

GENDER CONFLICT: THE RESTRICTIONS AND LIBERATION IN DALENE MATTHEE'S *CIRCLES IN A FOREST* AND *THE MULBERRY FOREST*

Laura Haruna-Banke

Abstract

Over the years, the feminist movement has focused on gender equality, equity and the rights of women in societies around the world. This has been the general preoccupation of different varieties of feminism including European, African, Christian, Islamic and Jewish strands of feminism that advocate for equal rights and opportunities for women in the society. Such advocacies by women still continue today as a number of societal ideologies and constructions still stifle and stereotype the woman; causing her to be restricted and limited in her quest to fulfil her dreams and desires. This article employs Dalene Matthee's *Circles in a Forest* and *The Mulberry Forest* to discuss gender Conflict: The Restrictions and Liberation, while looking at the assertive quest of the woman for self-liberation in a male dominated society. This paper finds that societal ideologies such as cultural practices, race, status and gender demarcations are the different structures that place barriers on the woman's path, and concludes that steps should be taken by stakeholders to liberate the woman from societal constructions

Key words: feminism, restriction, liberation, gender conflicts

Introduction:

Feminism means a million things to a million people. Generally and quiet simply however, feminism is about all genders having equal rights and opportunities. It is about respecting diverse women's experiences, identities, knowledge and strengths, and striving to empower all women to realize their full potentials and rights. Different groups, organizations as well as literatures have attempted to advance and protect the rights of women and girls, even though this does not

come without forms of restrictions. Such restrictions come to play as a result of the interplay between gender and other forms of discriminations like cultural practices, race, age, class, socio-economic status, physical or mental ability, gender or sexual identity, religion or ethnicity.

With the advent of modern fiction, feminist trends are obvious in works of early and late authors around the globe. In Nigeria for instance, are works like *Efuru* (1966) and *One is Enough* (1981) by Flora Nwapa, *Second Class Citizen* (1974) and *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) by Buchi Emecheta. Others are *Oil Cemetery* (2013) by May Ifeoma Nwoye, *The Stillborn* (1984) and *The Virtuous Woman* (1987) by Zainab Alkali, and *The Activist* (2006) by Tanure Ojaide among others. From other climes are such works as *A Room of One's Own* (1929) by Virginia Woolf, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) by Margaret Artwood, *Sister Outside* (1984) by Audrey Orde, and *Little Women* (1868) by Louisa May Alcott. These authors largely demonstrate aesthetics of feminism in their works both in form and content, while showcasing the restrictions that women face in a bid to assert themselves in their societies, the authors also demonstrate the possibilities for liberation.

The aim of this article is to examine gender conflict, the restrictions and liberation in Dalene Matthee's *Circles in a Forest* and *The Mulberry Forest*. Its objectives are to evaluate the diverse aspects of feminism in the novels, reveal the novels as tools for creating awareness for the female through feminist ideology while interpreting the life experiences of the characters as typically represented in the novels. The article begins with the introduction which provides background information to the topic of discussion, the theoretical framework, the analysis of the novels and lastly, the conclusion.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework used in this article is feminism. According to Maria Ajima in an article titled "Ecofeminism in May Ifeoma Nwoye's *Oil Cemetery*," Feminism has to do with waves or

clusters of movements and theories that are focused on engendering socio-political, economic, cultural, and in fact overall equality between men and women in every possible ramification (16). Mary Wollstonecraft, is an important early feminist writer. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, she argues similarly that women should have the same legal rights as men on the grounds of equal humanity, moral worth, rationality and freedom. According to her, it is wrong that women should be defined by their sex so as to be denied education, legal, economic and political rights. Once equality is established, there would be a beneficial revolution in the relationship between men and women (web).

Martha Rampton, who is the founder and director of the Pacific University centre for gender equality, also refers to the feminist movement as a series of political campaigns for reform on issues such as reproductive rights, domestic violence, maternity leave, equal pay, women's suffrage, sexual harassment and sexual violence, all of which fall under the label of feminism and the feminist movement (web). Mary Hawkesworth, a professor of gender studies, and similar to the foregone definitions, asserts that the priorities of the feminist movement vary from one part of the world to another. In parts of the western world, for example, feminism has gone through three waves with the first wave feminism involving suffrage and political equality, while the second wave attempted to further combat social and cultural inequalities. The third wave of feminism addresses the financial, social and cultural inequalities and also includes a renewed campaign for greater influence of women in politics and media (1). Hawkesworth states that in China and prior to the 20th century, women were considered essentially different from men, and were denied equal rights and independence like their male counterparts. Feminists in China then focused on the methods for women to behave and liberate themselves to achieve equal and deserved rights (14). In other words, Rampton and Hawkesworth are in agreement with the idea that the feminist movement is about women advocacy for independence, rights, and privileges for women around the world.

On his part, Cyprian Chiduo Obadiogwu states that, feminism sees its purpose in challenging the assessment of positions and experiences of women as well as society and social interaction by male bias. ...Further it criticizes unequal social relations. The understanding of particular social behavior, the awareness of male dominance and the observation of a situation through various angles and viewpoints have been achievements of the feminist theory. (89)

Similarly, in an article titled “Historical Overview, Global Outlook, Topical Relevance and Applicability of Feminism,” Emmy Unuja Idegwu observes among other points that:

feminism is the most contemporary and crucial movement in human history championed by women... either as a ...practice in the agitation and awareness of the underlying principles of gender equality or its consciousness and the fight to be who they ought to be....From above the 18th century till date, feminism has remained the art, act and craft of overturning all, or most forms of gender inequality geared towards liberating women from subjugation and obtaining women rights; rights which they feel, or they are actually visibly denied of, by the male dominated society. (74)

The key point in Idegwu’s observation above is the agitation by women against injustice by a male dominated society gearing towards liberation from subjugation, which is a major point in this article. The next section looks at the biography of Dalene Matthee.

Biography of Dalene Matthee

Dalene Matthee was a South African author best known for her four “forest novels” written in and around the Knysna forest in South Africa. Her books have been translated into fourteen languages, including English, French, German, Spanish, Italian Hebrew, and Icelandic and over a million copies have been sold worldwide. Matthee was born Dalene Scott on the 13th of October, 1938 in Riversdale South Africa. She died on the 20th of February, 2005 at Mossel Bay, South Africa at the age of 66. She was married to Larius Matthee and had three children.

Matthee's writings started with children's stories for a local radio programme, while her official writing in the literary scene began with the publication of her first book titled *The Twelve O'clock Stick* in 1970. She later wrote several novels, many of which were set in the Knysna forest of South Africa. In 1985 her release of *Fiela's Child* became one of her best known and which has been developed into a film. In total, Matthee published 11 books during her life. Her illustrious writing career was unfortunately cut short when she died. The summary of the two novels under study are briefly presented in the section below.

Synopsis of *Circles in a Forest*

Circles in a Forest showcases the character of Kate who is the fourteen year old daughter of MacDonald, a British miner and wood buyer who resides in the Knysna forest of South Africa. Saul Bernard on the other hand belongs to the family of wood cutters who also lives in the forest. At the age of eighteen, Saul begins to work for MacDonald at his residence. There, he meets with Kate who begins to admire him. The background of Kate and Saul puts them poles apart in terms of culture and status. This however, does not deter Kate who makes the first move for a relationship between them. Deep inside of him, Saul also develops feelings for Kate but is also held back from letting his feelings out because of the cultural barrier between the duo. At the end however, Kate and Saul decide to set aside what is of restriction in their way of being happy together. They allow each other into their different worlds proving that love supersedes barriers of all kind.

Synopsis of *The Mulberry Forest*

Miriam is the only daughter of Silas Miggel. Her grandmother died when her mother was born, and her mother died while Miriam was born. Miriam is taken care of by her father only, because of the fate that befell her mother and grandmother. Silas fears that the same fate will befall his only one and beautiful Miriam. For this reason, her father protects her in a manner that keeps her completely away from any man.

Silas restricts his daughter from going into the forest alone, especially when fifty Italian Immigrants arrive the Knysna forest to establish a silk industry. His fear is for her to meet any man who might start a relationship with her that will result in pregnancy making her end up like her mother and grandmother. However, Miriam would not allow her father's fears to get to her. She will not allow him trap her down; depriving her of love and happiness. In spite of all therefore, Miriam falls in love with Josefa Stander, gets pregnant and gives birth.

Gender Conflict: The Restrictions and Liberation

Dalene Matthee's *The Mulberry Forest* and *Circles in a Forest* showcase the role that gender plays as well as the way they challenge the social structures that separate men and women from each other which eventually stifle their peaceful existence. In *The Mulberry Forest*, Matthee provides a first person male narrative in Silas Miggel who continually worries about men hurting his daughter Miriam. He tries to hide her from the world and protect her from what he considers a predestined fate, as heard in the words of Miriam: ... "my grandmother died when my mother was born, and my mother died when I was born" (62). Because of this fate as revealed by Miriam, Silas tries hard to dominate his daughter, and does everything in his power to protect her and so he says in lamentation:

Where was I to hide her from the eyes at the tents? It had already become a battle to keep her away from the eyes of every young woodcutter in the forest, forever coming to the highland with the excuse of looking for a stray ox, or taking a short cut somewhere, but just to come and stare at her ...the night that my wife Magriet, had struggled with the child and death I prayed that it would be a boy...I promised God that I would see to it that the same lot that has befallen her mother and her grandmother would not befall her. (26-27)

In his eyes, Miriam cannot protect herself adequately from the aggressive men who threaten her mortality. From his words in the quotation, Silas infers that a boy would have been capable of protecting

himself from any situation better than the girl child would. This mentality is one of those that the feminist movement is challenging; stereotyping the female as regards capability thereby, reducing her worth. In a bid to protect her, Silas inadvertently does Miriam more harm than good, and causes her to feel even more trapped, and so she says: “if I go to the village, I have to count every step I make, because you’re at home judging how long I’ve stayed away, if I say ten words to anyone in the village, it shows on your face like doom when I get home” (60). He notices her restlessness and fears losing control of her: “before my very eyes she was discarding the rope I had so carefully tied her with and I didn’t know how to stop her (60-61). Silas realizes and agrees with Miriam when she say to him: “you are turning into a possessive old hen” (79), and it is because he believes that “because every young rooster is suddenly after my chicken” (79). The scenario here is that as a father, he owns her, like a rooster owns the chicken, and he constantly asserts his authority. Silas worries about her well-being more than his own interest.

The narrative depicts how Miriam not only conflicts with her father, but also with her femininity due to the danger of dying in childbirth like her mothers. She feels angry at the limitations forced on her by her father and her gender. Such limitations are those that the feminist movement has been and is still advocating against. They are such that affect and stifle the woman while inhibiting her from getting to her set target. The two limitations imprison Miriam in a life that offers her no alternatives. Her father watches closely and all the time as it is heard in the narrative: “pa watches closely” (162). She cannot fully love a man because she will risk her own life in the process as she feels bad and relates that: “I may start a fire but I’m not allowed to get too close to its warmth no matter how cold I am” (162). By this, her father thinks that she has said so “shamelessly, and didn’t even try to hide how bitter she was” (162). Silas compares Miriam’s sadness to an injured bird: “she walks like a bird dragging both its wings” (225). The scenario is frustrating for her as the reader can hear Silas affirm in the narrative when he states that “Miriam still had sadness about her that I couldn’t

quite fathom. I even saw her being downright rude a couple of times to some of the dam diggers and bachelors at the tents when they kept pestering her. It was comforting for me-but it was untypical of Miriam” (253).

Such is the gravity of harm that restricting a woman from enjoying her freedom can breed. It is therefore, safe to establish at this point that this image links Miriam to the common literary metaphor of woman as a caged bird that can no longer fly. More of Miriam’s frustrations are evident in the narrative as one can observe in her outburst: “I don’t understand you Pa, I was unhappy, you didn’t like it; now that I’m happy again, you still don’t like it. What is it that you want then?” (279). Again, while talking to Mr Dun, Miriam states: “if you want to go dancing with me, you ask me first and then my father. Had you asked me first, the answer would have been no and I would have saved you the bother of asking my father” (254). From the above reactions by Miriam, Matthee uses the character of Miriam to depict the situation that befalls women in a male dominated society and also the possibility of breaking the silence and also breaking loose from the shackles that hold them bound.

One of the feminist ideologies is that women should recognize their authority and rights by confident and forceful behaviour; in other words asserting themselves. Such is displayed by Miriam as stated in the following words:

She came and faced me and she spoke, it was clear that she had had every word ready. ‘Pa you always say there is but one day in the year that is one’s own and that is your birthday. Today is my birthday, I am going to the forest, and I am not going to get back before dark’ (182). ‘...don’t ask me then, Pa. especially not today’. ‘And don’t try to follow me again either, Pa I will know if you do’. (182)

Ironically, Silas is unstable and his fears overwhelm him, as a result of his determination to protect his daughter from all the men around the forest. “My mind was weary and confused about Miriam and many a night I fell asleep at the table. I couldn’t leave my work to

look after her, I couldn't lock her in and I couldn't take her with me to the forest although there was many a day I threatened to do so (279). Besides this fact, the narrative reveals how Silas is beginning to lose his grip over his daughter which is expected as one cannot put down an individual for too long without being affected. This fact is seen in his words when he states that

the worst thing was that I had nothing to say to her that would stop her. I couldn't understand it. I ruled thirty-two impossible Italians, but I could not rule my own daughter. Since when did a parent allow a child to defy him? Whatever it was that called her to the forest was stronger than my word and my wishes; had I taken a rope and tied her up am sure she would somehow have got free before my very eyes and still have walked off. (183)

In addition, and to make Silas more worried is the fact that he observes that Miriam's show of excitement in recent times should necessarily have to do with a man. Silas says to Miriam, "I'm not stupid, Miriam, your happiness is not an ordinary happiness and you know it" (279). Silas obviously is choked with worries over his daughter as his voice is heard in the narrative:

every time I tried to reach her, she retreated into her silence...it was during the week that she was seeing someone. I couldn't discover if he was coming to the house, I swept outside the door in the mornings and inspected every footprint in the evenings. Dun's were there too often for my liking and I kept an eye on him, but I still suspected that she was going into the forest to meet whomever. My Miriam is after a man, I told her as we sat down. I know it is wrong to come to you about it, but there is no other solution. I don't want to spy on her, but I've got to know because all this worrying is getting to me now. (279-280)

Despite the restrictions placed on her, Miriam decides to risk her health for her freedom and she pursues her love for Josafat Stander, a hunter in the Knysna forest. Silas visits his sister Hannie, who breaks the news to him: "your daughter, Silas, is with child!" (335). As it is

expected, what Silas feared most had come to pass, but it was already too late to turn back the time. Fortunately, Miriam does not die in childbirth. She liberates herself from the shackles of her father's restriction and, as a result, possesses the future that her mother and grandmother could not. In following her heart and advocating her needs, she also liberates her father from fear. He relinquishes his authority over her and goes off to protect the heart of the forest instead.

In *Circles in a Forest* and through Saul Barnard, Matthee acknowledges that men and society need to break down barriers that force the separation of men and women. Through Saul's perspective, one sees how Kate's father isolates her, forces her into a domestic role and silences her, as viewed in the novel. Mac Donald had drawn a line between the yard and the house over which a hireling hardly dared even look: "The line was drawn for Kate as well, but time after time Mac Donald had to send her back to her side, and time after time she trespassed and Saul learned to pretend that he did not see her" (127). When Kate chooses her relationship with Saul against her father's wishes, she defies his authority and crosses a social barrier, in the sense that she is a Briton while Saul is Afrikaans, and while Saul is the son of a woodcutter; she is the daughter of a wood buyer and a miner, which supposedly makes her better in status.

Kate embodies traditionally masculine traits by being a well-read and intelligent woman which is part of what feminism advocates. In a bid to spark up closeness with him, she gives Saul a copy of *David Copperfield* to read, which symbolizes an extension of her culture to Saul. Such act is an affirmation of the American feminist literary critic and activist, Annette Kolodny's stands which states that "reading is a highly socialized or learned activity" (153). Kate therefore socializes Saul by teaching him to read, which she believes will make him learned, rise in status and finally be more accessible to her. By so doing Kate takes him further away from his culture as she shares hers with him.

Matthee depicts an alternate existence for the two characters; they neither belong in her world nor his. Because of the difference in their cultures and social standing, Saul is uncomfortable with Kate's

attempt to come close. To that effect he says to her “just remember to tell your father that you came here yourself. I want nothing to do with you people ...if your father catches you here, he’ll rip the skin off me” (127). But Kate does not give up; she carries on until she gets Saul to begin talking with her, and the following dialogue ensues: ‘your father forbade you to come here’, ‘if you stay, I will give you *David Copperfield* to read’. ‘I can only read Dutch’. ‘then I will teach you to read English, it’s easy, ‘ I don’t want to read English you must go now’. ‘I wish you could come to our house’, ‘you want your father to kill me?’ (128). Such presentation of Kate’s character is Matthee’s way of seeking to transform and take a viable position against the stereotype of women so as to establish a system in which society can give room for women to freely express themselves and also be self-fulfilled.

Through the novel and in spite of her father’s restrictions which are based on the culture and ideologies that constitute limitations and restrictions of women, Kate asserts her independence, and attempts severally to break into Saul’s world. She does not allow language, status or race to halt her from achieving the happiness that she desires. She believes that she must take deliberate and necessary steps to get Saul to be hers. She buys him a piece of land with the money she earns as a teacher so that he can build his furniture shop. She does this even though Saul resists a relationship with her because of the barriers that exist. Because Saul will not accept Kate’s invitation to visit her home, she insists on him taking her to the forest where he lives as exemplified in the novel: “take me with you Saul” (176). “I am going with you I want to see where you live” (299). Saul struggles with his superiority due to his gender (a superiority that exists in both cultures) because Kate will not remain silent like he would want her to, in a bid to assert his superiority, he describes her as a child. He calls her “stubborn child” and “a girl tom” (299). He insists that he does not care about her; she is only a child and therefore, inconsequential. While Kate has her father’s restriction and Saul’s chauvinism to grapple with; the two pressures being products of mere societal construction.

After much insistence Saul succumbs to Kate. He accepts her into his world: “very well Kate, you can come with me, but we’ll have to go back to the gold village first and tell them not to look for you” (300). When Kate follows him into the forest, he suddenly recognizes her as a mature woman and not a child. He finally allows himself to see her and to allow her a voice. Kate enters the forest and as a result, the boundaries between nature and culture, man and woman break down. He permits her to enter his masculine wilderness and as a result, liberates himself from an isolated world.

Kate is the aggressive one in the relationship she forces Saul to accept her culture and her gender. In order to earn respect from Saul, Kate does not freely give herself sexually to Saul; instead, she repeatedly demands that Saul take her seriously. She confesses her love for Saul after she is sure of what he feels for her. Saul says to her “Kate I love you ...at this moment I am sure of only two things, that I love you very much and that I must get out of this forest as soon as possible” (309).

In the novel, Matthee focuses on challenging the man to see this intelligent woman’s worth and he does. Kate is a vocal, intelligent woman who defies society, the kind of society that views the woman as the responsibility of her father. She challenges such patriarchal structure in order to fight for her own needs and gets Saul to accept her.

Conclusion

The article examines restrictions that are meted out on women which are based on societal construction while discussing possibilities for liberation of the woman. The article foregrounds the societal construction of both men and women based on cultural ideologies. The paper also captures societal mentality and ideas that stereotype the woman while restricting and placing limitations on their part to life’s fulfilment. Further, it downplays barriers placed against a cordial relationship between men and women due to culture, race, status and gender superiority. In *Circles in a Forest* and *The Mulberry Forest*, Kate and Miriam, by their actions, encourage the feminist belief that women

must liberate themselves in order to allow men to do the same. Both stories have an idyllic ending but emphasize what is indeed possible if men give up control and women assert their freedom.

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