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Narrative Barriers to Social Inclusion of TTC "Mothers" in Feminist African Novel

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Abstract

The feminist African novel questions social practices and exclusions based on gender and social expectations of women. Procreation is the premise for marriage in African traditional society. When there is no procreation, such a marriage is believed to be cursed, incomplete, and a source of classifications and exclusions for the woman. It takes two in traditional African society to entangle and procreate. However, when couples fail to procreate as expected by their parents, relations, and communities, pressure is mounted on the woman, and she is excluded by certain narrative discourses of her fellow women that attempt to stigmatize, classify, deprive, and exclude the TTC mother from all forms of social gatherings by her fellow women. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines the narrative barriers to social inclusion for women trying to conceive (hence TTC). This paper analyses the female images of TTC mothers constructed in feminist African novels to reveal the feminist "unexamined" thought behind the female gazing of TTC women. This study accounts for narratives and social barriers to the inclusion of TTC mothers by mirroring the society in which the novel is produced. This paper applies the concepts of "proximity" and "gaze" to examine Dike's *Dear Kelechi* and Adebayo's *Stay with Me*. This study submits that there are narrative choices in interpersonal discourses by "mothers" that enforce social barriers in the inclusion of TTC women in African feminists' novels. These narrative choices by women constitute social barriers and lead to various forms of suffering and denigration for TTC women.

Keywords

TTC "mothers"; procreation; inclusion; African novel; feminism

Introduction

Creative literature in the Global South is functionally political in its entertainment and instruction as a personalised gaze of the ideologically malleable proximity of intentions to break down social barriers. Onyekachi Peter Onuoha and Lilian

PSN 5(9), 2025: 169–191.

Onyinye Ohanyere[1] observe that: "Creative literature is a site for possibilities and imagining of society through the portrayal of realities." Creative literature in Africa has consistently been used to speak truth to power, to reclaim the humanity of a particular people, and to reappropriate the power and existence of a people within a particular society using the linguistic powers of narratives. Poornima Singh and Archana[2] write that Roy's The God of Small Things can be seen as the most powerful novels that project the social realism of Indian society. "Through this novel, the novelist declares war to fight out these social challenges that have caused so much oppression of the downtrodden." The foregoing indicates the power of art representation through the sociolinguistic foregrounding of human experiences. The start of feminist criticism questioned the patriarchal gaze and insisted that proximity affected the patriarchal representation of women in literary texts. This patriarchal gaze of male-authored texts becomes a site for struggle and dominance, leading to the emergence of feminist writers, who most often exclude the stories of male-authored narratives even when they have a feminist temperament. The feminist African novel is a literary political gaze that questions patriarchal dominance and depicts the plight of women in society as well as in marital union using narratives. The feminist African novel in recent times highlights agencies of segregation and exclusion of women because of the inability of men and women to procreate in their marital union. Manoj Kumar Maurya[3] affirms the foregoing; thus, "Literature is the foundation of humanity's cultures, beliefs, and traditions. It serves as a reflection of reality, a product of art, and a window to an ideology." "Everything that happens within a society can be written, recorded, and learned from a piece of literature." A feminist novel serves as an outlet for the world of women in the Global South, and it is detailed and reflective because of its proximity of gazes. Poornam Nigam Sahay,[4] acknowledging the power of feminist narratives, submits that "Right from the stories told by our grandmothers to the great education we receive later in life, literature plays a significant part all throughout. It influences us and makes us understand the ways of life. Narratives, in particular, inspire empathy and lend a whole new perspective to us and that of others too." The feminist African novel brings new perspectives to bear on the lives of women and their

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[1] O.P. Onuoha, L.O. Ohanyere, *Role Reversal & the Emergence of Househusband in Adichie's "The Visit"*, "Journal Ilmu Sosiologi Dialektika Kontemporer" 2021, *8*(1), p. 65.

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[2] P. Singh, Archana, *The Role of Literature in Social Transformation*, "IRJMSH International Journal of Management of Sociology & Humanity" 2017, *8*(12), p. 364.

[3] M.K. Maurya, *Literature, Power, Culture and Society: Interrelatedness*, https://www.academia.edu/38799280/Literature_Power_Culture_and_Society_Interrelatedness [accessed: 27.09.2024], p. 1.

[4] N.P. Sahay, *Literature as the Foundation of Life and its Values*, "International Journal of Linguistics and Computational" 2000, *7*(4).

exclusion and subjugation in patriarchal society. Scholars have repeatedly insisted on the relationship between literature and society. S. Keerthika,[5] Roshni Duhan,[6] Arjun Dubey,[7] and Lakhbeer Singh,[8] in summary, are of the view that literature reflects society, which influences literature, leading to the question: does this reflection include the possibility of a woman being capable of dominance over her fellow woman?

Gendered gaze is a product of biological and performative proximity and accounts for the gaze of the other on "display" through the linguistic frame of gender in narrative. African literature foregrounds the male gaze on women through male authorship and the attempt of males to fashion the world of women, in which, in most cases, women are at the periphery of existence even when the text centres on their world. Male gaze is the social and literary conditioning of women and their existence in literary texts as well as in organic society. It is because of the power of the patriarchal gaze and its dominance over women that feminist scholars keep fighting for the liberation of women from such fierce patriarchal and phallocentric gazes that subjugate women. Patriarchy is a system of dominance and exploitation of women in African society. Ewa Glapka[9] is of the opinion that "in gender and feminist studies, the male is involved with reference to the patriarchal surveillance of women's bodies." Patriarchal gaze is a product of power, is beyond just male gaze, and is a mark of patriarchal dominance.

Over the years, feminist scholars have engaged with patriarchal domination, phallocentric exploitation, and patriarchal gaze in traditional African society. Masculinist narrative provided the literary depiction of the personality of the woman in male authored texts. John Ebimobowei Yeseibo,[10] writing about the portrayal of women in male-authored texts, submits that "in a raft of mainly male-authored plays, women are seen as either angelically virtuous or, more often, as dangerous, duplicitous, and rapaciously greedy." What Yeseibo means is that in male-authored texts there are extremes in the portrayal of women, which is against the actual depiction of the humanity of the woman as a reflective narrative of organic society. This foregoing view advocates for the need for a female gaze in literary texts. Gloria

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[5] S. Keerthika, *Literature and Society: How Literature reflects society*, "International Journal of Science, Engineering and Management (IJSEM)" 2018, *3*(4), pp. 471–472.

[6] R. Duhan, *The Relationship between Literature and Society*, "Language in India" 2015, *15*(4), pp. 192–202.

[7] A. Dubey, *Literature and Society*, "IOSR Journal of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)" 2013, *9*(6), pp. 84–85.

[8] Singh Lakhbeer, *Literature is the Mirror of Society*, "Rajasthali Journal" 2022, *1*(3), pp. 88–92.

[9] E. Glapka, *Critical Discourse Studies*, New York 2017, p. 1.

[10] J.E. Yeseibo, *Portrayal of Women in Male Authored Plays in Nigeria*, "Journal of Philosophy, Culture and Religion" 2013, *1*, p. 77.

Ada Fwangyil,[11] writes that "the Nigerian feminist novel has experienced remarkable growth in recent years. In spite of the negative portrayal of female characters in the works authored by male novelists, female writers have shown a commitment to portraying and revealing the subjugating plight of women in patriarchal societies and the positive contributions that they make to the development of their society in their works." The feminist novel has experienced remarkable growth and highlights certain capabilities of women. If feminist criticism needs to pause a bit and take a second look at the narrative discourses of women within literary texts, To some extent, gender politics has blinded the eyes of some feminist scholars to the capabilities of women in the subjugation of their fellow women in a patriarchal society. Feminist creative literature through the female gaze and proximity to female experiences has provided a more realistic and complete image of woman as a separate human entity from man but having certain capabilities of man, including the oppressive dimensions of man. However, feminist criticism seems to be silent with regards to this wholistic gaze on the woman and her capabilities of good and evil. David Machin[12] writes that "all institutions, such as schools, hospitals, and news organizations, shape, categorize, and transform reality to make it predictable and more easily manageable. Each sets up systems, which allow them to manage reality." Feminist writers have done a great job in categorizing women and their powers but feminist criticism in Nigeria is failing to critique the subjugation of women by their fellow women in the society and as such fails to transform a critical aspect of society.

The narratives of women are not a monolithic portrayal of her existence as a victim of patriarchal society, as most feminist scholars have repeatedly insisted in the twenty-first century. Monique O. Ekpong's[13] writing gives a clear account of the female gaze in literary writing and indicates that the earliest African writings were exclusionist and that "the lack of extensive exploration of female characters and women's concerns by male writers…" Ekpong,[14] writing about women's literary gaze in creative literature, submits thus:

> … African female writers like Flora Nwapa and Ama Ata Aidoo been compelled to write to correct the false gender myths that inhibit women from attaining self-realization and self-actualization. This is with the intention of getting women to revolt against their oppressive

[11] G.A. Fwangyil, *Changing the Concept of Womanhood: Male Feminists and the Nigeria Feminist Novel*, "International Journal of Language, Literature and Gender Studies (LALIGENS), Bahir Dar-Ethiopia" 2017, *6*(2), Serial No. 14, p. 29.

[12] D. Machin, *News Discourse I: Understanding the Social Goings-on Behind News Texts*, [in:] A. Mayr, *Language and Power An Introduction to Institutional Discourse*, New York 2008, p. 63.

[13] M.O. Ekpong, *Idealization of Female Characters by African Women Writers: The Case of "Anowa"*, "LWATI: A Journal of Contemporary Research" 2011, *8*(4), pp. 166–182.

[14] *Ibidem*, p. 168.

> condition and fashion out avenues of revolutionizing the status quo. These female writers have set out not to idealize female characters but to validate woman's humanity and personality, authenticate her experience, repudiate the negative and derogatory images ascribed to female characters by male writers, and celebrate the physical and mental capabilities of women, reveal her psyche and provide a more realistic and complete image of woman as a separate human entity from man. It has become imperative for women to write to elucidate to fellow women and to humankind, in general, the true identity and the tragic condition of woman, and the double victimization of the African woman. When female Africans write, they either make women the theme of their literary enquiry or female gender issues an essential part of their subject matter. Therefore, female writers do not set out to idealize their female characters as if in support of sexism.

Feminist criticism is filled with the weight of patriarchy as a structure of continuous dominance of women, even in literary texts and in society. Feminist critics of literary female-authored texts that have the complete gaze because of gender proximity have continuously reiterated the ideologies of received criticism without critically examining contexts of discourse and relations within feminist texts and how such discourses of proximity exclude women, not necessarily as an ideological criticism of the weight of patriarchy but as power relations within interactive contexts of women socializations. Feminist criticism has continuously idealised female characters as incapable of evil, even when such characters are at the forefront of subjugating their fellow women. Such critics point at patriarchy. Most feminist criticism idealises female characters in support of sexism in literary texts as a reflection of society. The identity Ekpong mentioned in literary novels seems not to include the capacities of some women to inflict pain on their fellow women, even when they occur in literary texts. Onyekachi Peter Onuoha and Opere Humuani Oyndamola[15] observe that; "Giving the power of women as a result of squaring in education, economic and political power, it does become necessary that the power of women should be examined within the structures of their subjugation in the society …"

Feminist scholars seem to ignore them. The scanty literature on the subjugation of women by their fellow women indicates the sainthood imposed on the woman as a fixed and continuous victim of patriarchal power even when she had achieved some levels of economic and political power, which were tools of her subjugation but are now in her service.

Feminist literary criticism of male-authored texts has consistently focused on the patriarchal subjugation of women in literary texts as well as in society. With the feminist texts that provided wholistic gazing into the existence of women, most

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[15] O.P. Onuoha, O.H. Oyndamola, *Men as Puns in the Feminist African Novel*, "Language, Discourse & Society" 2019, *7*(1), p. 164.

feminist scholars still put on this patriarchal gaze of patriarchy as the culprit in the subjugation of women in the patriarchal society, with women as a perpetuate victim even when she is the victimizer. This form of fixated literary criticism does not lead to the total eradication of all forms of oppression against women. There is a need to re-gaze at feminist literary texts and examine the world of women and their social discourse to account for power dimensions and dominance. Sylvester Mutunda[16] affirms the foregoing; thus, "The common belief among most feminist critics of African literature today is that men are the worst enemies of women. These feminist scholars have denounced men, accusing them of being the major source of women's unhappiness, particularly in the family. They claim that men oppress, mistreat, and exploit women by inhibiting and restricting their self-realization." This continuous claim, without holding the woman accountable whenever the need arises, prevents the complete eradication of the abuse and oppression of women in society. Women are humans and are capable of dominance, as literary texts have indicated. Mutunda[17] corroborates this; thus, "even the smallest unit of production, the household, often involves hierarchies and unequal power relations among women, for instance, mother-in-law versus daughter-in-law, senior wife versus junior wife(s), and elderly women versus young women." Within this mentioned structure, oppression occur, as will be clearly examined in this study. Mutunda acknowledges these fallacies of the preconceived nation of feminist criticism because patriarchal gaze-focused criticism that does not allow for flexibility and possibilities stifles the attempt for the complete liberation of women from narrative barriers and practices of social exclusion. Mutunda[18] submits that "mainstream feminist scholarship all attributes the dominance of patriarchal ideology in African society to the activities of men, while regarding women as innocent victims of patriarchal authority. However, a close reading of texts by some African women writers, like Mariama Ba, provides a critique of this standpoint and examines the direct and indirect roles played by some women in the sustenance and perpetuation of patriarchal oppression. The focus is on elderly women who, oftentimes, are so ignorant, selfish, and manipulative that they make life hard for other women." This study turns critical attention to the female gaze because of the feminist proximity to female experiences in the analyses of *Dear Kelechi* and *Stay with Me*, respectively.

The feminist African novel written by female authors explores the possibilities of women as humans and capable of dominating their fellow women in a patriar-

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[16] S. Mutunda, *Women Subjugating Women: Re-Reading Mariama Ba's "So Long a Letter" and "Scarlet Song"*, "Ufahamu" 2007, *33*(2–3), Winter & Spring, p. 91.

[17] *Ibidem*.

[18] *Ibidem*, p. 92.

chal society. However, most feminist critics are critically blind to this exploitation and subjugation of women by their fellow women in society. Research by feminist scholars in this regard to female subjugation by women is rare to come by, thereby constituting women as consistent victims without any possibility of dominance, which is an aberration of what feminist literary texts highlight. African feminist novels embody the verisimilitude of life and depict the capabilities of women to spearhead social exclusion of their fellow women, using childbirth as a premise for the inclusion of women in society. S. Shalini and A. Samundeswari[19] corroborate the concept of literature and what society does: "Literature is a reflection of society… Literature indeed reflects society, its good values, and its ills. In its corrective function, literature mirrors the ills of society with a view to making society realise its mistakes and make amends. It also projects the virtues or good values in society for people to emulate. Literature, as an imitation of human action, often presents a picture of what people think, say, and do in society." Feminist literature reflects society. It is a representation of the social relations between women and women and women and men in the world of the novel. Feminist novels through the female gaze through entertainment highlight the capacities of women to dominate and subjugate their fellow women and men within the world of the novel and, by extension, the organic society. However, what most feminist critical scholars do is ignore the real-life events that feminist writers have transported into the world of novels. This patriarchal-induced feminist tradition has kept on patriarchy as the only source of dominance, even when the rank of dominance is shifting because the economic, political, and biological powers of women are changing because of the changing definitions of humanity in modern society. Feminists' critics are at the forefront of making society and patriarchy realise the subjugation of women, but they are silent about the subjugation and dominance of women by their fellow women. The feminist African novels are imitations of women's actions and what women say and do, which leads to the exclusion of their fellow women in society. Jaysinh B. Zala[20] observes that "literacy can be very helpful to society provided it is studied or applied in a positive manner, but it can be very detrimental to society if what is contained within it is used with malice." There is a need for a balanced study of the subjugation of women in the literature of the Global South and not the malice replications of patriarchal study of the continued subjugation of women when women are the primary actors of social exclusion in certain social gatherings and existences.

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[19] S. Shalini, A. Samundeswari, *Literature as a Reflection of the Society – a Study*, 1St National Conference on "Teaching Innovations and Enhancing Learning (Arts, Science And Technology)", 2017, p. 170.

[20] J.B. Zala, *Literature and Society*, "International of Research in Humanities and Social Sciences" 2013, *1*(5), p. 26.

Narrative Barriers to Social Inclusion of TTC "Mothers" in Feminist African Novel

A feminist African novel captures the lived experiences of TTC mothers and their exclusion from society by their fellow women. The feminist narratives foreground deep knowledge on the subjugation of women by her fellow women, which gendered scholars have ignored irrespective of its complex effects on mental health and barriers to the inclusion of TTC women in society. Darlene Ciuffetelli Parker and Palmina Conversano[21] are writing about narratives of systemic barriers about the pandemic – intensely lived and storied experiences – and the narratives illuminate deep knowledge and sight into pre-existing systemic barriers prior to the pandemic, and those same barriers are magnified during the pandemic. A feminist African novel magnifies the deep-rooted dimensions of the subjugation of women by her fellow women in African society. The narrative barrier to social inclusion of TTC mothers in feminist African novels accounts for the challenges women faced in participating fully in society because of the negative narratives surrounding their attempts to conceive. These narratives, as illustrated in the conversations of the selected feminist novel, are indicated in the societal attitudes of women toward their fellow women trying to conceive. These TTC mothers are stereotyped, insulted, and excluded by the narrative content of their fellow women, which creates barriers to the social inclusion of women in families and in society. Laura Grindstaff,[22] writing about barriers to inclusion, observes that "structural inequalities arise and are reproduced at multiple levels simultaneously, each reinforcing the other: socially through interaction, culturally through ideas, values, and representations, and institutionally through formal rules and procedures, as well as informally through taken-for-granted norms and practices." The exclusion of women in African feminist novels occurs at various levels of society, such as through interaction and how women are treated by their fellow women, which becomes a cultural practise of the female gaze in defining her fellow woman. The normative patterns of subjugation, if continuously ignored by gendered scholars, will continue to lead to the subjugation of women by their fellow women in society. To overcome narrative barriers to the inclusion of women trying to conceive, it is necessary to provide critical awareness of the patterns of the exclusions of TTC mothers as a medium of open dialogue for the total liberation of women from all

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[21] D.C. Parker, P. Conversano, *Narratives of Systemic Barriers and Accessibility: Poverty, Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and the Call for a Post-Pandemic New Normal*, "Frontiers in Education" 2021, 6, 704663, p. 1.

[22] L. Grindstaff, *Barriers to Inclusion: Social Roots and Current Concerns*, [in:] L.F. Bisson, L. Grindstaff, L. Brazil-Cruz, S.J. Barbu (eds.), *Uprooting Bias in the Academy*, Cham 2022, p. 19, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-85668-7_2

forms of subjugation. Herman Paul Meininger[23] is of the view that "moralising ideological positions obscures the fact that exclusion and inclusion can have infinitely different forms and reasons and can sometimes even be two sides of the same coin." Moralizing the ideological position of feminism as an attack on patriarchal subjugation without the possibility of women subjugating their females prevents the breaking down of barriers to women's inclusion in society. The breaking down of the narrative barrier can occur when one understands its patterns and how it is formed in the subjugation of women, and this will foster a more inclusive society where the woman, irrespective of whether she is a mother or not, is not defined by the preconceived notion of biological motherhood and its exclusionary sociolinguistic barriers to the inclusion of women in society. Robert H. Stagg[24] writes that "virtually any behaviour or mannerism can prove to be a barrier to effective communication. Barriers to communication can be grouped into the following categories: physical, emotional, psychological, and linguistic. In dealing with people in crisis situations, an understanding of linguistic barriers is of paramount importance for the helping person. Barriers are erected by one or both of the participants in a communication. The placement may be intentional or unintentional, depending on the capability of one of the communicators. There are no set time frames for the existence of barriers or when the removal of them is possible. Some may be removed in a matter of seconds, and some may never be removed. Key factors in dealing with barriers are: "specific barrier recognition." The foregoing is implicated in a feminist African novel where the mannerism of some women proves a barrier to their fellow women's inclusion in society and effective communication. The linguistic barrier to the inclusion of TTC women in society is erected by their fellow women, and this is done both intentionally and unintentionally. Understanding this may assist us in disrupting such barriers. The feminist novel is an intentional tool for disrupting patriarchy, and it focuses more on the world of women in relation to patriarchal society. In this feminist world, women negotiate their existence through social interactions in their families and with their fellow women. Within these social discourses, there are dimensions of female subjugation and barriers to social inclusion of women, and this is carried out through social interactions and narratives that exclude the woman, which is promoted by her fellow woman. Andrea Mayr[25] observes that "institutions' power and politics are frequently exercised through the discourse of their members." Feminist discourses

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[23] H.P. Meininger, *Connecting Stories: A Narrative Approach of Social Inclusion of Persons with Intellectual Disability*, "Alter" 2010, *4*(3), p. 193.

[24] R.H. Stagg, *Linguistic Barriers to Effective Communication*, "National Report" 1991, Spring *10*(4), p. 2.

[25] A. Mayr, *Introduction: Power, Discourse and Institutions*, [in:] A. Mayr, *Language and Power An Introduction to Institutional Discourse*, New York 2008, p. 1.

on the feminist African novel through the female gaze allow us to see power relations in female discourses through social interactions. Women are capable of being human; women are human and have the capacity of subjugating and constituting barriers to the inclusion of their fellow women in society. There are patterns of narrative exclusion of women in this society, which is championed by the actions of women. Heiko Motschenbacher[26] writes that the "»linguistic barrier« covers a much broader range of language-related aspects, including differences between learners' native language and the target language, cross-cultural communication differences, discourses, language ideologies, and language attitudes that may have negative effects on learning and inclusion, as well as exclusionary mechanisms of linguistic and multimodal representation." This study builds on this concept to illustrate linguistic barriers to the social inclusion of women by their fellow women. It looks at language ideologies in communicated narratives within the context of the participation of women in the African feminist novel. This study accounts for the differences between women and the language attitudes of women that exclude their fellow women. Social narratives are vehicles for relationships and are products of proximity and gendered gaze, which lead to prescriptions within social relationships. Women who had stillbirth and women trying to conceive have experienced various forms of social stigmatisation and exclusions occasioned by social narratives, which constitute barriers to social exclusion. The feminist novel, through social interactions, indicates that trying to conceive or stillbirth is a form of disability, and most women are at the forefront of excluding their fellow women.

Patterns of Barriers to Social Inclusion of TTC "Mother" in Adebayo's *Stay with Me*

The African novel consistently depicts the power of the woman and her roles in constituting a barrier to the inclusion of fellow women in marital union as well as in society. The marital union is the site of the exclusion of TTC mothers by their fellow women. Feminist criticism seems to be silent at the form of female gaze that depicts the subjugation of women by her fellow women in African feminist novels. Turning and focusing the feminist gaze on the narrative relationships of women in African feminist novels allows us to see the power dynamics and the exclusion of women by their fellow women in marital union. Adebayo's *Stay with Me*[27] is a feminist narrative that highlights the effect of narrative barriers on the social

[26] H. Motschenbacher, *Linguistic Barriers in Foreign Language Education*, [in:] H. Mohebbi, Ch. Coombe (eds.), *Research Questions in Language Education and Applied Linguistics*, Cham 2021, pp. 711–716.

[27] A. Adebayo, *Stay with Me*, Opebi Lagos 2017.

inclusion of TTC mothers as a literary verisimilitude of the exclusion of women in modern African society. Adebayo's *Stay with Me* highlights patterns of exclusion of a woman in a marital union when her husband is impotent, as illustrated in the case of Akin, an impotent man, and Yejide, his wife. Yejide's exclusion as a child started in her childhood with her father's wife, and this is done through the narratives of her stepmothers to their children. Yejide[28] observes that:

> Whenever I arrived home late and bloodied up from another fight, my stepmothers would scold me loudly and promise to punish me for my disgraceful behaviour. At night they whispered, with washed out wrappers tied around their shrunken breasts, they whispered instructions to their children not to be like me. After all, their children had mothers, living women who cursed and cooked, had business and bushy armpits. Only motherless children, children like me, could misbehave like that. And it was not just that I did not have a mother, but the one I once had, the one who died seconds after she had pushed me out into the world, was woman with no lineage? … The whispered discussions in the rooms that each wife shared with her children were eventually reported to me in detail by my half-siblings.

Yejide is classified through narrative and excluded by her fellow woman as a child. This classification is done through the family discourse of mothers with their children, and through this narrative, they attempt to exclude Yejide from having any relationships with her siblings. Yejide is excluded because of the loss of her mother during her birth. The family constitutes the site for the exploitation of the girl child by women, and this is done through narratives to prevent their children from having any form of relationship with a particular person, as indicated in the case of Yejide. Yejide[29] further attempts to explain her exclusion from her family when she notes that, 'When I was a child, my stepmothers would usher their children into bed to tell them stories. But always behind closed and bolted doors. "I was never invited in to listen, so I lurked around in the corridor, moving from one door to another as I tried to determine which woman's voice was loudest each night." In a polygamous home, women constitute the agency of oppression of their fellow women, as indicated in the case of Yejide. Yejide is a motherless child, but no mothers were willing to feed her with the narratives she needed to grow as a girl child, and they prevented her from participating in their narratives. Narrative resistance and barriers constitute one dimension of the exclusion of the girl child by women, as the female gaze indicates through the proximity of their association and relationship. This family stigmatisation and exclusion continued even after the

[28] *Ibidem*, p. 42.
[29] *Ibidem*, p. 137.

death of Yejide's father. Akin Yejide's[30] husband affirms the exclusion of his women when he observes that "two weeks later, her father was dead. At his graveside, I was shocked by how her stepmothers went out of their way to make sure that Yejide stood without any family members by her side. They all moved from one side of the grave to another, so Yejide and I stood alone like outcasts. "When I nudged Yejide and asked that we both follow her siblings and stepmother, she smiled and told me they'd moved because of her, and if we went to their side, they would all simply move again." From the foregoing, women in Yejide's life were those who ostracised her through their narratives and physical actions. Through their narratives, women in Yejide's life psychologically condition their children into a herd, as indicated by making Yejide and her husband an outcast even at the death of her father. Yejide is excluded from birth, even at marriage, because fellow women continuously have a disruptive effect on her inclusion in the family and in society.

The African woman in the feminist African novel is a disruptive force in the marriage of her fellow woman. Yejide's plight in Adebayo's Stay with Me started because she was trying to conceive, and as a result, her stepmother and mother-in-law conspired to marry another woman for her husband. Akin's[31] mother is the first to pressurise her son to take a new wife. Akin attests to this matriarchal pressure, thus:

> After I'd been married to Yejide for two years, my mother began to show up in my office on the first Monday of every month. She didn't come alone. Each time, she brought a new woman with her, a potential second wife. She never missed a first Monday. Not even when she was ill. We had an agreement. As long as I continued to let her bring women to my office, she would never embarrass my wife by showing up at our home with any of her candidate; she would never mention her efforts to Yejide.

Akin's mother, a woman, attempts to disrupt the peace of her son's husband by pressuring him to take a second wife. She did not even ask if her son was potent to impregnant a woman. Akin's mother and other women in Yejide's life mount uncountable pressure on her to bear their son a child, and under this pressure, they exclude her, using childbirth as a premise for inclusion. In marrying another woman for Yejide's husband, Yejide's stepmother, Iya Martha,[32] says, "Yejide, my daughter, we have thought about and slept on this issue many times, your husband's people and me." And your other mothers." In the class of childlessness in marital union, it is women who start the classification; Yejide[33] implies this, thus:

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[30] *Ibidem*, p. 224.
[31] *Ibidem*, p. 29.
[32] *Ibidem*, p. 16.
[33] *Ibidem*, p. 18.

> Iya Martha tapped Funmi on the back. "Oya, you go and greet your Iyale."
> I shuddered when Iya Martha referred to me as Funmi's iyale. The work crackled in my ears, iyale-first wife. "It as a verdict that marked me as not woman enough for my husband."

Iya Martha, a woman, does the classification of her fellow woman. Iya's mother and other women in Yejide's life aid in the disruption of the peace in her home. Fummi,[34] the newly married wife, also engaged in the classification of her fellow women, thus:

> "Our mother, there is no need for all this-o; we have to be friends. At least for the sake of children we will have." She went on her knees again. "I know people say you are barren, but there is nothing God cannot do. I know that once I conceive, your own womb too will be opened. If you say I should not come here, I will not come, but I want you to know that this bitterness can be one of the things causing the barrenness-o. Goodbye Ma." She was smiling as she rose to her feet and turned to leave.

Yejide, a woman is excluded from the classification of womanhood, where the predominant definition of womanhood is premised on childbirth. Fummi, a woman, is the woman who engages in the definition of her fellow woman and diagnoses her condition as barren and a product of bitterness, even when Yejide did not object to sharing her husband with her fellow woman, as it was dictated by her mother-in-law, and her stepmothers were women in Yejide's life. Yejide trying to conceive is a premise for family exclusion. In the feminist African novels, the woman trying to conceive is the premise for her exclusion from family life and happiness. Childlessness in the feminist African novel is a premise for the exclusion of women in marital union occasioned by the actions of their fellow women, as indicated in feminist African novels such as *Dear Kelechi*,[35] *The Secret Lives of Baba Seji's Wive*s,[36] *Behind the Cloud*,[37] *The Joy of Motherhood*,[38] *Stay with Me*,[39] etc. Childlessness is a barrier to the family inclusion of TTC mothers. Yejide,[40] when she went to visit her mother-in-law, accounted for her exclusion because of her childlessness, thus:

> When I arrived at the house, Moomi was sitting on a low stool in the front yard shelling groundnuts into a rusty tray that sat on her lap. She looked up as I approached and looked down again. I swallowed and my steps slowed. There was something wrong.

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[34] *Ibidem*, p. 44.
[35] G.E.S. Dike, *Dear Kelechi*, Owerri, Nigeria 2005.
[36] L. Shoneyin, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, London 2015.
[37] I. Okoye, *Behind the Clouds*, London 2003.
[38] B. Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood*, Portsmouth 1994.
[39] A. Adebayo, *Stay with Me*, *op. cit.*
[40] *Ibidem*, p. 53.

> Moomi always greeted me by shouting Yejide, my wife. The words were a warm as the embrace that usually followed them.
> "Good morning, Moomi." My knees trembled as they touched the concrete floor.
> "Are you pregnant now?" She said without looking up from the tray of groundnuts.
> I scratched my head.
> "Are you barren and deaf too? I say are you pregnant? The answer is either, yes, I am pregnant or no, I still haven't been pregnant for a single day in my life."
> "I don't know." I stood up and backed away until she was not within the reach of my clenched fist.

Yejide is deprived of the hospitality of her mother-in-law because of the inability of her husband to impregnate her, which resulted in her childlessness. Pregnancy becomes a medium for Yejide to have a conversation with her mother-in-law or to even be treated with warmth. She is insulted and excluded because she is trying to conceive. Yejide[41] responding to her mother-in-law also implicates her exclusion by her mother-in-law's continuous classification; thus:

> "I don't manufacture children. God does."
> She marched towards me and spoke when her toes were touching the tips of my shoes.
> "Have you ever seen God in the labour ward? room giving birth to a child? Tell me, Yejide, have you ever seen God in the labour ward? Women manufacture children and if you can't you are just a man. Nobody should call you a woman." She gripped my wrists and lowered her voice to a whisper. "This life is not difficult, Yejide. If you cannot have children, allow my son to have some with Funmi. See, we are not asking you to stand up from your place in his life, we are just saying you should shift so that someone else can sit down."

Yejide's mother-in-law calls her a man, and in this context, a man is used as someone who is not capable of becoming pregnant. The use of a man by Yejide's mother-in-law is a finality of her situation; certain difficulties are associated with a man getting pregnant. Yejide's mothers-in-law attempt to exclude her fellow woman from the warmth of her home by dictating how Yejide relates to her husband, Akin, who is a son to her mother-in-law. The exclusion of Yejide by her husband's mother and the women in her life made her seek spiritual help for her problem, which further complicates her existence and foregrounds her exclusion. Yejide's life is complicated by the actions of her stepmothers, her mother-in-law, and the woman with whom she shares her husband, Funmi, to the extent that she developed a mental problem. The doctor confirmed Yejide's[42] case, thus:

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[41] *Ibidem*, p. 54.
[42] *Ibidem*, p. 74.

> Dr Uche place a palm against her forehead, "Madam, I'm sorry if I sounded patronizing. I'm just worried about your health, your mental health."
> She says said mental health in such hushed tones, as if she was afraid to hear own words. I wondered about the state of her own mind.
> She handed the result over. "It happens, this kind of… pregnancy. To people who can't have… haven't had children. It happens – pregnancy symptoms are there but no baby. We are agreed that you aren't pregnant, right? Perhaps you could see a gynecologist again about this issue? I can see on your file that you have had a number of texts done before, but maybe we could run some more tests?"

Yejide's constant battering by women in her life made her develop a psychological problem that she was not even aware of. It took several visits to many doctors and one year of her supposed pregnancy before she finally agreed that she was not pregnant. This foregrounds the psychological complications that social exclusions can have on TTC women in society. The narrative barrier to social inclusion batters the woman psychologically through social narratives of expectations. Yejide[43] affirms her situation when she submits, "I began seeing a psychiatrist on Wednesday. "I'd never heard of pseudocyesis until then, and though it sounded to me like a made-up word, I went for my appointment every week, and my body began to revert gradually to its normal size." The social exclusion of TTC women is a source of psychological stress and trauma for women trying to conceive.

Womanist and Motherist Narratives as Barriers to Social Inclusion of TTC Mothers in *Dear Kelechi*

The womanist concept, as propounded by Alice Walker,[44] focuses on the concepts of gaze and proximity in the lives of women. Shilpa K. Athawale,[45] accenting this concept of womanist gaze and proximity, submits that "womanist tales are mainly concerned with the issues of black women." The issue of black women goes beyond the patriarchal subjugation of women by patriarchy and the phallocentric exploitation of women in society. The issue of women also includes the subjugation of women by their fellow women through weaponizing of the womb and in the construction of narratives that exclude the TTC "mothers." Patricia Hill Collins[46] says in talking about the personal gaze and proximity of feminist narrative writers that

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[43] *Ibidem*, p. 104.

[44] A. Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, San Diego 1983.

[45] K.S. Athawale, *Womanist is to Feminist, as Purple is to Lavender: Alice Walker's The Color Purple as a Womanist Tale*, "Indo Western Researchers Journal" 2018, *5*(10), p. 18.

[46] P.H. Collin, *What's in a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism, and Beyond*, "The Black Scholar" 2021, *26*(1), p. 9.

black women appear to have a voice and, in this voice, come a series of concerns. It is necessary to note that this series of concerns is not limited to patriarchal exclusions of women, as it has been constantly postulated by feminist criticism; it also includes the exclusion of women by her fellow women through social narratives. Gloria Ernest Samuel Dike's *Dear Kelechi*[47] enables a re-gazing of the female gaze in the narratives of feminist writers. A critical interrogation of the text indicates dimensions of the exclusion of TTC mothers as a result of the challenges of trying to conceive. The analysis of *Dear Kelechi* indicates that the woman is at the forefront of the exclusion of her fellow woman in marital union. Iheoma[48] in *Dear Kelechi* narrates her experiences as a TTC mother, thus:

> My marriage to Ikem was three years old when my mother-in-law paid us that peculiar visit on a hot Saturday. I was busy with my domestic work when Stella, my maid came behind the compound where I was doing my drycleaning work, to inform me of the woman's visit. So, I rushed out to welcome her, I knew all was not well. I ignored her reticent conduct towards me and embraced her warmly. I called come and take in her bag, only to notice she had no bag.
> "Ah, Mama, I thought you're here for the weekend. Why didn't you bring your bag?" I asked with my most friendly tone of voice.
> "I'm not here for entertainment," she replied curtly.

The female gaze in the feminist African novel, as indicated in social narratives of women, sees patterns of exclusion of women in marital union as well as in society. The exclusion of Iheoma starts with the posture of her mother-in-law and her reversed encounter with her. Iheoma's mother-in-law comes with reticent conduct toward her, which has to do with restraint, quiet, and silent treatment. which is a barrier to social discourse between women. The gradual structuring of the exclusion of women by their fellow women comes with the restructuring of relationships as a premise for constructing social barriers, as the excerpt indicates. Iheoma's mother-in-law rejected Iheoma's hospitality as a medium to launch her offenses against her fellow woman. Iheoma's attempt at providing entertainment for her mother-in-law was rejected, and when Iheoma offered that she spend the night at her place since her son is not around, Iheoma's mother-in-law also rejected it. Iheoma's mother-in-law's constant rejection of all of Iheoma's suggestions made her inquire about the woman's reason for her action, and then Iheoma's[49] mother-in-law responded, "Because I'm now aware of your deceptive antics. I know how you found your way into my son's life and how you have come to destroy him and

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[47] G.E.S. Dike, *Dear Kelechi*, *op. cit.*
[48] *Ibidem*, p. 59.
[49] *Ibidem*, pp. 60, 61, 62.

render my husband and me useless like yourself." Iheoma's mother-in-law reclassifies her fellow woman as a premise of her exclusion from womanhood. She went further[48]: "Iheoma Akoma, what did I do to deserve your witchcraft in my house? What crime did I commit that you have vowed to erase my lineage with your wickedness? "What, what, what?" As indicated above, the woman is the first to classify the TTC mother, and this classification is a premise for barriers to social inclusion. In African society, those who are deceptive are branded witches and excommunicated from society, and they are always held responsible when something goes wrong, even when it is not their fault. Iheoma, responding to her reclassification by her mother-in-law, asked, "Mama, what did I do wrong?" and Iheoma went further to describe her mother-in-law's reaction; thus, "She turned to her side and, in profile, burst into tears, cursing, vilifying, and threatening. The next thing I knew, she stormed out without another word. I sat there speechless for minutes; my mind was replaying the day's events. I prayed that I'd wake up to finally find out that I'd been dreaming. Only the smell of burning in my kitchen reminded me that I was not sleeping, that I was in the physical world." The abuse of Iheoma's mother-in-law because Iheoma is trying to conceive was a stress to Iheoma and constituted a form of exclusion from her relationship with her mother-in-law. The novel highlighted various instances where Iheoma had horrible dreams that day because of her encounter with her mother-in-law and the invective the woman poured on her. When Iheoma[50] narrated her experience to her husband, he asked, "Iheoma, are you sure Mama said all these to you?" Iheoma's husband's question becomes a means of dispute between Iheoma and her husband. As a result of the dispute Iheoma had with her husband, her husband, Ikem, decided to confront his mother and went with his wife. Ikem's mother responded to his question thus:

> "Let me go and meet that shameless slut that wants to destroy my son," she bellowed repeatedly.
> "Mum, will you shut up and tell me what led to this?" Ikem thundered, as she entered the sitting room.
> "I've tried to warn her to stop this baseless accusation, but she wouldn't listen," Chief informed Ikem.
> "Iheoma Akoma… or whatever you call yourself, leave my family alone!" she added in finality.
> "So, my wife is not a part of Nwokoro's family; is it, Mum? I demand an explanation for this embarrassment," Ikem insisted.

Ikem's mother continued in her classification of her daughter-in-law because she is trying to conceive. Iheoma's mother-in-law's action constitutes a barrier to so-

[50] *Ibidem*, pp. 63, 65, 68.

cial inclusion in marriage. Through her reclassification, Iheoma's mother-in-law excludes her daughter-in-law from the family and peace exists within the family. Ikem insisted that her mother informed her why she had decided to exclude his wife from the family, and his mother responded, "Angela's inability to get married, your failure to secure that promotion last August." She reminded him of the post he lost to his immediate subordinate due to his asthmatic condition. "… and her inability to produce children for us," she concluded. Iheoma's mother-in-law first reclassified her daughter-in-law before she launched her offensive against her fellow woman. Iheoma's exclusion from Nwokoro's family is because she is trying to conceive. Ikem's mother's action against her fellow woman indicates that in Africa, childbearing is the prerequisite for the inclusion of women in the family she is married to, and it is a woman who spearheads this definition. Ikem's mother creates the barrier to the inclusion of her fellow woman, followed by her son. On getting home, Ikem said, "Iheoma, let's prove that spiritualist wrong." "Give me a baby before this time next year." Ikem's[51] mother's request becomes the premise for her son's request from his wife.

> Iheoma's mother-in-law continues this definition and exclusion when she came to apologize the next day; thus,
> "Iheoma my daughter, I know how you must have felt yesterday by my actions and utterances, but I want you to pardon me…" she was actually going to kneel down before me but I restrained her.
> "It's okay, Mama. I know how you feel too."
> "Thank God, my daughter you understand. I married you for my son because I wanted him to rear up many children for me. As you can see, Nwokoro's family is crazy about children …
> "It's our culture. I hope you know that barrenness is not fashionable…" …
> "You cannot be regarded as a full-fledged woman without a child of your own. Likewise your husband cannot be a full man." It was like she had suddenly spoke Ikem's mind. He nodded emphatically.
> "I have to be candid with you, my child. It is not enough to forgive my utterances of yesterday. The antidote is: Bear me a child… a grandson."

The TTC mother is excluded from the family she is married to because she is trying to conceive, and she is excluded in such a way that attention is only paid to her without any mention of the man. The person constituting this barrier to inclusion is her fellow woman. Trying to conceive from the female gaze is the premise for the exclusion of women in African society, and the woman spearheads such exclusion of her fellow woman. In this process of overcoming the marital barrier to inclusion, the woman is insulted and given new tags because she is trying to conceive, as indicated in the actions of Iheoma's mother-in-law. The female writer of *Dear*

[51] *Ibidem*, p. 69.

Kelechi did not give the mother-in-law a name, which is indicative of a collective reference to the actions of mothers-in-laws in Nigeria who exclude and make life unbearable for their daughters' in-laws because of them trying to conceive.

The feminist gaze in African feminist novels indicates that the woman is collectively excluded by the narrative of her fellow woman, who politicise childbirth and see it as a criterion for the inclusion of the other woman. Iheoma faces social exclusion based on the narratives of her fellow women. She accounts for her experiences, and this enables us to see how such narratives exclude her. Iheoma[52] notes that:

> Last Christmas, I attended a Christmas party organized by a friend. A little girl kept tugging at me. It was only natural that I offer to carry her. When I met our host in her kitchen with some of her close friends, they admired the little girl, who was exactly opposite of me in complexion. As I took the baby away from the kitchen, I heard one of the guests call our host.
> "Gladys, I bet your friend's husband is very fair from the complexion of her baby."
> "Oh, you mean Iheoma?" Gladys replied, "that child is not hers. She is one of the waiting mums in town," she laughed.
> Then another of Glady's friend chipped in,
> "Awaiting… is that what you call her? I call all of them". "Patience," she concluded, and they laughed quietly. The first speaker then offered.
> "… better call them 'Mama Ndidi' as in the soap opera we watched." They burst into laughter.

In social gatherings, the woman is excluded because she is trying to conceive. Her fellow woman, as indicated by Gladys' friends, excludes Iheoma by laughing at her and classifying her with various names. Their actions attempt to establish a certain sense of superiority above their fellow women. The women in Iheoma's[53] life always find an opportunity to exclude and use childbearing as the premise of having a conversation with her, thus:

> "Why did you react the way you did?" I asked her after the men had left.
> "Didn't you hear what I said?… I need to be home"
> "But you will soon be home…"
> "Listen, you don't understand. My little son I left since morning must have been crying out his lungs… I want to go home and feed him."
> "I won't tell you it's wrong to wish to go home to your baby, Aijay. You have the right. The issue is that you didn't address it as you should. There are better ways of passing across the information without hurting anyone. You can't feel free with him after today… and your husband is pretty embarrassed…"

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[52] *Ibidem*, p. 93.
[53] *Ibidem*, p. 96.

> "I don't care what you or any of you think. You are saying all these because you don't know what it feels like to be a mother…"
> "What?" I asked, perplexed.
> "Yes, you don't know what it feels like. You don't know what it takes. All you are interested in is parading yourself in fine clothes and catwalking from one occasion to another. I don't such time."

Aijay uses childbirth to spite her fellow woman and to exclude her from the concept of motherhood. She did not only tell Iheoma that she has a son to take care of, but she went as far as insulting her fellow woman just to feel a sense of superiority. Even in social gatherings, the "woman" structures her programme in such a way that it excludes her fellow woman and celebrates her unique privilege of childbirth. Iheoma[54] was invited to her friend's party and was alarmed by the content of the program, which is:

> Order of Photography
> Photography of the Birthday Cake
> Mother with the cake
> Daughter with the cake
> Mother and daughter with all children and the Birthday cake.
> Mother and daughter with all mothers and the cake.
> Mother and daughter with all mothers and their children with the cake.

Women in *Dear Kelechi* weaponize the womb and exclude both male and female through their narrative description of the event of the day. In this exclusion of "mothers," the TTC mothers are not included, the spinsters and even men are not included, and this concept of motherhood is a source of barriers to social inclusion and leads to stigmatization. TTC mothers, as indicated in *Dear Kelechi*, face many challenges with regards to pregnancy and childbirth, but their fellow women, who should have known better, are at the forefront of excluding her. Iheoma, amidst her exclusion, also accounts for the exclusion of her fellow woman by a woman. Iheoma narrated the storey of a woman named Madam Ogboru[55] who disciplined a student because she was disrespectful, and how the student's mother reacted thus:

> "Wicked woman," she raved, "it was owing to your wickedness that God deprived you of a child of your own. You think it is essay to bear a child, that's why you want to murder mine in the name of correction…"
> Amidst her outburst, Madam Ogboru called unto God to listen to the abuse. This further intensified her abuser's invectives.

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[54] *Ibidem*, p. 97.
[55] *Ibidem*, p. 112.

> "Nonsense woman, when I was making my babies, you were busy arabanco. Now, that I have her, you want to kill her for me. If you are looking for whom to kill, go hang yourself because you are useless to your family."
> Madam Ogboru broke into open tears like a baby. It took almost all the teachers in the school premises that day, to calm her down.

Madam Ogboru is abused and subjugated by her fellow woman because she is performing her job. Dorothy's mother weaponizes her womb to launch abuses against Madam Ogboru. Childlessness is a source of trauma and pain for the woman, as is also indicated in the cases of Yejide in *Stay with Me* and Ogboru and Iheoma in *Dear Kelechi*. Trying to conceive is a form of barrier to inclusion and affects the woman negatively in finding a solution alone to the challenges of conceiving. Iheoma[56] affirms the foregoing when she submits that "I began to pay uncountable visits to gynecologists. Thank God, Kelechi, you never had these experiences. Can you imagine how insulting it is to open your laps for deliberate assault before different men and women, all in the name of gynaecological examinations? Is it a possible diagnosis of one's state of mind after each assault yields no fruitful result?"

Conclusion

The women in the African Novels and by extension are no longer neutral actors when it concerns the exclusion of women in marital union as well as in the society. The marital union provides a framework for the exclusion of woman by her fellow woman through classifications and weaponizing the womb as premise for inclusion and exclusion of the woman. Pregnancy through the female gaze indicates that it is a factor in the exclusion of women in the feminist African novel. Trying to conceive is barrier to the inclusion of women in society, and these barriers are complex and erected by women against their fellow women as depicted in their narratives. This study indicates that exclusion can lead to mental health problems, as it is indicative of Yejide's experiences when the constant pressure of her fellow women made her a psychiatric patient. The conversation of women in African feminist novels indicates that patterns of classification and identity that are tied to childbirth constitute a premise of the exclusion of women in society, as indicated in the experiences of Yejide in *Stay with Me* and Iheoma in *Dear Kelechi*. These novels provide a realistic gaze because of their proximity to the one capable of dominance, and these texts depict the dimensions of female dominance in society. The women, through creating barriers for the inclusion of their fellow women,

[56] *Ibidem*, p. 71.

seem to suggest that trying to conceive or marry a woman without having a biological child has a form of disability that they tagged as barrenness irrespective of the woman's achievement in society. One constant temperament of feminism is the complete liberation of women, and this might include the liberation of women from their fellow women if we re-gaze again at the world that the feminist novels have created for the humanity of women.

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