

Exploration of Women's Sexuality as a Form of Currency: A Reading of Elaigwu Ameh's *Sweet Taste of Shame* and *Climate of Change*

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a feminist analysis of Elaigwu Ameh's plays titled *Sweet Taste of Shame* and *Climate of Change* to investigate the representation of female sexuality. Through a close reading of the texts, the paper examines how Ameh constructs a narrative wherein women's bodies are commodified and instrumentalized as a means of social and economic exchange. The paper closely reads the plays to illuminate the transactional nature of sexuality for female characters. Through textual analysis, it demonstrates how these characters are subjected to exploitation, often exchanging sexual favors for necessities or as a means of social advancement. Furthermore, the paper emphasizes the gendered power dynamic at work, highlighting the patriarchal structures and societal forces that contain women's agency and limit their control over their bodies. The paper concludes that Ameh's plays offer a critical commentary on the commodification of women's sexuality, serving as a powerful indictment of the social and economic inequalities that perpetuate a system wherein women's choices are limited.

Keywords: Women Sexuality, Currency, Elaigwu Ameh, *Sweet Taste of Shame*, *Climate of Change*

Introduction

Women's sexuality has been a subject of fascination, contention, and oppression throughout history, and literature has often served as a powerful medium for exploring this complex terrain. Elaigwu Ameh, a Nigerian author known for his thought-provoking works, provides a nuanced examination of women's sexuality as a form of currency in his plays *Sweet Taste of Shame* and *Climate of Change*. These plays invite readers to engage critically with how gender, power, and sexuality intersect in Nigerian society, offering a lens to understand the broader issues of patriarchy, sexual agency, and societal transformation.

This study employs a feminist literary critical lens to examine how gender roles and power dynamics are constructed and represented within literary texts. It explores how women are portrayed, their societal constraints, and the underlying messages about gender embedded within

the texts (Showalter, 2011). The core of this investigation lies in dissecting how Ameh constructs his female characters and the choices they make regarding their sexuality. Are they empowered agents, or are they constrained by societal expectations that reduce their worth to their sexual desirability? This analysis will explore the concept of women's bodies as commodities, the psychological impact of such objectification, and the potential for resistance against these structures. The concept of women's sexuality as a form of currency is not a novel one. Feminist scholars such as Armstrong (2020) have argued that throughout history, women's bodies have been viewed as possessions to be exchanged, a means to secure social status, economic security, or necessities. This transactional view of female sexuality is precisely what this paper seeks to explore in Ameh's works. By analyzing the characters' motivations and the consequences of their choices, one can better understand the power dynamics at play within the patriarchal system.

Investigating how women's sexuality is conceptualized in Ameh's texts is crucial for several reasons. First, it exposes the power imbalances inherent in a patriarchal society where women's bodies are often seen as commodities to be exchanged or exploited. Second, it sheds light on women's complex strategies to navigate these limitations and negotiate agency within a restrictive system. Finally, analyzing the portrayal of female sexuality can offer insights into the sociocultural context in which the plays are written, revealing underlying societal norms and expectations regarding gender roles.

Previous studies that have examined women's sexuality as a form of currency include the ethnographic research of Hoang and Yeoh (2015) in the examination of how Vietnamese migrant women in Taiwan navigate sexual relationships for economic gain due to their dependent status, the conceptual framework of Elin et al. (2024) in shedding light on how positions of power have historically been leveraged to exploit women sexually, the *AWDF* (2018) article in the investigation of how societal structures and the gender pay gap can establish situations whereby women feel pressured to leverage their sexuality for financial support, even within romantic relationships. Other studies that have looked at women's sexuality as currency are those by the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (2017) and Roy and Kathleen (2004).

While scholars have examined the transactional nature of female sexuality as a potential survival tactic (Hoang and Yeoh, 2015; AWDF, 2018; Roy and Kathleen, 2004), they have largely overlooked the representation of this theme within literary works. Although thematically connected, this paper diverges by employing a more rigorous theoretical framework and analyzing a distinct corpus. Previous research on this topic has demonstrably focused on a limited aspect of the phenomenon, which this paper aims to investigate holistically. By adopting a feminist theoretical lens, this analysis is based on the following three core tenets: (1) the social construction of gender, (2) the prevalence of gender inequality, and (3) the concept of intersectionality. Consequently, this paper seeks to answer the following three research questions: (1) How do the plays of Elaigwu Ameh portray the economic and social factors that influence women's choices to engage in transactional sex? (2) In what ways do Ameh's plays challenge or reinforce traditional gender roles concerning sexuality and economic power within Nigerian society? (3) Can these texts be interpreted as a commentary on the environmental or societal factors that contribute to the commodification of women's bodies?

This paper analyzes the central themes and messages within Elaigwu Ameh's plays, specifically exploring how these works illuminate the commodification of women's sexuality in Nigeria. Utilizing Feminist Literary Theory and rigorous critical analysis, the study assesses the significance of Ameh's works within the ongoing struggle for gender equality. Through a close examination of these texts, this paper aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the

challenges faced by women in Nigeria and to stimulate discourse on the role of literature in addressing these critical issues. Before engaging with these aspects, the paper will first establish a background on Feminist Literary Theory.

Feminist Literary Theory

Feminist Literary Theory is a robust school of thought that examines literature through the lens of gender and power dynamics. Informed by broader feminist movements, it critiques the historical marginalization of women in literature and how texts reflect and reinforce patriarchal structure (Tyson, 1992). The theory exposes how literature portrays and perpetuates male dominance. It analyzes the economic, social and psychological mechanisms that underpin patriarchy within narratives (Showalter, 2011). Its central concern is the portrayal of women. Critics analyze how female characters are constructed, silenced, or objectified within a text (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979). Feminist theorists challenge the traditional literary canon, arguing that it has privileged male voices and excluded or marginalized women's writing (Spivak, 1988).

Feminist Literary Theory is not monolithic. It has evolved alongside feminist thought, with various emerging branches exploring specific aspects of gender and identity. By offering a critical lens for understanding gender dynamics, the theory enriches our appreciation of literature. It encourages a more nuanced reading of texts and fosters a more inclusive literary landscape. Feminism is the movement for men's and women's social, political and economic equality. It maintains that women and men are treated differently by society and that women have frequently and systematically been barred from participating fully in all the available social arenas and institutions. Kramarae and Treichler say that "feminism" can be described as "a movement seeking the re-organization of the world upon a basis of gender equality in all human relations; a movement that would reject every differentiation between individuals upon the grounds of gender, that would abolish all gender privileges and burdens, and strive to set the recognition of the common humanity of women and men as the foundation of law and custom (1986, 158).

Feminism thus seeks social change in women's status by changing how society views them. It "wants society to change its ideas on patriarchy and accept women as being a valuable part of society" (Peter, 2010, 30). Walker defines a feminist as "someone who perceives that women in a given society are oppressed as women, and believes that this should be changed" (1991, xxiii). Chukwuma states that: "Feminism means...a rejection of inferiority and a striving for recognition. It seeks to give the woman a sense of self as a worthy, effectual, and contributing human being...Women's conditioning in Africa is the greatest barrier toward fulfilment of self" (1994, ix) because men use "the ideology of patriarchy which emphasizes male importance, dominance, and superiority" (Njoku, 2001, 195) to enslave women and make them second-class citizens. The most common schools of thought in feminism include Black feminism, radical feminism, cultural feminism, lesbian feminism, liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, materialist feminism, womanism, African feminism, socialist feminism (Kathy and Daley, 2007), and Africana womanism. Among these branches of feminism, I have based my analysis on two, which are (1) womanism and (2) African feminism.

Womanism has been highlighted as a Black women's liberation movement that seeks to support the enhancement of Black backgrounds and the ideals of African life. It is shown through the literary texts of theorists of the movement such as Walker (1983) and Christian (1981). Womanist Theory has always played a pivotal role in "consciousness-raising, while it also acts in

the public spotlight to improve the lives of women in general” (Peter, 2010, 204). Womanism seeks to support all females and to expose all violations committed against them. Ogunyemi’s definition of the term is expedient: “Womanism is black-centered; it is accommodationist. It believes in the freedom and independence of women like feminism; unlike radical feminism, it wants meaningful union between black women and black men” (1998, 60). This movement is “committed to the survival and the wholeness of all people, females and males” (Peter, 2010, 35). Because the term “feminism” has negative connotations in Africa even by female writers and is sometimes regarded as a curse, African critics have developed many alternative terms such as African feminism.

African feminism is a diverse and multifaceted movement that seeks to address the unique challenges faced by women in Africa. It is not a monolithic entity but a collection of diverse perspectives and approaches. While there is no single founder of African feminism, several scholars and activists have made significant contributions to its development. A renowned Nigerian novelist and feminist writer, Adichie, has become a prominent voice in discussions about African feminism. Adichie’s *We Should All Be Feminists* (2017) has been widely praised for its accessible and insightful exploration of feminism. Oyewumi (1977) has challenged traditional Western conceptions of gender and sexuality in Africa. Her work, *The Invention of Women: Gender Discourses in Yoruba Culture* (1977) argues that the concept of “woman” as a distinct category of social identity is a relatively recent Western import. Oyewumi’s analysis has been influential in rethinking the history of gender in Africa. A Kenyan feminist scholar and activist, Mama (1995), has been a leading figure in the African feminist movement. Her work has focused on issues such as reproductive rights, gender-based violence, and economic justice. Mama has also been instrumental in building networks and coalitions among African feminist organizations. A Sierra Leonean-American feminist scholar, Steady (1987), has conducted extensive research on African women’s experiences, particularly in the areas of health, education, and politics. Her work highlights the interconnectedness of gender, race, and colonialism in shaping the lives of African women.

Unlike Western feminism, African feminism does not work against men but rather accommodates them. This is not a surprising phenomenon since most African women are also committed to the institution of the family and certainly do not want to do without their men. Nonetheless, they do not want to be maltreated and are readily interested in working out guidelines that defend women and get rid of the prejudice against them. African feminism as a term serves as the domesticated version of the ideology of feminism. It takes into account the African philosophy of life which stresses marriage as a social institution. Nevertheless, it condemns all forms of patriarchy which dehumanize women and portray them as second-class citizens. Rooted in African historical and cultural experiences, it advances the view of the complementarity between man and woman by stressing the male-female principle in the creative order (Maduka 2005).

The two plays broached in this paper fall under the two aforementioned strands of feminism which focus on different aspects of women’s lives that are “most frequently introduced, by capitalist and patriarchal ideologies, as personal aspects of human existence. Such systems insist that (traditional) issues like mothering and motherhood, socialization of children, housewifery and domestic labor, and sexuality” (Maleki and Labakhsh, 2012, 67) should be dealt with in detail. The ensuing section will provide a brief background on women and sexuality

Women and Sexuality

Literature offers a rich and multifaceted exploration of female sexuality. Across historical periods, various disciplines, and cultural contexts, writers have depicted women's desires, agency, and sexual experiences in diverse ways, reflecting the prevailing social norms and evolving perspectives of their respective eras. Throughout history, women have been used as pawns in political and social exchanges. Obeid (2017), a gender-based violence specialist, discusses this issue in the context of the Syrian conflict, where women were offered protection, border crossing, and even rent. There is also the common practice known as the dowry system (which is money or goods offered by or to the bride's family). This can be seen as a form of exchange whereby a woman's hand in marriage secures wealth/cost or social status for her family (Liu, 2013).

Also, in Anthropology, there is the issue of bride price. In some cultures, bride price (payment from the groom's family to the bride's family) is practiced. This can be viewed as a form of compensation for the loss of a daughter's labor and reproductive potential (Tara, 2023). The research by Chimaraoke (2010) in Sociology explores the link between patriarchal ideology and how female sexuality is viewed in Nigeria. He proceeds to say how women's bodies are seen as "gifts" to men, emphasizing male pleasure and control. In the same vein, Ekwutosi et al. (2021) explore how societal norms around sexuality are rooted in patriarchy. This reinforces the idea that women's bodies are for men's pleasure, potentially leading to a transactional view of sex. Furthermore, apropos Sexual Economics Theory, scholars like Laumann and Wallerstein, (1983) argue that sex functions as a "marketplace deal" whereby women control access to their bodies and exchange it for money, security, and social status.

Early works in literature portrayed female sexuality indirectly, either through the male gaze or as a source of societal disruption and temptation (Gilbert and Gubar, 1979). Works like Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) explore societal punishment in response to female sexuality deviating from societal norms. Hester Prynne's forced display of adultery highlights how women's bodies can be seen as a form of currency for social control, while Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) features Edna Pontellier's desire to challenge the constraints of her marriage.

Furthermore, literature delves into the physical aspects of the female experience. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) portrays Sethe's conflicted relationship with her body, shaped by the realities of slavery and motherhood. Conversely, works like Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1973) celebrate female sexual pleasure from a first-person perspective. Importantly, the literature also investigates how societal structures influence women's sexuality. Margaret Atwood's dystopian *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) depicts a future where the state controls female bodies, while Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006) explores the impact of colonialism on women's experiences.

Contemporary literature increasingly portrays the complexities of female sexuality beyond traditional categories. Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) explores a lesbian relationship, while works by Carmen Maria Machado and Ocean Vuong, as pointed out by Garcia (2002) challenge traditional notions of gender and desire. Female sexuality is a complex concept encompassing a biological, psychological, social and cultural interplay (Garcia, 2002). It transcends the purely physical act of intercourse and delves into the realm of identity, desire, pleasure, and emotional connection (Davis and Brody, 2018). Several key factors that shape female sexuality are the following:

- (1) *Psychological Factors*: A woman's self-esteem, body image, and emotional wellbeing significantly influence her sexual desire and satisfaction (Matthews and Fisher, 2010). Past sexual experiences, trauma, and cultural messages surrounding female sexuality can also shape these psychological aspects (Kopp and Westen, 2017).
- (2) *Social and Cultural Influences*: Societal expectations, gender roles, and religious beliefs all play a significant role in shaping women's sexuality (Morokoff and Them, 2017). Societal pressures to conform to unrealistic beauty standards and the stigma surrounding female pleasure-seeking can negatively impact sexual expression (Davis, 2008).
- (3) *Sexual Orientation and Identity*: Women's sexuality encompasses a spectrum of sexual orientations, including heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, and asexuality (APA, 2014). Understanding sexual orientation is crucial when examining female sexuality, as attraction and desire are central components.
- (4) *The Evolving Landscape*: The concept of women's sexuality is constantly evolving, with social movements and feminist discourse challenging traditional gender roles and promoting female sexual agency (Brooks, 2014). Access to information and open discussions about female sexuality can lead to a more empowered and diverse understanding of women's sexual experiences.

It is of utmost importance to acknowledge the problematic aspects of viewing women's sexuality as a form of currency. This perspective can reinforce gender inequality and objectification. Nonetheless, understanding this concept can shed light on historical practices, social structure, and ongoing struggles for women's empowerment. It is a complex and ever-evolving tapestry woven from biological, psychological, social and cultural threads. Dismantling outdated stereotypes and promoting open communication are crucial steps toward a more inclusive and healthy understanding of female sexuality. Before getting into my analysis of the data collected for this paper, I will first provide in the next section a brief review of the research methodology and design that also helped to ground my analysis.

Research Methodology and Design

This paper employs textual analysis, a cornerstone methodology across various disciplines. Textual analysis offers a systematic approach to dissecting and interpreting written, spoken, and even visual messages (Scribbr, 2023). It transcends surface-level meaning, aiming to uncover underlying themes, messages, and symbols (Lettria, 2023). This process allows me to glean valuable insights into authorial intent, the cultural context surrounding texts' composition, and its potential impact on the audience.

Textual analysis involves a close and critical examination of a text by deconstructing its elements for holistic comprehension (Alan, 2020). This includes analyzing content, language choices, and structure/organization. By meticulously examining these aspects, I will identify patterns and relationships that unlock deeper meaning. Textual analysis is adaptable to diverse

research questions and disciplines. Literary studies might focus on deconstructing symbolism and figurative language (Scribbr, 2023). The specific approach depends on the research goals and the type of text being analyzed. This paper benefits from textual analysis because my interpretation of Ameh's texts is guided by observations that aid in constructing meaning from the work.

This paper adopts a close reading approach to extract pertinent data concerning women's sexuality within the chosen texts. The feminist theoretical framework is used to analyze and interpret the collected data. Following a thematic analysis, the paper will present its key findings regarding the exploration of women's sexuality. Narrative techniques are also employed. The central characters are identified and their connection to the plot is established. A meticulous examination of plot elements is undertaken to reveal their contribution to the research questions. These characters drive the narrative forward, while focalization allows for a deeper understanding of how each character functions in the exploration of women's sexuality. Next is a summary of the two plays under review.

Plot Summary of the Texts (*Sweet Taste of Shame* and *Climate of Change*)

The play *Sweet Taste of Shame* delves into the harrowing experiences of a young woman named Ene. At the vulnerable age of 16, Ene falls victim to the predatory actions of her father, Monday. This act of incest, repeated four times, results in an unwanted pregnancy. Faced with this horrifying reality, Ene seeks solace but encounters further exploitation. A seemingly helpful figure, Doctor, preys upon Ene's desperation. Through deception, he lures her into a facility later revealed to be a "baby factory." Initially naive, Ene soon discovers the facility's true purpose, a realization that shatters her innocence. Unwilling to become another captive, Ene embarks on a daring act. With remarkable resolve, she rallies other girls in the camp and together they attempt an escape. Their bid for freedom is thwarted, leading to a confrontation with Sergeant Monday. This encounter triggers a series of revelations. Monday's confusion regarding the presence of twins within the facility exposes Doctor's operation. Ultimately, the play culminates in the just punishment of Doctor and his accomplice, Cash Madam.

In a related development, the play *Climate of Change* centers on Zaza, a teacher and daughter of a prominent farmer who was unjustly killed and his land seized. Years later, her mother suffers a similar fate, falsely accused of witchcraft by Chief Nisa and subsequently murdered by the son of the ruling King, Kado. Grief and a yearning for justice propel Zaza into a leadership role among the village youths. They aim to combat the environmental destruction caused by a corrupt politician who has deforested the land for personal gain. This politician, fueled by ambition for a senatorial seat, employs various manipulative tactics. He attempts to neutralize Zaza's growing influence by offering her a relationship, believing it will grant him supernatural power. When she refuses, he resorts to a smear campaign, falsely branding her a witch, mirroring the accusation used against her mother.

Meanwhile, the King and trusted seer, Baba Toka, have reportedly been swayed by the politician's bribes and promises. Baba Toka, under the politician's influence, attempts to convince the village and the King of Zaza's supposed witchcraft. The narrative depicts the brutality Zaza endures: arrest, forced confinement, and ingestion of foul concoctions. Despite this, she is scheduled for public execution within the palace. The story takes a supernatural turn as the ghost of Zaza's mother appears, seemingly pursuing Chief Nisa. Adding to the sense of impending retribution, Baba Toka's son, promised a life abroad by the politician, dies under

mysterious circumstances. This event suggests the potential for divine intervention and the consequences of corrupt actions.

Women's Sexuality as a Form of Currency in the Texts

In the fictional worlds of *The Sweet Taste of Shame* and *Climate of Change* by Ameh, women's sexuality is a potent force, but not necessarily one wielded by the women themselves. This paper presents how these narratives portray female sexuality as a form of currency, highlighting the power dynamics and exploitation inherent in such a system. Ameh's plays provide rich terrain for exploring the themes of female sexuality and its commodification. Set in contemporary Nigeria, these plays grapple with the social and economic pressures that compel women to leverage their bodies for personal gain or survival. Through his characters' experiences, Ameh offers a nuanced portrayal of the complex ways in which women navigate a world where their sexuality is both a source of agency and vulnerability.

Sweet Taste of Shame establishes a society where female beauty and sexuality are commodified. Most of the female characters in the play use their bodies to gain social and economic advantages. This establishes a situation whereby their attractiveness and sexual availability measure their worth. The act of sex itself in the text becomes a transaction devoid of genuine desire or emotional connection. Like the case of Emeka in the text. "You think I like what I do? Each time I'm scheduled to sleep with the girls here, I take drugs to desensitize myself. With my senses intact, I can't do this... It is r-a-p-e. Oh! So, you've known it's rape all this while and you didn't stop? I was only carrying out orders" (*Sweet Taste of Shame*, 60-61).

Three girls apart from Ene the protagonist do not have agency in their sexual encounters. They are pressured to use their bodies to secure a desired outcome. The first girl was kidnapped on her way to the market. The kidnappers took turns to rape her after she challenged their authority. She got sold into a baby factory. Her first child was a girl. Doctor, who is in charge of the baby factory, could not recover from the sale of the baby which happens to be a girl against his better judgment. So, he asked Emeka, his bodyguard, to impregnate her and the result was a boy child. She thought Doctor would free her after the delivery, but he did not. Emeka did the same thing to her again and she is pregnant again.

Furthermore, the second girl was not forced but poverty did. She is a Year 2 Geology student. Somebody told her by becoming pregnant and giving birth, she would make enough money to pay for her tuition and basic needs. She was lucky her first baby was a boy. She sold him to Doctor for a handsome amount which she used to open a shop for her younger one's upkeep. The second pregnancy, if it gives her a baby boy, should take care of her remaining tuition and upkeep allowance.

Moreover, the third girl got impregnated by her schoolteacher. The sex was consensual, but not the pregnancy. He wanted an abortion, but she wanted "them"—the baby, him and her—to be a family. He said there was never "them" and there will never be. In the fourth month, her classmates were beginning to suspect she was pregnant, so she ran to an orphanage to deliver her baby based on the advice of Doctor who is their school physician. This is her fourth pregnancy. Cash Madam would not let her go because her babies are always very big and handsome boys. She was 14 when she came to the baby factory five years ago.

In addition, Ene was raped four times by her father. According to him, ever since his wife passed away, there's been a vacuum left in his heart. He misses his late wife every passing minute. In Ene, he sees her and relieves his memories. (*Sweet Taste of Shame*, 33-36). This

devaluation of female desire not only objectifies them but also reinforces a patriarchal structure whereby men hold the power to determine the value of a woman's sexuality.

Climate Change presents a seemingly different scenario. The societal shift brought about by the protagonist Zaza and her climate change protest disrupts the established power structures. In this text, there is a change in how female sexuality is viewed. It offers a glimmer of hope for women to reclaim control over their bodies and desires. The first girl shuns the politician to stop touching her because she does not want to become pregnant like her friend, Chief Nisa's daughter. The politician immediately promised her a trip to Copenhagen like he did to other girls in the village. But the girl calls him shameless and runs off. She says: "Tell your girlfriend to meet you there. After all, you impregnated her ... Shameless man" (*Climate of Change*, 21). He does not sleep with these girls for pleasure; it is for spiritual powers. Their success becomes his, and he grows more successful while the girls become more useless. Zaza is his next target and states: "Oh Zaza! You think I sleep with these girls for pleasure...No! Not at all! It's for spiritual powers. Their success becomes mine and I grow more successful while they become more hopeless. Zaza, you are my next prey" (*Climate of Change*, 33).

Similarly, the politician makes several attempts to foil Zaza's movement. First, he offers a marriage proposal to Zaza, which she declines. Then he attempts to rape her to subdue her. When all attempts fail, he gets the village seer to brand her a witch and the source of the calamity confronting the village. Zaza is captured after being branded as a witch by the village seer and set to be sacrificed to appease the gods. From the preceding, the female character in *Climate of Change* exhibits more agency in her sexuality, although still subjected to exploitation in this new world order as seen on pages 21-22 of the text.

The titles themselves, *Sweet Taste of Shame* and *Climate of Change*, hint at the emotional and societal consequences of women's sexuality being used as currency. These narratives depict shame that stems from a more personal burden carried by the female characters. Within *Sweet Taste of Shame*, Ene encourages her colleagues to let the past fade, but not with their best, so that when they drink from the fountain of freedom, "though pumped up in a cloak of shame, we shall savor shame's sweet taste" (*Sweet Taste of Shame*, 47). Both plays offer an opportunity to explore the possibility of transcending the system of sexual currency. Ene and Zaza challenged the status quo and sought genuine relationship connections. They offer a glimpse of an alternative future whereby women's sexuality is valued for itself, not as a tool for bartering (see pages 55-58 of *Sweet Taste of Shame* and pages 19 and 70 of *Climate of Change*).

Ameh's plays illuminate the enduring presence of patriarchal structures in Nigerian society. The characters of Monday, Doctor, and Emeka in *Sweet Taste of Shame* represent the entrenched power dynamics that perpetuate the commodification of women's sexuality, while the politician represents greed, corruption, and patriarchy in *Climate Change*. He uses his money to lure young, impoverished women into his sexual escapades. Nonetheless, Ameh establishes strong female characters. He addresses the social status of women via his characterization of strong women who engaged in direct conflict with a male-dominated society.

Zaza plays a role similar to Ene in *The Sweet Taste of Shame*. She is passionate about the welfare of nature and women. She confronts the cohort of Political and spiritual leaders responsible for despoiling women and the environment. She challenges the authority of the politician as follows: "(Pointing at Politician.) No! You are the problem!" (see pages 8-10). Ene portrays such radicalism as follows: "Doctor: (Sternly.) No! Keep the food! This show of disrespect is too much. Right here...right now...they must eat the food. Ene: And if we don't?" (see pages 64-67 of *The Sweet Taste of Shame*). She resists Doctor, Cash Madam, Monday, and

the subordination of women through her reconceptualization of women as active agents and subjects of their freedom. She told her colleagues: “We’ll fight back harder and smarter...until we find a crack in their system to exploit on our way to our freedom” (*Sweet Taste of Shame*, 56). At the heart of the texts is the theme of societal transformation. Female characters such as Zaza and Ene symbolize the potential for change and progress within African society. This paper explores how Ameh’s narratives offer glimpses of hope and transformation amid deeply ingrained societal norms.

Sweet Taste of Shame and Climate of Change as a Study in Womanism and African Feminism

Ameh’s plays contain gender motifs that seem similar to those tackled in most African fiction. The texts constitute an unprecedented advance in their advocacy of women’s issues and concerns. The stories explicitly deal with pernicious social diseases such as wife abuse and the gendering of poverty. For all his endeavors in the empowerment of women, the most notable transformation in his work came with these two masterpieces. In these plays, women have their full independence and overcome all kinds of obstacles put in their way by men and society. The plays introduce the concept of “sisterhood”: i.e. women working together for their collective good as well as that of society. *Sweet Taste of Shame* and *Climate of Change* are the works that most represent Ameh as a lifetime crusader for the empowerment of African women. The plays delve into the multifaceted constraints experienced by women in post-colonial society. Waita fittingly captures this complex situation, describing women as “trapped in the patriarchal and the colonial past as well as by the emerging male elite in independent Nigeria” (2013, 48). The plays effectively illustrate how African women are subjected to a confluence of oppressive forces, highlighting their marginalized position within these intersecting systems of power.

To begin with, the plays depict a set of wrongs to which African women of all classes and social ranks are subjected. Ene, the protagonist in *Sweet Taste of Shame*, is humiliated by her father, Inspector Monday, for having dared to challenge him of sexually violating her. As a result of her “crime”, she is threatened to be killed: “So, you called me a rapist. You call your dad a rapist? I’ll kill you” (*Sweet Taste of Shame*, 21). In the *Climate of Change*, Zaza is victimized and labelled a witch because she dares to challenge the oppressive patriarch: “Your time is up Zaza! You can’t continue to deceive us anymore! This young woman right here was brought up in a home of witchcraft. Let’s not forget that the father died mysteriously and that the mother was killed for her witchcraft” (*Climate of Change*, 34-35).

A second example of a woman constrained by postcolonial power structures is Udoro, Inspector Monday's wife and Ene's stepmother in *The Sweet Taste of Shame*. Despite her husband's ostensibly modern position in the police force, Udoro's domestic role mirrors the entrenched patriarchal norms of postcolonial society. Waita observes: “Although living in the modern age...husbands view their wives as a lesser rather than an equal partner” (2013, 48). This observation highlights the enduring subjugation of women, even within supposedly modernized sectors of postcolonial society. She is continuously in dire need of domestication and her husband views abusing her as his male prerogative. Udoro is an African woman who believes in the holy bond of marriage. She is described as a dutiful wife and a wise and organized woman who manages domestic and business affairs skilfully when her husband is out of town due to the nature of his job. She also excels in treating her husband and stepdaughter very well. Nevertheless, in return for her limitless services and favors to her family, she is rewarded with

abuse and insults now and then: “(Rising from the sofa, visibly infuriated.) What nonsense is that? (Pointing his finger at Udoro.) Why are you always thinking evil? That’s why you’ve been childless ten years after I married you” (*Sweet Taste of Shame*, 2-3).

Taking us further, Ene, the heroine of the play, is born into the middle class; but as her consciousness develops, she rejects her father’s threat and attempts to control her. She confides in her family’s doctor about her pregnancy against her father’s wishes. When she realizes that the doctor and his wife are trying to use her for wealth and not for help, she starts to protest in the orphanage where she was kept with the other girls. Ene is the most successful female character in *Sweet Taste of Shame*. She is presented as an astute organizer of women. She represents a fresh consciousness of a new woman who provides meaningful political leadership in a collective endeavor to save the homeland.

Likewise, in *Climate of Change*, Zaza takes it upon herself to free all the women in Bagada by holding campaigns to fight patriarchal oppression. The play promotes a positive image of women, decries violations against them, and projects a kind of feminist social consciousness. In *Zaza*, Ameh establishes a character who is at the center striving to make a new identity and who is ready to reconsider the cultural map of the African continent. Zaza questions the position of the African woman as she is trebly oppressed on the account of her gender like all women in the world; on account of her class like all workers and peasants in the world; and on account of her race and ethnicity like every other woman of color in the world. That is why she can also be regarded as a socialist feminist who believes in consciousness-raising as a strategy for sharing experiences and hidden fears resulting from the suppression of women in neocolonial African society. As Acker and Barry describe it, “consciousness-raising is a technique for revealing experience that the dominant ideology has denied” (1984, 179). Zaza is a pioneer in providing social and moral education to other characters in the play.

In the same vein, Davis (1986) speaks about the concept of “Sisterhood” in the light of its ability to aid the advancement of women in society. Ene’s schooling of the girls in the orphanage to refuse indiscriminate sex as a means of survival resulted in notable and positive female interactions which gave Doctor and Cash Madam sleepless nights: “This show of disrespect is too much” (*Sweet Taste of Shame*, 65). Todd argues that “Friendship is a nurturing tie not pitting women against society but rather smoothing their passage within it. Here, the support and acceptance of other women is essential, since through their teaching of female lore, criminal or conventional, women aid and sustain each other” (1980, 4). This sisterly feeling is reflected in defending the girls in *Sweet Taste of Shame*. The girls’ refusal to stand and greet Doctor and Cash Madam shamed them as they entered the girls’ room: “We should remain seated or laying on our mattresses. Nobody should stand to greet them” (*Sweet Taste of Shame*, 56) exposes their evil practices to the whole world. In this way, an issue that is consigned to the domestic arena is made public and also brought to the attention of the global audience. The girls kept repeating “Little girls are free! They’re not locked up in a room! They’re not sexually exploited! They’re shown love, and not made love to” (*Sweet Taste of Shame*, 65).

Furthermore, *Climate of Change* sarcastically satirizes the politician’s pseudo-philosophical tract, which argues that women should be suppressed and must always be used to meet a man’s needs. He believes that by sleeping with Zaza, he will acquire what it takes to defeat his opponent: “It’s about your great fortune. Your brilliant courage and success destined for you from birth will all be mine. Allow me to sleep with you and tap this great fortune I need to defeat my opponent. If I enter your royal sanctuary, I shall come out purified and fortified to face the electoral war ahead” (*Climate of Change*, 33-49).

The assault on Emeka in *Sweet Taste of Shame*, perpetrated by the young women he has impregnated and abused, underscores a central tenet: domestic matters are intrinsically linked to societal wellbeing. This incident serves as a microcosm of the broader issue of gender-based violence. Ene, the play's central activist figure, advocates for a comprehensive approach to women's rights, demanding equality across domestic, familial, national and global spheres. By illuminating previously taboo subjects, these plays challenge the boundaries of the African public sphere, advocating for their integration into the fabric of a just and equitable society (Okolo, 2009).

The plays draw insights from the Africana Womanism postulate of Hudson-Weems (2024) which is aware that there has always been bonding among African women and between them and African men. This bonding cannot be broken because it is genuine sisterhood. The traditional family is so important to the African womanist who recognizes the need for a genuine connection between women. This kind of family gives them support in their search for solace in their time of need and can offer them insight into their time of confusion (as cited in Peter, 2010). The concept of sisterhood is also emphasized as Ene empowers the girls in the orphanage and gives them a voice and a strong will to pursue their freedom: "I have a brilliant idea sisters! This very day is a witness to great beginnings. We cannot continue to like this, my sisters. They've haunted us into the firestorms; they've stricken our psyche so badly that we're now numb. So, let's become numb to their indignity, numb to their threats, numb to their might" (*Sweet Taste of Shame*, 46). Ene kept the girls in touch with the latest idea and, by so doing; she proved her loyalty to the girls' cause more than to her life

Equally, in *Climate of Change*, when King Kado threatens to escort Zaza out of the palace for interrupting the politician, he orders the guards to capture dissidents and put a stop to leaflets, protest songs, and placards used by the protesters to educate the community on his unpopular policies (see pages 4-8 of the text). Zaza never feels terrified although she has been described by the politician as a hopeless schoolteacher: "Hopeless schoolteacher, I know you're jealous of my flourishing paper and wood business" (*Climate of Change*, 9). The appearance of Zaza's mother's spirit reminds the villagers of how brave women can be as it can be related to the tireless and courageous women's freedom fighters in many parts of the world (*Climate of Change*, 59).

To this end, *Climate of Change* is a ground-breaking work in the transformation of man-woman relationships. We are told that Zaza refuses to have sex with the politician in the text, telling him to: "be good to the people. You know their needs. Provide for them, and they'll vote for you en masse" (*Climate of Change*, 48). Thus, topics that used to be regarded as taboo in African literature such as intercourse are now discussed openly by Politician, Baba Toka, Monday, and Emeka. The institution of marriage regarded as the pinnacle of idealism in the past is now described as no more than a troublesome affair. Zaza and Ene are Ameh's most truly feminist female characters. The final triumph of Zaza's characterization is that she has to assume the role of the Queen Mother of the Bagada Kingdom when King Kado renounces the throne and handed over to his son, Umana. Their union is that of selfless service to the community and Zaza has the opportunity to consistently resist the constant cycles of repression and exploitation in postcolonial Africa. Likewise, Ene succeeded in getting the girls freed from the dungeon of Doctor and Cash Madam: "Officer...name your price. I give you, and we go free. I am not a businessman but a Police Officer. (*Turns to guard.*) Untie the girls! Then tie-up Doctor and his wife" (*Sweet Taste of Shame*, 83).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Ameh's *Sweet Taste of Shame* and *Climate of Change* offer a profound exploration of women's sexuality as a currency within the complex tapestry of Nigerian society. Through a feminist lens, this study illuminates how these plays intersect gender, power, and sexuality. Ameh's female characters navigate a landscape where sexual agency is both a tool for survival and a form of oppression, revealing the enduring influence of patriarchal structures.

By focusing on women's sexuality as a currency, this analysis contributes novel insights into Ameh's oeuvre. It situates his work within broader discussions of gender, power, and sexuality in Africa, offering a counterpoint to predominantly ethnographic or social science-based studies. Ameh's plays challenge the status quo, encouraging readers to critically examine the commodification of women's bodies and desires.

The plays underscore women's agency and resilience, as they evolve from passive victims to assertive protagonists. While rooted in the context of Nigerian society, Ameh's works resonate globally, prompting a call for a more nuanced understanding of women's experiences.

To foster a more equitable society, it is imperative to move beyond reductive representations of women. Playwrights should establish complex characters reflecting the diversity of women's lives. Policymakers must enact gender-sensitive legislation, invest in gender education, and challenge harmful stereotypes. By prioritizing gender equality, we can establish a world where women's sexuality is respected, protected, and free from exploitation.

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