SECTION F: GENDER AND FEMINISM STUDIES

17.

Women's Identities and Subjectivity of Self in Lesley Nneka Arimah's '*What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky'*

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of women's identities and embedded subjectivity of self in Lesley Nneka Arimah's *What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky*. Considering the dearth of critical works on the debut collection, this paper fills the gap, in reading some of the purposively selected stories through a feminist standpoint. The textual analysis of the selected stories reveals patriarchal social order and the power tussle among women as challenges facing the true emancipation of women. The latter challenge, however, the paper argues, emanates from the sole aim to either undermine or strengthen the weak amongst affected women. This paper equally underscores both dignified and degrading identities evident in some of the female characters, ranging from being assertive, independent, dubious and aggressive to being wayward. In manifesting through these identities, the paper exposes the subjective interests behind the roles or actions of the women which are to better their lives and those of others around them. Furthermore, there is an overt display of personal struggle for emotional fulfilment among majority of the female characters in most of the studied stories. This paper concludes that Arimah, as a new feminist voice in the corpus of African literature, has, through this debut collection, added fresh insights to the identities of African women with vistas of underlying issues for critical engagements among feminist critics and writers.

Keywords: Women, Identities, Subjective self, Feminism, Arimah

Introduction

The portrayal of diverse identities of women in literary works, over time, is predicated on the evolution of societal and ideological consciousness. Such portrayal, either on liberal or radical stance, indicates the essence of women and those spotlight situations and experiences that construe their identities and existence. Nevertheless, the polemics of women in any society always attract the vibes of committed critics toward revolutionizing against the overt bordered

freedom of their manifestation and relevance. As human events move in same acceleration with modern advancement, women's identities, which are part of interactional ambiance and co-existential human relationships, are (re)configured based on cultural exigencies of the immediate society. It is not an oblivious fact that women thrive in condescension as regards their primal role and relevance, either due to male chauvinistic tendencies or hostile conditions orchestrated by themselves (same female group). The latter situation, however, deconstructs the cliché of feministic dogma which assumes that the oppressive experience of women is borne out of patriarchal construction. There seems to be an upsurge of evolving behavioural patterns among women in the feminist world with the propensity of blowing the unity of their struggle against their assumed common enemy, 'male dominance', out of proportion. This scenario, either manifesting consciously or unconsciously, suggests the existence of a dual war in the house of feminism: first, to be free from patriarchal forces and, second, to tackle self-induced limitations indirectly posed by women themselves. This dual war, (re)occurring within the territories of the women's world, has strongly created a vista of interests regarding its correlation in women, their diverse identities and emancipation mantra, which abound in both old and emerging literary feminist works.

There is no gainsaying the fact that the struggle for the emancipation of women from the shackles of patriarchal order has remained one of the focal engagements in the body of literary theory and criticism. This engagement, as the case may be, metamorphoses into what seems a unified ideology through committed postures of some scholars, critics and theorists; hence the term 'feminism'. According to Charles Bressler, "feminism is an ideological movement that seeks to change the degrading views of women so that all women will realize that they are not a non-significant other…possessing the same privileges and rights as every man" (144). This movement for women and their rights, irrespective of its later ideological modification, has its foundational Western interrogation in seminal and critical works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, and Julia Kristeva, among others. Due to the movement's assumed Eurocentric nature, its reception in other continents of the world, especially Africa, was greeted with dissenting voices among critics. In this regard, Molly Chiluwa submits that, "for an African feminist, forms of women oppression are peculiar to their individual societies and cultural milieus…those theories [of African orientation] pitch the African philosophy galaxy as their world view … borne out of the urge for African women to articulate their brand of marginalization and experience that differ in many ways from those of Western women" (103-104). There is a wide gap in the reception of issues that bother women in both western and African societies. For instance, in a traditional African setting of Igbo extraction there are some cultural dogmas which are not favourable to women, and in most cases they are obligated to respect them without any form of defiance. Suffice it to say that such cultural ideology and its influence on women's condition is in total contrast with what is tenable in Western climes. In lending more credence to the earlier position of Chiluwa, Akachi T. Ezeigbo posits:

> Feminist literary theory and criticism in the West tended to ignore the experience of Black women, African women and women of colour from other cultures of the world…. The universal application of the Western model - as if it the only experience - has provoked a dissenting voice from feminist theorists, critics and scholars from non-white cultures. They dissociate themselves from the brand of feminism espoused by middle-class Western women…they have sought to define their type of feminism. (14-15).

In solidarity with the dual views above, some Afrocentric feminist critics cum theorists have propounded diverse indigenous theories which they believe have the strength in catering for the aspirations of Black or African women. These Afrocentric feminists and their theories include Alice Walker's Womanism, Clenora Hudson-Weems' Africana Womanism, Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie's Stiwanism, Chikwenye Ogunyemi's Black Womanism, Catherine Acholonu's Motherism, Chioma Opara's Femalism, Obioma Nnaemeka's Nego-feminism and recently, Ezeigbo's Snail-sense feminism, among others. In no small measure, these diverse postulations of African-oriented feminist theories or models portend the continuous realistic happenings as they affect the lives of women, especially in African societies. This claim is validated in the words of Aderemi Raji-Oyelade, that "…the interpretation and misinterpretation of the woman - the critique and integration of the female - is perhaps the most crucial subject of contemporary African literature today" (67). It is worthy of note that African literature is replete with creative writings - be it prose, poetry, drama and most especially short stories, which explore the state of women and their identities. This is glaring in the creative productions of her pioneer female writers - Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo, Mabel Segun, Ifeoma Okoye, Mariama Ba, Buchi Emecheta, Bessie Head, Grace Ogot, Calixthe Bayela and Zaynab Alkali, among others. Arguably, these female writers and their feminist writings form the sublime foundation upon which the new generation of African feminist writers, especially Lesley Nneka Arimah, whose creative work this paper focuses on, derives her prodigious and ideological strengths in tackling women's travails in society. In attesting to this claim, Alioune Sow argues that "African writers [especially feminist writers] have been particularly accurate in their depiction of the collective and individual tragedies that lead to the fragmentation of societies [as it affects women]" (207).

Over time, various African female writers have emerged, with diverse orientations, (re)creating various identities of women through literary representations. This is achieved through apportioning either dignifying or demeaning roles to women characters as for and against the ones being done by their male counterparts who dominated the writing world before their epoch. In accounting for the disparities in the creation of women's role which is part of their identity formation among feminist writers, both male and female, in African Literary period, E.E. Ojaruega concludes that:

> While the first [African] generation of feminist writers cautiously presented heroines whose desire for prosperity or power often jeopardizes their fulfilment in the domestic

> sphere, recent trends in feminist narratives show these debutantes [including Arimah] concerned with reassessing human experiences so as to build bridges and expand frontiers in human relationship by fostering true emancipation for women…re-inscribing new identities, new roles and canons of power for the contemporary Nigerian [and other African] woman via fictional space (108).

In support of Ojaruega's view, Emeka Nwabueze, agrees that "it is clear that the portrayal of women in African society now wears a new look. Their traditional portrayal as people who play a secondary but cheerfully accepted role has changed…as well as on the pages of African creative literature" (86). Out of sheer bravery or what can be seen as will-power, women expand their life influence beyond mere stereotyped pattern of existence. They are not only questioning the dichotomy being posed by patriarchal social order, they also counteract those impediments caused by themselves (women) as a group. Buttressing further, Helen Chukwuma says that "the rural, back house, timid, sub-servient, lack-lustre woman has been replaced by the modern counter-part, a full rounder human being, rational, individualistic and assertive, fighting for, claiming and keeping her own" (3). In same light, Simone de Beauvoir avers that "the modern woman accepts masculine values; she prides herself on thinking, taking action, working, creating on the same terms as man" (cited in Walters, 98). This cross-gendered personality transition, from what women used to be in the 'dark era' to this modern period, shows the triumph of subjectivity in the (re)configuration of 'self' as represented in the creative world. Such transformation of women's roles, in the words of Sule E. Egya, points to the "metamorphosis of the heroine arising from the author's programmatic infractions of patriarchal conventions" (212).

Subjectivity of 'Self" as it is intended in this paper, thrives on the manifestation of women's identities - collapsing boundaries of limitation for others to benefit from or for personal gain. Those boundaries, nevertheless, are primarily built by male hegemonic forces. Under such stringent boundaries, women do take masculine roles or actions, acting beyond conventional parochial gender perception to liberate themselves or others who are dependent on their intervention. Margaret Walters affirms that "it was one thing to act in 'unfeminine' ways if divinely inspired, not quite so easy to act unconventionally out of personal ambition" (17). Women are currently taking independent-willed positions which project them as strong as their male counterparts. This pattern of women identity and likes abound in the literary production toward bringing to limelight such trendy and significant existence "...for cross-fertilizing dialogue to replace the self-absorbed conversations among women that were inevitable at the height of the gender wars" (Ogunyemi 7). Female characters, through characterization, are imbued with qualities of a subjective nature in thoughts and actions aimed at placating their plights as well as asserting their own opinions. According to Charles E. Nnolim, "the African woman, through the efforts of the female writers and critics, is now much more aware of her identity and is determined not only to assert her separate personhood, but also to break away from the encircling shackles imposed by men and tradition [including the ones orchestrated by

them]…" (146). To this end, taking cognizance of the forgoing issues, this paper, therefore, through feminist lens, seeks to explore various manifestations of women's identities and the underlying subjectivity of self in Arimah's *What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky*.

Women, Identities and the Subjective Self: The Example of Lesley Nneka Arimah

Arimah's *What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky* is a debut collection of short stories whose title was shortlisted for 2016 Caine prize; but unfortunately, it is characterized with dearth of critical attention, especially on a feminist engagement, apart from this present study. Nevertheless, the feminist tempo that overwhelms the margin and centre axis of the stories suggests the prodigiousness of the writer as another strong crusader of women emancipation in the new Nigerian and African literary world; and this lends credence to her emergence as the winner, 2019 Caine prize for African writing. Such feminist concern as it revolves around women in the collection, points toward a group of assumed weak individuals suffering from the whims and caprices of patriarchal order and other challenges to survival and the need for their freedom. The stories in the collection are also imbued with tales of women and their staunch poise in taking the bull by the horn toward salvaging their pitiable conditions. In achieving the aim of this paper, therefore, some of those stories in the collection are to be selected for textual analysis in order to ascertain how the writer, through characterization, projects the (re)configuration of the identities of female characters and the subjective motivation behind their diverse attitudinal postures.

In "The Future Looks Good," Arimah presents a society where womanhood thrives in dilemma. The story revolves around assertiveness, independency and aggressiveness in the making of womanhood. There is equally hatred, disappointment, regret and violence besieging female characters which construe and influence their struggle for emancipation from many difficulties. The reader's first contact with the story creates an intriguing focus on some key female characters, especially Ezinma, her sister, Bibi, mother and grandmother. The narrator accounts for the experiences of women as it revolves around Ezinma's grandmother:

> Her grandmother, overworked to the bone by the women whose houses she dusted, whose laundry she washed, whose children's assets she scrubbed clean; overworked by the bones of a husband who wanted many sons and the men she entertained to give him, sees her son to his thirteenth year with the perfunction of a nurse and dies in her bed with a long, weary sigh. (1)

The excerpt is a manifestation of industrious, slave-like and despondent condition emanating from harsh conditions of women toward surviving against all odds. Ezinma's grandmother is seen as a workaholic who engages in all manner of menial jobs as a cleaner and nanny. This singular act swiftly raises the bar of revamping the fate of women in society who are viewed as weaker vessels and dependent parasites on men for survival. In spite of strict struggles, Ezinma's

grandmother is also under uncontrolled procreation as a result of inconsiderate choice of her husband for more male children. Her obedience in giving the husband many male children as recounted by the narrator above, emphasizes the patriarchal construct of African society in which she finds herself. In this circumstance and likes, it is a parochial chauvinistic notion that any marriage that produces more female children than or with no male ones has failed, with its concomitant acrimony and rejection. This notion, not only creates imbalance in the gender relevance in society, it equally subjects women, in such a male dominated society, to various inhuman treatments. Despite this terrible experience of women in patriarchal society, Arimah, creates the identity of a passionate woman in the character of Ezinma's grandmother who extends her caring nature to the son. Before her painful death, her aspirations to enjoy a meaningful motherhood was dashed due to frequent pregnancies that she has had for the husband who is bent of having more male children. Furthermore, the story captures the condition of Ezinma in the hands of her stepmother after her mother's untimely death. Ezinma's father falls into the hands of another wife who lured him into sending away his fifteen-year old son - his possible next of kin as evident in Igbo traditional society. Such a disposition by Ezinma's stepmother is anchored on her major interest in acquiring every possible wealth possessed by her husband without any iota of opposition. The writer equally ushers in the events of pre, during and post-civil war days, where the identity of women becomes somewhat confident, thriving toward displaying their innermost desires in asserting their real 'selves'. The narrator simply puts it thus:

Her mother [Ezinmma's mother] is a brash girl who takes more than is offered. It's 1966, months before everything changes, and she is at a party hosted by friends of her parents and there is a man there, yellow-skinned like a mango and square-jawed and bodied like the statue of David, wealthy; the unmarried women strap on their weaponry (winsome smiles, robust cleavage, accommodating personalities) and go to war over him. When she comes out the victor, she takes it as her due (2-3).

The excerpt depicts a new generation of women, in taking bold steps especially as it affects their emotions and intimate affection. It is always seen as anathema and culturally abnormal in African society for a woman to go after a man; and to profess her love toward the latter on the first contact. Rather, women, as regards the said society, are seen to be the paradise which every man must desire to have and ought to take the first possible step in luring her emotionally. Ezinma's mother and her contemporaries, break what seems to be a cultural protocol in their African society. They represent new generation of modern women who go after a man that tickles their fancies without being apologetic whatsoever in their pursuits. As a result of the Biafra war as presented in the story, the newly won fiancé (Ezinma's father) left her lover due to war conditions. The lover (Ezinma's mother) is subjected to poverty during the war, as confirmed by the words of the narrator that, "…food is so scarce, she slips into farms at night and harvests tender tubes of half-grown corn in stealth. They [her family] boils so soft and she eats the inner core and the fibrous husk, too" (3). However, before the disappearance of her lover,

she became pregnant and thereafter, gave birth to two daughters, Bibi and Ezinma. The lives of the duo are full of bitterness, especially emanating from the aggressive and assertive character of Bibi. The narrator captures Bibi's disposition toward her mother:

> When Bibi is twenty-one and her parents struggling to pay the university fees, she meets Godwin, yellow-skinned and square-jawed like his father, and falls in love. She falls harder when her mother warns her away. And when her mother presses, saying, you don't know what his people are like, I do, Bibi responds, you're just angry and bitter that I have a better man than you…. (4-5).

Bibi sees her mother as an obstructive force; against having her newly found love – Godwin, as her husband. There is a clear evidence that Bibi is fearless in her quest to go after the love of her life, despite her mother's stern opposition. This is due to the former's enthusiasm in having a man who even provides more than her father. Godwin makes sure that she does not lack anything. The narrator expresses that "he rents her a flat. He lends her a car. He blinds her with a constellation of gifts, things she's never had before, like spending money and orgasms" (5). The actual motive of Godwin in providing every pleasure of life for Bibi, is geared toward using her as a sex toy. Bibi is so soaked in the dreams of futile future marriage with Godwin. When she makes her marriage intentions known to Godwin, it results to a terrible end. She is assaulted and battered. The alarming rate at which marriage among women has become a do or die affair is evident in this instance. Women see such a hidden marriage plan as only passage to be self-fulfilled as shown in the life of Bibi. The story equally shows the corrosive patriarchal mindset of Godwin who, after manhandling Bibi, also fires a gun into Ezinma's neck when the latter is fumbling the unfamiliar keys against the lock of Bibi's apartment to get her sister's abandoned belongings.

The writer, in "War Stories," exposes the self-induced show of power and supremacy among women as a barrier to themselves. The story revolves around strong-willed girls in secondary school enmeshed in power tussle as exhibited by Anita and Nwando in the membership of the Girl Club. The narrator accounts for the wrangling among the girls as captured below:

> I wanted to tell them about how Anita had started the Girl Club after claiming that her father had sent her expensive bras from London edged with barely-there lace and soft ribbons and powdered with fairy dust, and how she made the rule that only girls with bras could be in the Girl Club and that if you weren't in the Girl Club you couldn't sit in the Girl Area and you had to play with the boys. Anita would confirm who was Girl by escorting each applicant behind the school to check if she was wearing the required undergarment. (7-8)

This excerpt recreates the picture of the aged tussle between men and women in patriarchal society where the former appears powerful, and the latter rendered powerless because of their assumed weakness. Nwando, in defence of the vulnerable girls, plays a major role in dismantling

the forces of discrimination among the girls in school. It is clear that the disposition of Anita toward quarantining some unfortunate girls from identifying with their assumed superior group based on one possessing the 'required undergarment' leads to Nwando's defiance. It is obvious that Anita's attitude lured other girls in school into stewing in bitterness just to be a Girl (8). In order to put an end to this experience of subjugation and discrimination of other girls by Anita and her group, Nwando undresses Anita in school in order to check if truly she does wear the expensive bra which she claims before other school girls to have been sent by her father from London. This radical act amounts to the dethronement of the unfavaourable oppressive structure like that of the patriarchy, which affects the girls, in their liberty of association and relevance. In achieving this feat, Nwando, expresses thus, "I arrived at school the next day a hero. Fellow students patted my back and I was soon surrounded by the girls who hadn't made Anita's club and a few who had but wanted to curry favour with the new regime. By exposing Anita and cutting the head off the beast, I'd inherited my very own Girl Army" (11). Due to the humiliation after her encounter with Nwando, Anita becomes an object of public and sexual harassment among the boys in school. To this end, Nwando says that, "what I hadn't expected were the boys who ran behind her during recess and lifted up her skirt, as though my actions had given them permission, as though because they had seen her bare breast they were entitled to the rest. It was a boyish expectation most would not outgrow even after they became men" (12).

Strikingly, Arimah also creates assertive roles in women toward configuring their identities in "Wild". The story opens with the brave display by Ada, showing love - kissing her newly found love, Bartholomew Fradkin, in school. This self-indulged and assertive behaviour of Ada is greeted by her mother with stern; the latter sees such act as immoral and a sign of being too carried away by the western culture which is in total contrast to their indigenous African cultural values. In this regard, the mother complains, "you are not like these oyinbo girls, you can't just do your body anyhow" (20). The mother, on the other hand, tends reconfiguring Ada's identity (although in subjective mode) into being a reserved African lady irrespective of their long stay overseas. The author also presents a strong character in Ada. She opposes, without fear, the position of her Debate and News teacher in trivial matters. She was suspended for calling the teacher a fascist cow because he refuses her to argue for abortion rights, an issue she did not feel one way or the other about until she was denied the opportunity to support it (20). Due to this unwavering attitude, she was suspended from school for a week and a half which affects her academic performance, ruining her chances of becoming a valedictorian of the graduating class - her teacher keeps scheduling pop quiz every day, lowering her grading scores. Her mother sees such attitude as a disappointment, considering the various efforts put in place to enrol her in a school in America. This uncontainable situation prompts the mother to send Ada back to Auntie Ugo in Nigeria.

Upon Ada's return to Nigeria, she excludes another strong identity of a woman bereft of undue influence in her fashion. Her cousin expects to see American style of fashion but gets disappointed in her appearance at the airport. Ada confided in Auntie Ugo who is still surprised

at her expected thought about her foreign-based cousin that, “my mother constantly complained about my dressing, the baggy jeans and shirts too masculine for her liking, but I had always dressed for comfort, not much caring how I looked” (22). Ada’s mother usually uses her niece in Nigeria, Chinyere, who behaves well and dresses beautifully as an example for her to emulate what seems to be an ideal women identity. Ada accounts thus, “my mother loved invoking Chinyere to nudge me into correct behaviour. Chinyere was such a sweet girl; was so obedient. Even after her indiscretion, the lectures continued. Chinyere was so nice, you see….” (23). The story also brings to light the independent nature of Ada in refusing her mother’s desire to change her belief in putting the type of cloths she thinks the right type that is befitting of a lady of her stature. Her mother’s stubborn stance becomes evident when Chinyere ransacks Ada’s suitcase after her return from the airport, pulling out new tops and dresses. Ada cries out, “I looked at the suitcase. Not a scrap of flannel or denim in sight. No doubt my shirts and jeans were being sorted at a thrift shop right that minute, or possibly aflame in our backyard fire pit. ‘Ugh, my mom must have. I don’t dress like this” (24-25) because it makes me “look a whore” (29). Ada becomes a transformed person fashion-wise, through the efforts of her mother and the consolidation by Chinyere. To this effect, the narrator states:

> I picked a blue dress from the collection my mother had packed and had to admit that when it came to clothing, my mother knew what she was doing. After watching me struggle with a tube of caked mascara, Chinyere went and retrieved an arsenal of tubes and brushes, sat me at the foot of the bed, and went to work. She said nothing except to direct me - close your eyes, smack your lips - and was done within ten minutes after she began. The mirror showed that nice young woman my mother was always hoping for. I looked like a promise fulfilled (30).

The writer also brings to the fore, the pitiable notion of identity which foreign women in diaspora have about African women. The message from the black immigrant friend, Leila, to Ada, confirms this assertion. It reads, “yeah, I heard your mom sent you back to Africa. Text me some topless women” (27). This excerpt shows the wrong notion about African women by their foreign counterparts who see them as uncivilized people with no dignified existence. In the same vein, the author through Ada reconfigures the reception of single motherhood which is seen as an omen of irresponsibility on the affected ladies in African society. She confides in her mother, through a telephone conversation concerning the state of Chinyere and her son that, “single women with children aren’t bad people” (28). This positive belief is in contradiction to the action of Grace, who indirectly mocked Chinyere over her son, Jonathan, during the fund-raising ceremony. Chinyere, due to this stigma, becomes traumatized over what the likes of Grace in her society do in frustrating ladies in such a condition. She left the event unplanned due to hostility she faced at the hands of Grace. However, it is through Grace who once dated Ada’s late father, that inhuman treatment being done against women in a male dominated society is also exposed. Ada’s mother lost almost every property of her late husband at the hands of the latter’s relatives. In corroborating the mother’s experiences after the demise of her husband, Ada expresses:

> Even though my mother had inherited the few properties outside the country, my father's brothers had challenged her right to his businesses in Nigeria, and they had battled it out in the courts for five years, till I was seven. Chinyere's father managed what little my mother had been able to win - the bottle factory, various tracts of land - and wielded some small influence. My father's brothers had retained the majority of his Nigerian holdings, despite the will (35).

Arimah, no doubt, is one of the celebrated African short story writers in recent times, owing to her dazzling power of narration and characterization. One of her short stories, "Light" in the studied collection, won the commonwealth short story prize for Africa in 2015. In "Light," she captures the life of a girl growing in the absence of love, care and training of the mother. This unfortunate situation is caused by the travel of the girl's mother (Enebeli's wife) to America for her master's degree programme. Such distance caused a whole lot of things on a girl-child, growing unguardedly independent in her life desires. Living only with the father who pays less or no active role in bringing out an ideal womanhood in her, she is lost to emotional frivolities. At fourteen, she is caught showing emotional attachment to a boy, Buki, in school. One of her letters to the boy reads, "Buki, I love you. I will give you many sons" (48). Her idea of giving 'many sons' to the desired potential husband (Buki), is a tactic geared toward winning the latter's attention and love. This consciousness is glaring predicated on the preference of male children against the female ones in a typical African patriarchal society. Not minding the distance, Enebeli's wife also sets out to build up an ideal woman in her daughter through caution and care. The narrator presents:

> At fourteen the girl is almost a woman, but still a girl, and her mother is trying to prepare her for the world. Stop laughing so loud, dear. How is it that I can hear you chewing all the way from here in America? What do you mean Daddy made you breakfast, you are old enough to be cooking. Distance between mother and daughter widens till the girl doesn't enjoy talking to her mother anymore, begins to see it as a chore (50).

The instance above indicates that the daughter enjoys free hand with the father. She only spends most of her days basking in frivolities, and orders their house girl around. The mother detests such behaviour; she wants her daughter to do the house chores by herself and be responsible to avoid "learning all the wrong ways to be in the world" (51). The mother succeeds in convincing her father to send the house girl back to the village. In the same wake of thought, the mother is also perturbed over the seemingly reckless life of her daughter. In one of the skype calls with her husband, she bitterly complains, "what is this, the girl is wearing? The girl should be sitting with her legs crossed at the ankles. Why is the girl's hair scattered like that, when was the last time she had a relaxer? (51). The girl, however, grows up without much motherly guidance. She sees herself as being independent of her own self as regards emotional fulfilment. The narrator recounts that she:

> …confesses to her mother about the boy. She strings his virtues out like Christmas lights− he's shorter than her, so he has to obey her, he's finally learning how to kiss well- and her mother silences her by saying, sadly, that she didn't think she'd raised that kind of girl. This is the first time the girl becomes aware that the world requires something other than what she is (52).

In "Second Chances," the writer captures the consciousness of independence in a young girl, Uche, who thinks that she is old enough to fend for herself. She sees herself as the light upon her feet for survival in spite of any difficulty. After two years from the graduate school, she takes on the mantle of responsibility in doing things that seem assertive in nature. She admits thus, "I'm old enough to buy my own bed and shouldn't ask my father to chip in on a mattress…" (55). This utterance, however, indicates the spirit of zealousness in Uche in taking charge of her needs. Such a trait is in contrast to her mother, who is always dependent on her husband. In one of their family outings, she exposes that, "my mother is digging through her purse and I know it's not to pay because she never does when my dad is around" (56). In other words, Uche's identity is crested with hues of pity and regret. In this regard, she recalls her childhood experience, "I was a child prone to hysterics. Every cut was a deep wound that would surely keloid and scar me for life, every playground slights an unforgivable infraction that merited a meltdown. I also took to stealing, a habit that saw me disinvited from many of my schoolmates' homes…" (59). It is obvious that Uche's childhood experience, as captured above, influences her stiff personality in her dealings with other characters but not without resultant disdain as demonstrated in the story. As a result of her independent nature, Uche receives a scornful approach from her mother, when she misses out time to pick up her sister, Udoma, from the airport. Indeed, it is a pile up of annoyance on the mother over her daughter's seemingly over-blown assertive attitude. The narrator presents the outburst of Uche's mother thus, "what you are is disappointing. You are so disappointing…. Every tantrum I'd [Uche] pulled, every item I'd stolen, every time she must have cringed at having to introduce me as her daughter" (64).

Moreover, in "Windfalls," there is an evidence of dubious identity of womanhood. This identity is created out of harsh conditions that come after the death of a husband and the burden of catering for the surviving child. The narrator exposes the unfortunate experience and the strategies being deployed by a vulnerable woman to eke out living for herself and her only daughter overseas. The story presents women as go-getters, where a mother uses her daughter as a bet for survival. The little daughter is being staged-planned by the mother to fall in the grocery stores in order to claim damages and also for the latter, to enrich herself. The narrator notes the aftermath of one of such escapades, "you [the little daughter] like to believe that the first fall, the one that left you with a permanent brace on your ankle, was real…she was reaching over to grab the biggest, freshest eggplant off the display but slipped, oh shit, dropped the baby. The store settled without a fuss, blaming the overzealous produce misters for leaving the floor wet. The money lasted for good three years…" (69). On the other hand, the story also traces what constitutes the underlying issue that led to the harsh situation of the said mother and her little

daughter as depicted above. The underlying issue, however, is due to the zealousness of the mother, who is bent on undermining stringent positions of her own father based on her choice of a man to marry. The narrator expresses, "she'd married against his [father's] wishes, moved to the States against his wishes, and had you against his wishes, all with a man he called that fool from Calabar" (69). The promiscuous nature of the mother manifested after the loss of contact with the father of her daughter. The narrator exposes, "…your mother occupied herself with shopping and the men who darted in and out of her life like a lizard's tongue" (72). The daughter, at fifteen, later gets exposed to doing a blow job with the law clerk, Billy, in order to achieve her mother's desire - she wants a price cut on a battered green Toyota. She later got pregnant and delivered a baby girl. At the hospital, the narrator accounts for the mischievousness of the mother, "you [the daughter] woke every few minutes as your mother entered and exited the room. You could hear her voice in the hallway. It was shrill and you knew she was either excited or angry" (77). Due to poverty, the mother in connivance with the nurse sold the baby at the cost of five hundred thousand dollars (78) out of selfishness to make ends meet.

In "Glory," the envisioned better life on the protagonist, Glory, by her parents, opens up many issues concerning her identity as a woman. This is owing to many obstacles which her parents faced - six years of bareness and six hours of labour. They project a good life for her but all becomes an illusion. The narrator accounts, "pinning on her every hope they had yet to realize, her parents imagined the type of life well-situated Igbos imagined for their children. She would be a smart girl with the best schooling. She would attend church regularly and never stay away from the Word. (Amen!). She would learn to cook like her grandmother, her father added…" (145). Glory's inability to get married at almost thirty years old, led to a strained relationship with her parents. This is coupled with her failure to graduate from law school and her becoming a customer service representative. In spite of all these challenges, the narrator expresses a strong-willed spirit which is embodied in Glory:

All of this was true, and not. Her parents did put pressure on her, but it was sort of hopeful pressure that might have encouraged a better person. And she was unlucky, yes, but it was less fate and more her propensity for arguing with professors and storming out of classrooms never to return that saw her almost flunk out of college. She eventually graduated with an embarrassing GPA. Then came law school…. But she'd managed to screw that up, too, choosing naps instead of class and happy hours instead of studying, unable to do right no matter how small the choice…. (147-148).

Furthermore, in "Redemption," there is a representation of demeaning identities of women; working as house cleaners and nannies. Mayowa who finds herself in the house of Mr and Mrs Ajayi at the age of thirteen becomes a victim of such degrading figure. This happened because of the inability of the parents to send her to school. This pitiable situation of women, especially as house helps, is really worrisome due to misfortunes that are attached to such jobs and the likes. Arimah creates a brave character in Mayowa. She is able to withstand all obstacles on her way. She displays bravery while in school, when she hold one of the opposing students and pinns her

head down and scraps off half her cornrows with a razor blade (181). The story also bothers on infidelity. Mayowa accounts, "…and seeing the woman my father left us for. She came every few Sundays, when the weighty sin of fornicating with a married man became too heavy to bear. My mother didn't know that I knew who she was and understood why my mother never clapped when the woman gave a testimony of God's goodness" (182).

In the story, women are also seen as representatives of trustworthiness. This manifests when the 'special offering' taken to support the widows and orphans fund including weekly donations in the church are being given to female members by the pastor to secure. In this regard, Mayowa says that "this was the second time in a row my mother had gotten it and her sixth time overall. She was the most trusted woman in our church" (183). This serves as a source of pride as she admonishes Grace that "men want a trustworthy and godly woman. It is not just looks; you have to be honest and good" (183). On the other hand, Mayowa's visit to their house helps is aimed at correcting her mother's wrong impression concerning house maids. She says, "when I took a breath, I smelled the soap she [Grace] used to wash her hair (disapproving my mother's assertion that all village girls are dirty") (185). However, Mayowa's connivance with Grace in stealing the church money under the custody of her mother led to her horrible experience in the hands of Brother Benni, who is so good with troubled children in need of prayers (190). In worsening the matter, Brother Benni, in an attempt to rape Mayowa, received a severe razor blade cut from her. According to the narrator, "it was Mrs Ajayi who got the story from her, about how Brother Benni pulled out his 'oko' and tried to make her taste it…by pointing out that Brother Benni's belt was unbuckled and asking why, if Mayowa cut his leg for no reason…someone called the police despite Brother Benni's claim that the devil made him do it" (190-200), which exposes the experience of Mayowa in such a horrible condition.

Conclusion

The focus of this paper has been on the exploration of diverse identities of women and subjectivity of self as represented by Arimah, in the selected stories in her debut collection through a feminist viewpoint. The textual analysis of the stories shows challenges faced by women - patriarchal construct, widowhood experience, attempted forced marriage, infidelity, prominence of male child, rape, and poverty, as well as the ones posed by women themselves, emanate from power tussle either to undermine or strengthen the weak amongst them, especially mother versus daughter, and misconception of African women from their Western counterparts. In a similar vein, the writer creates dignifying and degrading identities in some of the female characters ranging from assertiveness, independence, dubiousness, aggressiveness to waywardness. There is also an evident display of personal struggles for emotional fulfilment among majority of the female characters in most of the stories. Arimah, as a new feminist writer in the body of African literature, has, through this debut collection, created room for a re-examination of the identities of women and the attendant subjective interests, among critics for the advancement of women struggles in all ramifications.

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