & Florence, 2021). Putuma exposes the sidelining of black women's autonomy. According to her, the fight for racial solidarity in South Africa often prioritizes the struggles of black men over issues that affect black women. Women sacrifice their voices, bodies, and experiences for the sake of unity while society makes them inferior. This argument has also been raised by Esmaeel and Saeed (2024, p. 466) that "equality is a fundamental human right crucial for societal growth and harmony and upholding equal rights, opportunities, and respect for all, regardless of gender, fosters a balanced and respectful society" where everyone's contribution is valued.

Also, the exploration of Postcolonial feminism in the works of Putuma, reveals the innate misogyny and systemic racism within law enforcement agencies. She highlights advocacy for leadership and activism that value inclusivity and collaboration rather than ascendancy and erasure. The exploitation of black women's labour, dignity, emotions, and resilience is a manifestation of how deeply rooted patriarchy and chauvinism are within the entire black community.

You call us sell-outs and feminazis when we exhume the fungus from your politics.
 fanon and biko sound like venom in your mouth.
 I cannot tell if I am breaking bread or being poisoned.
 How come references to your revolution are only limited to biko, fanon and Malcolm?
 Do you read?
 Your solidarity, it seems, is anchored by undermining black womxn's struggle. (l. 10-15)

Putuma rhetorically questions the readers' reflection on the invasive and exploitative practices within the black solidarity revolution movements by demanding accountability and justice for the harm inflicted on women. Women who critique the "fungus" in the black solidarity are labelled as "sell-outs" or "feminazis". The act of calling women "sell-outs" stresses Harris' (2021) assertion that black women were always afraid of voicing out because they would be seen as informants and could be killed in an attempt to seek authorized protection and equity. This prevented women from coming openly to empower other women to fight gender suppression in their communities.

Furthermore, Postcolonial feminism critiques the exclusion of women's voices within revolutionary and liberation movements. Putuma's reference to prominent Black liberation scholars such as Frantz Fanon, Malcolm X, and Steve Biko draws attention to the ways their revolutionary ideas have been misused or distorted, sometimes betraying the original spirit of Black solidarity. Frantz Fanon, a Martinican psychiatrist and revolutionary, famously advocated for violent resistance as a means to achieve decolonization and true liberation, significantly influencing anti-colonial struggles globally (Jacobin, 2021). Similarly, Steve Biko, a South African anti-apartheid activist, drew on Fanon's ideas to empower Black South Africans to reclaim their identity and self-worth in the face of apartheid oppression (Gibson, 2008; Habibi, 2014; Maistry, 2023).

Nevertheless, Putuma highlights how revolutionary traditions often operate within a narrow scope that excludes the contributions and diverse experiences of women. By engaging with figures like Frantz Fanon, Steve Biko, and Malcolm X, she critiques the gendered nature of Black solidarity movements and calls for a more inclusive revolutionary discourse that intensifies equality in the struggle against racial and gender oppression.

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- Tell it to wait.
- Tell it to stop dividing black people.
- Tell it that the revolution does not need all that sass and feminist noise.
- Tell it that not all of you are like that.
- Tell it to hold up the placard in a paragraph,
- You turn shadows into shade and call us brave for being able to withstand the heat.
- We must hand you our faces and vaginas to play tennis with, to make canvases with. (l. 16-22)

Putuma's use of anaphora at the beginning of these lines creates a rhythmic and emphatic structure that draws attention to the urgency of the message. The poet's use of imperative sentences "Tell it to wait, ...", engages the reader directly in confronting the issues. Also, the ambiguity in the pronoun, "it", allows readers to give multiple interpretations of the feminist contributions to the black revolution. Women's bodies have been exploited and objectified for the benefit of others in the cause of the fight (Richie, 2018). This informed their stories and tailored their decision on how violence and female coercion led to crime against the marginalized.

- You want black womxn's bodies on the line.
- Not the frontline.
- You endorse intersectionality.
- But not at the expense of your praise and visibility.

Terms and conditions of your solidarity:

- No feminism
- Limited feminism
- No Feminism that exposes patriarchy
- No feminism that disturbs patriarchy
- Only feminism that will show up with pompoms
- And struggle songs
- Don't forget the struggle songs
- And silence
- Don't bring your politics
- It's not about politics
- Your politics
- What's the point of liberation and claiming back land, if neither of us will be here to receive it? (l. 25-41).

However, Postcolonial feminism theory exposes the patriarchal systems within liberation movements that often restrict and marginalize women's voices, while claiming to advocate for equality. Putuma critiques the restrictive and hypocritical nature of Black solidarity movements that profess support for Black women but rather impose narrow conditions on the type of feminism that is deemed acceptable. The repetition of "feminism" emphasizes this hypocrisy and society's tendency to endorse feminists who align with its ideals while disregarding those who genuinely seek to transform women's struggles. By challenging the relegation of women's voices within these spaces, Putuma calls for a more inclusive and holistic approach to liberation, one that values the views, well-being, and lived experiences of all individuals, especially women, as central to achieving true freedom.

Subjugation of Women in Putuma's *Growing Up Black and Womxn*

Growing Up Black and Womxn is also another poem by Putuma that critiques the subjugation, trauma, and resilience of black women within an African patriarchal community. This poem is a free verse written in a fragmented narrative form to vividly capture the marginalized status and gender inequality that often suppressed the pains and experiences of black women through

evocative imagery, metaphor, and a compelling voice of advocacy. The poem begins by emphasizing the impact of silencing the pains of women. Women are forced to suppress their suffering and maintain an inferior strength and composure. In the opening lines:

Growing Up Black and Womxn
will teach you
how to hoard skeletons
and how to duct tape your screams with staples, (l. 1-4)

Putuma alludes to the buried pains of Black women to emphasize the silent struggles and unspoken traumas they have to endure. By employing evocative imagery of “skeletons” and “duct tape your screams with staples”, the poet gives voice to these buried pains to promote recognition and healing. This message conforms to Baral’s (2024) assertion that women’s voices have been silenced for ages so therefore in writing trauma narratives, they share their experiences with the world. Women do this to manage and suppress the trauma which takes a toll on their mental health. This is because society looks down on their pain and considers it a norm (Harris, 2021).

Numbering
is
kept
at
the
expense
of your sanity. (l.5 – 11)

In these fragmented structures, Putuma critiques how women maintain control and order, even when they are mentally exhausted and damaged. This is to emphasize the disjointed and often chaotic nature of their experiences. The fragmented structure mirrors the internal turmoil and uneven reality of women while still presenting a composed exterior as societal norms compel them to maintain a disguised composure despite their entrenched pain (Montei, 2023).

if our underwear drawers could speak.
they would bleed (I tell you).
pillows would haemorrhage on our behalf.
the unfortunate thing about healing is this:
it convinces you that the pain is better than a scab. (l. 12-16)

Using the lens of Postcolonial feminism, Putuma emphasizes the importance of uncovering silenced narratives and addressing the hidden struggles of women within patriarchal societies. Here, Putuma symbolizes the physical and emotional wounds that women conceal. The imagery used in the above lines exposes a more pathetic situation of women within a patriarchal society. The metaphorical bleeding of underwear drawers and pillows “haemorrhaging” on behalf of women suggests that they bear the weight of silent suffering that goes unacknowledged by the world around them. By empowering women to speak out, Putuma advocates for a supportive environment where women’s voices are heard and their experiences validated.

Poems of Titilope Sonuga

Titilope Sonuga’s poetry plays a significant role in social justice advocacy in Nigeria and Africa at large. Titilope Sonuga, a Nigerian poet, writer, and performer, has significantly contributed to social justice advocacy in Nigeria through her evocative works. Her poetry sheds light on issues of gender-based violence, trauma, resilience, and gives voice to marginalized communities, addresses tragedies and crises. She challenges societal norms and expectations that suppress women in Africa, reflecting her commitment to shared human experiences and emotions (Umezurike, 2020). Sonuga’s poetry encourages activism and empowers Nigerian women to use their voices to fight injustice. Through her poetry collection, *This Is How We Disappear*, she amplifies the voices of

women who have been victims of societal oppression by employing poetry as a tool for both resistance and healing.

Female Victimization and Sonuga's Poetry on the Chibok Abductions

Postcolonial feminist theory provides a critical lens for examining the intersection of gender, power, and colonial legacies in Titilope Sonuga's poetry, particularly about female victimization. The abduction of female students from Chibok Government Secondary School by Boko Haram highlights the weaponization of women's bodies for political and ideological warfare. In April 2014, 276 female students were kidnapped by the Islamist extremist group Boko Haram in Borno State, Nigeria. Boko Haram, meaning "Western education is sinful" (Peters, 2014), has been responsible for numerous acts of violence and terror against women in Nigeria since it transitioned to democracy (Bloom and Matfess, 2016). The ideology of Boko Haram opposes Western education, especially for girls, leading them to target schools, villages, and churches in their campaign to establish an Islamic state (Oriola, 2023). After Muhammad Yūsuf's capture and execution in 2009, Abubakar Shekau became a more radical and violent leader (Peters, 2014). The lack of security at the school facilitated the abduction of many girls without resistance, who were then transported to the Sambisa Forest and subjected to forced marriages, sexual violence, and indoctrination (Nwaubani and Mazza, 2018). Over time, some girls escaped or were released through negotiations. These events spurred a global campaign against gender-based violence and for the right to education (Onah, 2024). Sonuga's poetry contributes to this global activism against the Chibok girls' abduction.

Sonuga employs various literary techniques to critique Boko Haram's terrorism and its impact on the Chibok girls, using profound empathy and outrage to condemn the abduction. Her poetry reflects trauma, resilience, and the collective pain of affected families and communities. The use of free verse, as seen earlier, resonates with the boundless nature of female abuse. The poem *The Girl Comes Back with Fire in Her Chest* is a free verse narrative recounting the missing girl's return and the violence she endured, highlighting humanity, womanhood, gender-based violence, loss, resilience, and the transformation of women into stronger beings. The poem opens by questioning the identity of the persona. In the lines:

By what name do we call the girl
when she comes back?
Is it cruel now to call her Joy,
to call her Precious,
to call her Patience?
Do we turn her old clothes to rags
to wash her with or break
the bed where her feet now dangle over
and burn it to ash?
Do we sing a praise song or dirge
when the girl comes back (l. 1-11)

Similar to Sonuga, Oriola (2023) critiques the abduction as involving sexual enslavement, believing the girls were kidnapped to fulfil the extremists' sexual desires. Sonuga addresses the invisibility and erasure of women's experiences in patriarchal society through these rhetorical questions, questioning the appropriateness of using virtuous names for a girl who has experienced intense violence. The disconnection between societal expectations and the reality of the girl's trauma is highlighted, emphasizing the uncertainty and difficulty in restoring her identity. The suggested ritualistic cleansing and destruction of the bed symbolize the desire to eradicate painful memories and facilitate healing. The juxtaposition of "praise song" and "dirge" suggests hope for the girl's positive reception upon her return, acknowledging her survival and resilience. Sonuga also critiques the forced silencing of the girls by oppressive systems:

with her mouth sewn
her eyes sunken shut and
her eyes sunken in (l. 12-14)

Edoro (2017) asserts that this horrifying imagery of a “mouth sewn” and “eyes sunken” depicts deep emotional exhaustion and psychological torment, reflecting the visible internal trauma that marginalizes and destroys the victim. Sonuga further explores the uncertainty and alienation accompanying the girl’s return:

When the girl comes back
whose arms does she run into?
Who will call her daughter
and call her daughter daughter too? (l. 20-23)

These rhetorical questions express uncertainty about where the girl will find solace and acceptance, questioning whether she will still be seen as her former self and accepted back into her family, thereby interrogating generational connections and identity recognition. The repetition of “daughter” emphasizes the detached relationship and the challenges in re-establishing family bonds.

her mouth pools with blood from her razor tongue
in a corner with her hands held high
she becomes a wall
savors the anger like fruit she stole when no one was looking
tells her sins to God, no one is listening
in a corner with her hands held high she becomes a wall
becomes a fire no one can touch (l. 26-32)

The imagery of a “mouth pools with blood” portrays the physical consequences of the girl’s resistance to victimization, expressing the devastating impact of her suppressed voice. Oriola (2023) notes that Boko Haram extremists told the female students to abandon education and get married, viewing women’s empowerment as a challenge to patriarchal structures that legitimize their masculinities:

no one could say which one of them
held the baby or the bomb
each cradled a heavy head
held its body across her chest
beneath a billowing cloth (l. 41-45)

In adding a voice to the abduction, violence and trauma discourse, Oriola (2023) states that Boko Haram considered taking captives a legitimate part of warfare, turning kidnapped girls into agents of suicide bombing through psychological manipulation, threats, and violence, justified by their interpretation of Islamic teachings. This terror not only serves their operational needs but also spreads fear and destabilizes communities. However, the poem concludes with a note of resilience:

We could not bend the bones back from broken
to know whose forehead touched the ground last
or gather the breath back into their mouths (55-57)

Despite their harrowing experiences, including forced marriages and violence, the girls’ unwavering strength allows them to survive, as also emphasized in Ibrahim and Hoffmann’s (2017) memoir. Many girls resisted their captors, maintained hope, and supported each other. The resistance of the females is corroborated in Ibrahim and Hoffmann’s (2017) Memoir, *A Gift from Darkness: How I Escaped with My Daughter from Boko Haram*. The memoir emphasizes the unwavering strength and determination of the girls to survive. Many of the girls found ways to resist their captors, maintain hope, and support each other through their ordeal.

Sonuga’s second poem advocating for the eradication of female victimization is *We Drew Chibok on The Map in Our Blood*, another free verse addressing the trauma and resilience of the abducted

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girls. The poet employs intense imagery, metaphor, symbolism, contrast, and enjambment to depict their experiences, opening with a poignant epigraph:

“No matter who my daughter is when she comes back,
she is my daughter and I want her back home.” (l. 1-2)

These lines directly convey the persona’s unconditional love and yearning for the girls’ return, acknowledging potential changes due to trauma while emphasizing unwavering parental love and the desire for reunification, projecting a message of sympathy and the need for a supportive environment for healing.

dis ap pear / ,dis 'pir / verb / the men, thick as baobab, become
a forest, drag us in by the wild of our hair (l. 3-4)

Sonuga uses simile to depict the physical brutality and loss of independence, portraying the extremists as an overwhelming force, much like an inescapable dense forest, a point corroborated by Ibrahim and Hoffmann (2017) regarding survivors bearing witness to Boko Haram’s violence. The comparison to immense baobab trees emphasizes the men’s physical strength and imposing tactics.

the men scratch
our names from our throats
betray our bodies
bones bend back
break (l. 5-9)

This imagery expresses the violence inflicted upon the girls, suggesting not only physical harm but also the erasure of their identities and violation of their bodies and womanhood (Agara, 2024).

we become a whisper
hands gather a scream
back into her mouth
pray (l. 10-13)

Postcolonial feminism highlights the systemic silencing of women within patriarchal and colonial structures, perpetuating oppression through enforced silence (Spivak, 1994). Sonuga fleshes out how women’s voices are suppressed, forcing them to endure pain silently, emphasizing the psychological and emotional struggles of articulating suffering in societies that prioritize silence over liberation, challenging these systems and advocating for women to reclaim their voices as acts of resistance:

beg god between her legs
birth and bury
what we must to stay alive (17-19)

In the poem, the girls are religiously, emotionally, and psychologically exploited. Attoh (2014) notes that the Chibok abduction remains a heart-wrenching act of terrorism, with many girls subjected to sexual slavery and forced marriages, emphasizing the critical need for privacy and protection for survivors. Attoh (ibid.) further argues that while some of the girls have managed to escape and share their stories, their right to privacy and protection is critical, especially considering the intense trauma they’ve endured. It is this trauma that exacerbates the pain experienced by the mothers. Thus, Sonuga also portrays the affected mothers’ relentless efforts to find their missing daughters:

beneath the moon that sees us all
our mother prays into the black
bloom between her legs
reaches deep to birth us back. (l. 23-26)

From a Postcolonial feminist perspective, Sonuga underscores the necessity of addressing the intersection of gender, colonial histories, and systemic oppression that marginalizes women’s voices,

aligning with the transformative impact of women's empowerment and advocacy for justice. She emphasizes the need for a justice system that addresses the Boko Haram abduction and extends to all similarly oppressed women, highlighting the critical role of women's voices in reclaiming agency and the broader fight for justice (Agara, 2024). *The Girls Are Still Laughing* further explores the enduring strength and societal longing for the Chibok girls' return, using surreal imagery to depict their return from captivity. The persona's advocacy continues to ignite the fight for justice. The poem opens by reflecting on the number of missing girls:

In the dream
I close my eyes and count backward from 276
the girls crawl feet first from their hiding places
behind the curtains where their feet stick out
under the bed untangling from a mess of limbs (l. 1-5)

Maiangwa and Agbiboa (2014) confirm that over 200 schoolgirls were kidnapped in Chibok, a number also supported by Oyewole (2016), highlighting the significant loss. Sonuga's specific mention of 276 girls underscores the exact number abducted.

A slit in the silence bursts open
and their voices fall out
calling each other's names
unlearning memory
bones melting back to whole (l. 6-10)

Sonuga envisions the sudden return of the girls' voices as the beginning of their empowerment, with the imagery of them calling each other's names reaffirming their identity after subjugation. In agreement with Sonuga's poetic strategy to give a voice to the voiceless, Attoh (2014) adds that exposing their stories is shedding light and voice giving but it also intensifies the psychological damage, emphasizing the need for societal protection for long-term recovery. The metaphor of "bones melting back to whole" suggests a deliberate healing and restoration process, redefining their identities beyond trauma, similar to the resilience portrayed by Ya Ta in Nwaubani and Mazza's novel (2018). In that novel Ya Ta's unwavering faith and determination to hold onto her identity, despite the forced conversion and indoctrination during the Chibok kidnapping is highlighted in the inner strength required to reclaim one's identity. This is also epitomized in Sonuga's poem that states that:

The ones who do not make it into hiding
shake their bodies loose from where they stand
suspended in time (l. 11-13)

Peters (2014) notes that some fifty-three girls escaped during the abduction by Boko Haram or from the Sambisa Forest where they were sent. This is addition to the fact that the girls who escaped managed to jump off the vehicles that the Boko Haram extremists used to transport them and others also managed to flee from captivity in the Sambisa Forest. From this premise Sonuga depicts the struggle and resilience of those who could not escape, emphasizing women's vulnerability in danger:

They brush past me as they go
peeling back the skin of a thousand days
calling up the blood to dance beneath
their former faces still soft enough
for their mothers to recognize (l. 14-18)

Here, Sonuga conveys a deep connection to the girls. As a Nigerian activist who amplifies the voices of those affected by violence, Sonuga is driven by her commitment to social justice and human rights. The abduction is seen as a severe human rights violation, fueling the desire for justice. Despite the impact, Sonuga describes a rebirth of life and inner strength.

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The poem, *Hide and Seek* written by Sonuga is another reflection on the repercussions of violence against women. It is a free verse poem in three parts echoing the unresolved fate of the missing Chibok girls and exploring the helplessness and horror following the abduction. The first part of the poem explores the helplessness and horror in the aftermath of the sad abduction. Sonuga exposes the emotional and moral implications of the sad event:

What do we do with the bodies?
How do we gather them up
or know which arm goes where?
Whose eyes are still searching?
Whose head with the delicate head tie 5
now sits atop a suited torso?
Which hands clasped in prayer belongs
to which kneeling body? ... (l. 1-22)

The impact of Boko Haram's actions has overwhelmingly affected many families and communities in Nigeria and other neighbouring countries. According to Shekwolo et al (2017, p. 63), "Hundreds of individuals have been abducted, thousands have been killed, and more than a million people have been displaced". Also, from interviews conducted by Bashir et al (2019) on the insurgency of Boko Haram's actions, it was gathered that the extremists have kidnapped and slaughtered many people, most especially women. An interviewee revealed "They have also abducted our daughters, and they killed our youth during the insurgency. We have buried the dead bodies of many of our relations before we escaped" (p. 63). Sonuga's use of imagery of the "bodies" sets a tone of mourning and the victimization experienced by the girls. The massacre makes it difficult for the families to identify the remains of the abducted girls. In strong rhetorical questions, Sonuga emphasizes the emotional vacuum the society is challenged with, their struggles, and their hopelessness in trying to restore the individuality and dignity of the victims.

Moreover, the second part of the poem paints a vivid picture of an ideal world where the girls are safe and untouched by violence. Before Chibok was attacked, the Federal Government College, Buni Yadi in Yobe state was ransacked on 25th February 2014 and killed fifty-nine boys in the incident (Oriola, 2023). In a surrealist scene, Sonuga contrasts the tranquil scene with the harsh realities of the abducted girls:

The children are asleep in their beds
food provisions locked in tiny cupboards
buckets of water for their morning bath beside them
their uniforms are ironed and folded
a row of polished shoes wait at the door
They are snoring in unison
the one who sleeps sprayed out like a wishing star
or the one with her thumb clasped between her lips 30
even the one that lies with arms akimbo
as if preparing for a fight
above their heads the night sky is full of promise ... (l. 23-63)

Sonuga portrays the sense of harmony and innocence of children and creates a serene and secure environment that represents a flawless and safe world where children are well-protected and cared for. The images represent the daily opportunities parents offer their children to ensure they have quality education and an optimistic future. Sonuga offers an intimate glimpse into the vulnerability of children. She critiques self-seeking men who breach the morality and freedom of young girls and also advocates society's attention to the injustice.

Nonetheless, the final part of the poem focuses on the vast number of girls who were victims of the abduction and the importance of documenting their courageousness in the nation's history. The documentation serves as a step to remembering each victim and their resilience in the fight for justice and security:

The history books won't remember
how a group of girls the size of a small tribe vanished
like a twisted kind of hide and seek
How we began our counting too late
imagined them giggling in their hiding places
like the games we used to play
when we were just little girls
when we were sure ... (l. 64-93)

According to Shekwolo et al (2017), the activities of Boko Haram terrorists in Nigeria have become a great concern, particularly in communities where many people live in perpetual fear of bombings and kidnappings. The tragedy that engulfed these Nigerians may face societal and historical neglect in the future. Sonuga's assertion underscores the erasure of the experiences of marginalized women. Many women and girls never lived to tell their stories of being under Boko Haram's captivity (Onah, 2024). He argues that the Chibok abduction should be seen as a historical reenactment of the 1996 kidnapping of the One Hundred and Thirty-nine Aboke girls from their dormitories in Northern Uganda by the Ugandan militant group known as the Lord's Resistance Army. In Sonuga's poetry, she indicates her empathy for the fight against injustice and her role as an advocate for societal accountability and justice.

The expression of dissent in the poetry of Putuma and Sonuga is characterized by their powerful and unflinching exploration of systemic injustices, trauma, and the reclamation of marginalized voices, particularly those of women suppressed by the patriarchal norms of society. Both poets focus on the experiences of women who are historically erased, silenced, and objectified by patriarchal and colonial structures. Being a feminist, most of Putuma's narratives are centred on the harsh experiences of marginalized black women within South African society, as these realities are often omitted from dominant discourse. For instance, in her poetry, *Oh Dear God! Not Another Rape Poem*, *Growing Up Black & Womxn*, *On Black Solidarity*, and *Every Three Hours*, Putuma expresses dissent by confronting society's desensitization to gender-based violence and the normalization of rape culture and objectification of women's bodies. She brings to the fore victim-blaming and the silencing of survivors by exposing the cyclical nature of violence and society's apathy. Likewise, Sonuga focuses on the violence against women, using the tragic story of the Chibok girls as a framework for collective mourning and resistance. Her poetry often transforms the female body into a symbol of resilience and survival. For instance, in her poetry, *The Girls Are Still Laughing*, *The Girl Comes Back with Fire in Her Chest*, *Hide and Seek* and *We Drew Chibok on The Map in Our Blood*, Sonuga emphasizes how, despite enduring violence, loss, and oppression women have experienced, they can reclaim their voices, strength, and transform pain into resistance and empowerment.

Also, dissent emerges in the works of Putuma and Sonuga by their refusal to allow their silence to persist as complicity. Both poets embody dissent as resistance to oppression and a commitment to amplifying silenced voices, reclaiming identity, and fostering transformative change. Their work reflects a postcolonial feminist ethos that challenges societal norms, restores memory, and celebrates the resilience of women. Through a thorough analysis of their works, both poets assert poetry's power as an artistic and political act that can bring transformation. Putuma and Sonuga use their art as a form of dissent against societal ills, most especially patriarchal and postcolonial structures that oppress women. Both poets employ performance and orality to amplify their messages. Thematically, both poets use their works as forces and sites of resistance against societal injustice. Putuma's poetry often confronts the collective and historical burdens that silence women's voices and erase indigenous South Africa's history and demands its dismantling. Sonuga, on the other side, also views the marginalization of women as a deeply personal and psychological struggle women reckon with. Her poems emphasize Nigerian women's resilience and liberation in helping them heal and overcome societal norms that oppress them.

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Additionally, Putuma and Sonuga's poems employ simple diction in fragmented and declarative structures to push for societal transformation. Putuma's unapologetic use of these structures to demand immediate action against injustices, such as rape culture, racial oppression, and suppression has made her dissenting voice louder to the readers. Her confrontational voice stirs readers to challenge the harsh realities happening in South African society. Likewise, Sonuga adopts an intimate, more lyrical, introspective, and reflective voice to confront these challenges in Nigerian society. Her poems invite readers to reflect deeply on injustices that need collective action to foster change.

Additionally, both poets use vivid imagery and symbols to expose social injustices and evoke emotional responses to the predicament of women. Putuma's poetry often incorporates confrontational images that reflect the realities of gender-based violence, racial oppression, and colonial legacies. For example, in her poem, *Growing Up and Womxn*, she employs evocative imagery of "skeletons" and "duct tape your screams with staples", to give voice to the buried pains of women, promoting recognition and healing. Meanwhile, Sonuga employs equally evocative but soft images to highlight resilience and grief in the lives of Nigerian women. In her poem, *The Girls Are Still Laughing*, her symbolic use of "laughter" illustrates how survival can coexist with deep emotional wounds.

While Putuma and Sonuga share similar feminist ideologies, their cultural and historical contexts influence their thematic focus and stylistic approaches. Putuma and Sonuga employ repetition and allusion in varied ways to transform brokenness into collective empowerment. Putuma's frequent use of anaphora, the repetition of phrases, asserts her activism for women's agency and to challenge oppressive systems. For instance, in *Every Three Hours*, Putuma explores systemic violence against women through the repetition of "Every three hours, one of us does not make it" to directly link to the high rate of femicide in South Africa. Her persistent repetition of "Every three hours" underscores the urgency of breaking the silence and restoring dignity and justice to marginalized women. In contrast, Sonuga employs repetition in a more lyrical and storytelling manner, weaving personal and collective memories into her poetry to ensure they are preserved and honoured. In *The Girls Are Still Laughing*, Sonuga repeats phrases like "The girls are still laughing" to emphasize the resilience of the Chibok girls, the victims of the Boko Haram abduction in Nigeria.

Conclusion

The poems of Putuma and Sonuga serve as a powerful vehicle for both critiquing systemic injustices and fostering collective healing, empowerment, and transformation. Social justice advocacy in their poetry ensures that marginalized women and people of colour are made visible and heard. The reclamation of marginalized voices in their poems challenges readers to engage with the narratives on social injustice and compels a shift in societal awareness and empathy. Putuma and Sonuga demonstrate that art can be a form of protest, resistance, and empowerment. Their poetry challenges dominant narratives while envisioning alternative futures. Their work underscores poetry's capacity to serve as a form of activism, pushing boundaries, empowering marginalized communities, and fostering solidarity.

Both poets inspire their audiences to move beyond passive engagement to take action against injustice. Their works do not merely describe issues but challenge readers to effect the needed change. This call to action empowers readers to become agents of movements for justice, equality, and cultural transformation.

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