



Original Article

## Femme Fatale Poetics in Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood*

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In this article, we focus on unravelling the femme fatale poetics in Elechi Amadi's and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's, *The Concubine* and *Petals of Blood*, respectively. It is premised on the knowledge that the femme fatale is a shifting personage in interpreting feminist politics beyond national borderlines and the social procedures that frame relational contradistinctions of gender and its convergence with sexuality. It is believed that the term femme fatale refers to an archetypal female personality whose wicked features compel her to either unknowingly be destructed or consciously seek retribution. In light of this, Jung additionally submits that a femme fatale is often depicted as a lady who is stunningly gorgeous, has a sexually enchanting voice, is a thought-provoking figure, and has multiple character traits. She is both attractive and intelligent, and she frequently articulates in a soft voice and dresses in unconventional and attractive ways to attract men's admiration. In line with Jung's submission, the central concern of this paper is to unravel how the femme fatale has become a source of anxiety in the male domain. This article reveals that the femme fatale quest for individual sexual equality is emphasized as the fundamental source of conflict between patriarchal and feminist conceptions. Therefore, this article concludes that in order to solve the puzzling conundrum paused by the femme fatale, a need for a gender-equal regime should be advocated among all the gender cadres. The principal assertions made in this study serve to highlight an adequate solution to the problem of essentialism by the post-modern and post-feminist view context concerning the modern femme fatale as a threat to male dominance. This work was carried out by the use of close textual analysis to gather sufficient data for the phenomena under investigation and description of the significant claims.

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## INTRODUCTION

The femme fatale was born in the aftermath of World War II. Mark Jancovich (2019) in his article, *Vicious Womanhood: The Femme Fatale Genre, and Post War America*, avers that "the character of the femme fatale was recognized as one of the distinguishing qualities emerging at the end of World War II" (101). During the 1940s, the majority of critical works appeared to have evaluated femme fatales in ways that were noticeably different from contemporary depictions of these characters. The femme fatale spawns unpleasant awareness of feminism, equality of sexes, and fear of sexual equality, her tantalizing nature promotes an intensifying feminist glimpse of women comparatively than the contrary portrait image of substantial, unflinching, and individualistic femme fatale. One of the preponderance pertinent and multiplex heritage of the past for feminism is the fabrication of an all-embracing individual within the detachment between individual and communal life. An individual's sexual character is at the core argument between feminism and post-feminism regarding equality of sexes and sexual difference. In her book *Sexual Politics*, Kate Millet provides an in-depth look at the background of the femme fatale. Millet maintains that the femme fatale concept is thought to have originated in the biblical story of Adam and Eve, as well as the mythological story of Pandora's box. The old tales of Pandora's Box and the biblical narrative of man's downfall, according to Millet, are the two most important legendary

narratives in Western culture. The tragic themes in both situations allude to the feminine persona.

## THE LETHAL WOMAN

Femme fatale is a French assertion that means a lethal woman. Tolga Aktas (2020) believes that "Since ancient literature and cinema, the femme fatale has been a literary figure used in various kinds of art". The femme fatale archetype, according to Akta, "represents a representation of seductive and cunning women who are fully capable of leveraging their attraction and magnetism to acquire what they want, deriving from their alluring charm and boundless self-confidence" (2).

Theoretically, says Aktas, "The femme fatale concept refers to women who wrap men around their fingers like rings and use their attitudes and behaviours as puppets on strings to create a complicated situation and eventually get whatever they want. These women, he argues, have a need for quality and a will to succeed. These characteristics are believed to be coined around mysticism and fear, but also the sphere of attraction and undeniable beauty" (2).

On the same note, Miller John (1974) characterizes a femme fatale as "an archetypal female personality whose wicked features compel her to either unknowingly be destructed or consciously seek retribution" (89). Ihuoma in *The Concubine* confirms our assertion that she was unaware of her reputed status as a femme fatale in a reflective talk with Ekweume. She declares, "these are unusual

and almost amusing things. I do not feel like a sea-daughter in the least” (179). In this episode, Ihuoma is mythically defined as a femme fatale. Wanja, on the other hand, is a captivating femme fatale in *Petals of Blood*, her contemplative remarks, “it’s a lovely feeling when a thousand eyes turn toward you, and you feel that it’s your body that’s issuing commands to all those hearts” (129) indicates she is proud of her femme fatale personality. Ihuoma’s characterization in *The Concubine* embodies the subconscious characterization in the preceding episodes. On the other hand, Wanja in *Petals of Blood* embodies Miller’s deliberate portrayal of a femme fatale.

In the preceding discussion, a femme fatale is depicted as an enigmatic and alluring woman whose allure entices her lovers into binds of irrepressible predilection, frequently leading to unhappy endings or even death.

Wanja completely epitomizes Carl Jung’s (1989) characterization of a femme fatale in *Petals of Blood*. In his text, *Archetypes and the Unconscious*, Jung writes, “a femme fatale is an attractive lady totally implanted with features of being alluring and dangerous to males. She is untrustworthy and will deceive any man that enters into a sexual connection with her” (115). In *Petals of Blood*, Wanja had sexual relations with all of the males in the book, including Karega, Munira, Abdullah, and Kimeria, bringing them to their doom. It is debatable whether these gentlemen endure grave consequences as a result of their engagements with her. Jung also argues that “her typical descriptions” include “mysterious, subversive, double-crossing, unloving, predatory, tongue-sweet, unreliable, and manipulative” (115). In line with Jung’s capitulation, Wanja meticulously orchestrates a tactical plan for killing the three men. Her pleasant demeanour allows her to successfully criticize plans to eliminate all three of the men with whom she was having extramarital affairs at the same time. The narrator unravels that Wanja provided each suitor with a distinct rationale for why the females could not serve, insisting it was a particular case. Surprisingly, she was convinced that her unexpected twist would be supported by cooking and the kitchen. Finally, she stepped to see whether Abdullah, who had coordinated everything, had arrived to deliver the agreement.

Jung (1971) subsequently submits that “a femme fatale is often depicted as a lady who is stunningly gorgeous, has a sexually enchanting articulation, a thought-provoking figure, and multiple personality traits. She is both attractive and intelligent, and she frequently articulates in a soft voice and dresses in unconventional and attractive ways to attract men’s admiration. According to Jung, the femme fatale is a tremendously lethal female, and a man’s involvement with one might be devastating” (115). In *Petals of Blood*, Wanja is identified by Munira as the “woman described by the prophet’s extracting obedience from mankind by making them divert from the path and all the time with a voice that had the evocative features of suffering and revolt, hope and terror and above all of the promises of escape via the power of flesh” (42). Munira’s explanations in this scenario present Wanja as a very lethal and nasty female.

Ihuoma, on the other hand, perfectly embodies Kaplan Anna’s African depiction of a femme fatale in *The Concubine*. Anna writes, “The African femme fatale adores and has long lived in a world where her presence, like that of the continent from which she belongs, is both perplexed and despised. Rather than being a normal human being, she is thought to be a water deity or an incarnation of evil sent to punish men” (16). Anyika’s confession in *The Concubine* solidifies Ihuoma’s identification as an African femme fatale by stating boldly that “Ihuoma hails from the sea, and in the spirit realm, she was the wife of the Sea-king, the sea’s ruling spirit. Despite her husband’s warning, she sought out human society and became incarnated” (174).

The actuality that Wanja is an unanticipated female character in *Petals of Blood* is a censorious issue that male protagonists in the narrative face. The enticing aspect of the conundrums she pauses for her male rivals prompts patriarchal conceptions as they struggle to categorize her, eventually allowing her to escape effortlessly. Wanja is exposed to a horrible experience by Kimeria in order to protect the masculine Ego. Feminist critics interpret the femme fatale’s seductive nature as a work of fiction. The alluring character she pauses, according to feminist observers, is not a true sense of essentiality. As a result, they claim that “this reality is always interpreted in terms of the female persona’s sexual degradation” (Tasker & Negra 250). This opinion

resonates with Sankara's submission that "African literature portrays prostitution as a downtrodden career regarding female sexuality discourse" (19). In *Petals of Blood*, Wanja presents both sides of the coin; she is depicted as an industrious woman as well as a prostitute. The following extrapolated passage from the text highlights the narrator's questioning of Wanja supports this claim. He asks

*Munira's knowledge of her was limited. What could he possibly know about a woman who was constantly changing shapes and beings in front of his eyes? She was the master of the men surrounding her when he first encountered her in the hut. Her actions and eyes had all appeared so certain. She'd looked for his eyes over Abdullah and Munira's heads a few times, but he'd reflexively recoiled from the brightness in her own. When they next reunited in Limuru, he had gone to the lowest depths of deception, attempting to flee one's own self, and she had offered him a lifeline. Her voice sounded real, worried, and softened as she called him up from the depths. Over the last few weeks, he had seen the slow development of a shattered, hooked, slender beauty and the experienced brightness in the eyes (Ngugi 128).*

In *Petals of Blood*, Wanja propped up a paradigm shift, which is clearly unravelled in the preceding excerpt. Her portrayal in this context resulted in a scathing attack on essentialism, an ideology that campaigned for women's fundamental inventiveness despite its harsh criticism from third-wave feminists. Essentialism holds that you are endowed with this kind of inborn trait that cannot be modified or transformed by anything outside of yourself. When it comes to sex and gender, essentialists say that differences between men and women are features that exist independently and universally, but gender essentialists contend that these cultural definitions are socially produced and thus flexible (Di Leo 250). Ihuoma in *The Concubine* and Wanja in *Petals of Blood* are female heroines who find themselves stranded between the wreckage of the old days and choose to move forward into an uncertain future. They are described as being in a constant state of flux and ambiguity as a result of the brutal subjugation of a complicated, paradoxical and changeable identity that defines

their historical and contemporary cultural conceptions.

### **The Femme Fatale as A Prototype of Male Anxiety**

Our selected authors create conflicting images of female figures as blueprint ruins of the past and a reconfigure of the new present to attract our awareness to the destiny of a femme fatale. The male protagonist's attempt to capture our female protagonist only results in a cold vengeance in the end, evoking this analogy. This discussion is confirmed when Madume outrages a furious attack against Ihuoma in the green leafy vegetables to seek vengeance on her. As Ihuoma steps out of traditional limitations into a new reality, the female persona in this setting sparked a raging battle between traditional notions and modern cultural characteristics on the female topic. On the same note, Kimeria and Munira in *Petals of Blood* allegorize Wanja's previous ruins, but her new beginning is depicted by Abdullah and Karega's loving relationships. According to the narrator, Wanja's involvement with Abdullah had offered her a lot of comfort in her heart, unlike the prior engagements that had brought her "pain, anger and the need for blood and vengeance" (231). Here, the author figuratively employs Karega to accord Wanja a second opportunity to battle her old past and reclaim her lost grandeur. In doing so, Ngugi masterfully blends the past and present in his main character (Wanja), reiterating his prior assertions, as noted by Virginia Redd (1973), that "African writers have failed to amalgamate the past and present in their characters" (6). Ngugi chooses to depict Wanja as an active symbol of a shattered past redeeming herself for a brighter flowering of a leadership role.

Ngugi and Amadi project their female personalities as prototype symbols of female agency in the selected literature to pardon the female voice. Wanja in *Petals of Blood* and Ihuoma in *The Concubine* raises the glass ceiling for female personalities to achieve sexual freedom. The novelists use their female heroines as game-changers of the precarious patriarchal conventions in their orthodox traditional cultures.

Wanja in *Petals of Blood* and Ihuoma in *The Concubine* are also portrayed as women who are enslaved by evil spells. Virginia Allen (1983) backs up our claim by saying that “the idea of the femme fatale arises from men’s concern and need when challenged with females who claim the freedom to regulate their emotions, bodies, and childbearing tracts, in other words, females who deny men’s control over female sexuality” (x). Wanja’s desire for reproductive freedom puts her in complete contradiction with the male heroes in *Petals of Blood*. She seeks to encapsulate all of the male code’s impulses to succumb to their psychological desires solely for the sake of sexual fulfilment. She asserts, “I have various varieties for various types of men, some prefer short ones, tall ones, and religious ones. I have them all here” (293).

On the same note, Ihuoma in *The Concubine* is entrapped by Religious beliefs that emphasize she cannot have a good marriage, as she can only be a great concubine to men, not a wife. Anyika agrees with this sentiment, stating that “Ihuoma could only be someone’s concubine, her sea-king husband can be persuaded to put up with this after highly involved rites, but as a wife, she is completely ruled out” (174).

Wanja, on the other hand, uses patriarchal ideals to spread her ideals in *Petals of Blood*. She has the sexual power to double-cross any male lover, regardless of social status. This behaviour causes a lot of disputes with patriarchal stems, who feel threatened and hence feel compelled to control her. Her protestations about Kimeria’s financial woes exemplify the patriarchal suppression that female characters in Ilmorog face. She declares, “Kimeria had wrecked my life and afterwards disgraced me by compelling me to sleep with him on the way to the city. It is the same Kimeria that has benefited from Ilmorog’s new-found economic prosperity” (293).

Wanja’s suffocation in the preceding excerpt inspires her to seek vengeance on her tormentors. She disagrees with the optimist leveraging her sexual power. An ideology that Sula in Toni Morrison highly embodies. Through the narrator, we learn that Sula trudges like a prince, posing a danger to patriarchal structures. She chooses to unwrap her sexual power by having sex with guys.

Societal expectations cannot stop her from using smart techniques; therefore, she succeeds in getting over patriarchal barriers.

In *Petals of Blood*, Wanja aspired for sexual power to dominate men’s souls and retribute against her oppressors. This occurrence makes us debate in line with Charles Nnolim’s assertion that “a femme fatale is a lady who castrates a man by making him a slave to her beauty” (180). She is seen as a danger to the normative framework and the male’s pinnacle at the top of patriarchal mandates, as previously stated. Wanja in *Petals of Blood* and Ihuoma in *The Concubine* both possessed sexual dominance over their male characters. Their sexual agency in the selected text makes them the aptest women to promulgate the post-feminist culture since they can conquer the patriarchal constructs. They have “authority over masculine personalities, making male personalities feel disappointed because they do not have power over it” (Tasker & Negra 4). Munira had convinced himself in *Petals of Blood* that he would not be duped by any woman. “I had pledged never to be horrified by anyone’s exposure to the flesh,” he says, “but Wanja turned out to be a prisoner of myself, twisting and knotting my soul” (244). In this scenario, Ngugi objectifies Wanja, frequently depicted as bearing an alluring allure suitable for attracting guys.

Munira’s urge to control Wanja raged in her heart, a case that echoes Ekweume’s portrayal in *The Concubine*. In the book, Ekweume is dazzled by Ihuoma’s beauty to the point where he loses his masculinity and is labelled insane. Ekweume had stopped taking his medicine because of Ihuoma’s alluring attractions and now regards her as his only treatment. “I don’t need medicine, I’m not sick,” he declares. “Ihuoma, Ihuoma, get me Ihuoma” (162). Ekweume ran away from home in order to approach Ihuoma, only to be realized on a tree, an occurrence that irritated the male folk in omokachi, who had been educated not to be too weak in the company of any female, according to the novel.

### **The Unmasked Identity**

A femme fatale is always viewed as a problematic female character; her wicked nature motivates her to create harm or seek retribution, either unintentionally or purposefully. As a result, she is

frequently associated with “the Adam and Eve story as a dangerous lady responsible for man’s fall” (Kate 52). In *The Concubine*, retribution is carried out by the sea-king, who destroys any men who claim to be Ihuoma’s suitors. According to Anyika’s admission, he does this to avenge Ihuoma for disobeying his instructions and wanting human company. Emenike is thought to have died following a heated argument with Madume, who was enraged that Emenike had married Ihuoma before he proposed to her. The subsequent three gentlemen in the book die in an attempt to marry Ihuoma, a wish that never materialized, and she ends up as a kept lady, according to Anyika’s observations. From the aforementioned, this article debates that Ihuoma can be characterized as a prototype for the perilous and lethal contemporary woman staged by patriarchal realms because of her terrible fatality.

Despite her ingenuity, Wanja feels cheated by Kimeria. The thought of him prospering makes her bitter till she makes plans to avenge him. Her recognition of Kimeria’s success as a director sets her off on a series of dramatic plot twists to assassinate him. This she does by “hitting him with a panga while her whorehouse is being burned down” (330). Wanja’s action exemplifies Elizabeth Brofen’s belief that a femme fatale’s last decision is tragic sensibility. In Kateb Yasmin *Nedjma*, Nedjma is depicted as a star of blood born from Rachid’s father’s murder in order to obstruct retribution for the father’s killing. Nedjma is a child of rape and the enemy’s daughter to seek retribution against her oppressors.

Like Kateb, Amadi also uses the femme fatale trope as a literary method for challenging socio-cultural attitudes and norms. Anyika’s revelation in *The Concubine* that the spirit realm had control orchestrates Ihuoma’s true identity as a femme fatale. The three men die one after the other, which is seen as an invasion by the sea king, who is enraged by any man who tries to marry Ihuoma. “The sea king portrays himself in the form of the three death traps: the fierce fight between Madume and Emenike, the spitting serpent, and the poisonous arrow” (195).

## CONCLUSION

In view of the foregoing, this paper has presented a concrete analysis of the femme fatale poetics in Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Petals of Blood* and Elechi Amadi’s, *The Concubine*. A study of the femme fatale poetics reveals that in the selected literature, the femme fatale prototype stands out as a distinguishing strong advocate for her female counterparts’ sexual liberty. The in-depth analysis of this study has highlighted society’s perspective of any woman who attempts to deconstruct societal customs while portraying patriarchal ideals as wicked. The femme fatale’s thirst for sexual power and disregard for the family structure prompted an assault on interpersonal conceptions, unearthing contradicting verges that culminated in an impetuous disagreement of feminist and post-feminist doctrines’ theoretical underpinnings. Therefore, this motif is used by both Ngugi and Amadi to reveal female sexual potency as a weapon for destroying patriarchal systems.

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