Looking Forward by Looking Backward: Reclaiming the Status of African Women in Mugo's *My Mother's Poem and Other Songs*

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Abstract:

The present paper seeks to establish the Kenyan poet, critic, playwright, and human rights activist Micere Githae Mugo as a black feminist, highlighting her philosophy of African Feminism within the paradigm of Postcolonial feminism. The paper attempts to answer the following queries: 1) What alternative African terms are used to replace white feminism? 2) What are the aesthetics of Mugo's poetry to enhance the black feminist theory? 3) What feminist strategies are employed by Mugo for the empowerment of modern African women? 4) Is Mugo a radical feminist, a womanist, or a mixture of both trends? Thus, this paper aims to take stock of Mugo's contributions and position her appropriately within the various strands of feminism. The paper shines a spotlight on the different influences on Mugo's career and her distinctive philosophy of feminism, which sifts through the achievements of past African women in the hope to inspire modern women to take a leaf out of their book. It also explores Mugo's lifelong efforts to re-empower African women both within and beyond the continent, and her strongly held belief in the exceptional skills of African women, past and present.

Keywords: African Feminism, African poetry, empowerment, Mugo, Decolonization

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النظر للمستقبل عن طريق النظر للماضي: استعادة مكانة المراة الافريقية في ديوان "قصيدة امي واغان اخرى" للشاعرة موجو

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الملخص:

تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى تقييم بعض أعمال الشاعرة والكاتبة المسرحية والناقدة الكينية "ميشيري جيذاي موجو" وذلك من خلال تحليل قصائد مختارة من ديوانها الشعري الموسوم "قصيدة أمي وأغان أخرى" ويؤكد البحث على الدور الريادي الذي لعبته الشاعرة من خلال أعمالها الإبداعية في الدفاع عن مكانة المرأة الأفريقية وإعادة تكريمها من خلال تذكير النساء الأفريقيات بأمجاد الماضي حيث تولى عدد من النساء مناصب عليا في الدول الأفريقية بينما لعب عدد منهن أدوارا قيادية في النضال من أجل رفع مكانة النساء بوجه عام كما يبرز البحث من خلال تحليل القصائد المختارة قناعة الشاعرة الراسخة بمواهب ومهارات المرأة الأفريقية في الماضي والحاضر.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

التحرر من الاستعمار– النسوية الأفريقية– الشاعرة موجو– الشعر الأفريقي– المرأة الأفريقية.

Introduction

Hailed as one of Africa's literary heroines, Kenyan poet, critic, playwright, and human rights activist Micere Githae Mugo (1942-) has published six books, a play in collaboration with Ngugi wa Thiong'o, some articles, and reviews. Mugo is a passionate campaigner for human rights, particularly for marginalized and disenfranchised groups at both African and international levels. Among her remarkable achievements that still lives on in the African memory is that she was selected as the first African to enroll in a white, all-girls high school in Kenya in 1960. Moreover, Mugo was elected as an academic dean in 1980, to become the first African woman ever to assume such a leading position, transcending gender barriers in a traditionally male-dominated position. Mugo's project centers on restoring the dignified space that African women enjoyed in pre-colonial times after they had been relegated to second-class citizen status. "As a representative of Amnesty International, she speaks on issues of human rights with particular attention to the situation of African women." (Renate 170)

This article aims to assess the contributions of Mugo as she can be deservedly credited with upholding African women's stature on human rights. The paper casts light on her distinctive philosophy of feminism and the empowerment of African women, alongside her strategy of reflecting on the accomplishments of historical African women to inspire contemporary women to emulate their initiatives. It also underscores Mugo's lifelong commitment to the re-empowerment of African women, both within and beyond the continent, and her steadfast belief in the exceptional abilities of African women, past and present. Postcolonial feminist theories are set forth to address the following questions:

-What are the alternative African terms used to replace white feminism?

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-What are the aesthetics of Mugo's poetry to enhance the black feminist theory?
-What are the feminist tactics used by Mugo for the empowerment of modern African women?
-Is Mugo a radical feminist, a womanist, or a mixture of both schools?

Taking a stroll down memory lane, Micere Mugo seeks to orient herself into the present and future. She endeavors to reintegrate into the African social mainstream, from which colonial education had estranged her, striving to make herself relevant in the African context. To borrow Ngugi wa Thiong'o's terminology, by renewing her interest in African art and culture, Micere Mugo aims to remember her own and Africa's dis-membered psyche and identity (15).

Micere Mugo embraced Marxism in the late 1970s. In the foreword to *Visions of Africa* (1978), she expresses regret at not having encountered Marxism earlier, as it would have enriched her doctoral dissertation with fruitful theoretical dimensions like concepts such as class, historical and dialectical materialism, and revolutionary consciousness. The influence of Marxist aesthetics is palpable in her second poetry collection, *My Mother's Poem and Other Songs* (1994), which is also examined in this critical project. In this collection, thorny issues confronting Africa, such as war, unemployment, poverty, political repression, and dictatorship, are analyzed through class and materialist epistemology.

Theorizing Postcolonial Feminism

Helen Chukwuma (1994) defines feminism as "a rejection of inferiority and a striving for recognition. It seeks to give the woman a sense of self as a worthy, effectual and contributing human being" (ix) However, a score of notable African authors voiced their disapproval regarding the use of the term "feminism" to refer to African women. The list includes such

remarkable figures as Mohanty, Aidoo, Hooks, and Acholonu, among others.

Feminists who are acutely aware of the predicament of women of the Third World such as Chandra Mohanty, condemn the attitude of "white feminists speaking for Third World women, rather than allowing women of colour to speak for themselves". They tend to represent Third World women as "ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, family-orientated, victimized" (Mohanty 258), while portraying Western women as educated and modern, thus reinforcing their patronizing position. Ghanaian playwright and novelist Ama Ata Aidoo satirized European feminists, regarding them as "a new wave of imperialists eager to invade the African continent brandishing a particular political doctrine while remaining blissfully ignorant of the culture, history, and needs of individual groups of African women" (qtd. in Gilbert and Tompkins 118). Bell Hooks subscribes to these views: "Racism abounds in the writings of white feminists, reinforcing white supremacy and negating the possibility that women will bond politically across ethnic and racial boundaries. … Class struggle is inextricably bound to the struggle to end racism". (qtd in Hinding 251)

Another negative aspect of Western feminism is that it does not prioritize "challenging other forms of subordination like slavery, colonialism, racism, and their accompanying prejudices and complexes, which affect women as well. Its exclusiveness to the western middle-class woman's experience undermines its universality and objectivity, and therefore puts to serious doubt its relevance to the African woman of the same era" (Mwale 133). In addition, women of color and working-class women were determinedly ignored by Western radical feminists and their agendas since feminism emphasized primarily the issues of gender and primarily focused on the problems faced by only white middleclass women. Acholonu condemns European radical feminists as over-individualistic:

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“This excessive individualism, among radical feminists,” she confirms, “has in some cases given rise to an extremist radical feminism” (85).

Non-Western societies often resist Western hegemony and its underlying discourses by appropriating elements from both Western and indigenous cultural heritages. This phenomenon is described by Bill Ashcroft et al. as "The Empire Writes Back." This dialectic generates cultural hybridity, where the cultures of both categories interpenetrate, thereby undermining claims of cultural purity and superiority on both sides. However, this reality is frequently denied by Eurocentric discourse, which continues to interpret this relationship in a biased manner.

Feminist criticism regards literature as a social institution that consciously or unconsciously inscribes within its structure gender configurations that socialize members of society into world views about gender relations. Feminist criticism aims at devising new conceptual and hermeneutical tools whereby women’s and men’s writing can be appraised.

The theory advocates for evaluating women writers according to their own standards rather than androcentric norms. This study attempts to implement this principle in practice. Elaine Showalter identifies two types of feminist criticism: gynocriticism and feminist critique. The feminist critique focuses on the reader and audience, aiming to develop methods of reading from a woman's perspective. In contrast, gynocriticism concentrates on the female writer. As Gilbert and Gubar suggest, "If we start by assuming a female audience and a female text, we open the possibility of uncovering a tradition of women's writing which has been masked by the dominance of a masculine critical tradition" (11). Echoing this sentiment, Elaine Showalter states:

> The study of women as writers, and its subjects are the history, styles, themes, genres, and structures of writing by

> women; the psychodynamics of female creativity; the trajectory of the individual or collective female career; and the evolution and laws of a female literary tradition. (310)

Patrocinio P. Schweickart opines that the feminist literary theory undertakes the task "of recovering, articulating and elaborating positive expressions of women's point of view, of celebrating the survival of the point of view in spite of the formidable forces that have been ranged against it" (438). Schweickart underscores the resilience of women's perspectives, highlighting their endurance despite historical suppression. This tenacity is a testament to the power and significance of women's voices in literature. By bringing these viewpoints to light, feminist literary theory reclaims and celebrates narratives that have long been overshadowed. The endeavor is akin to unearthing buried treasures, revealing the richness and diversity of women's experiences.

Micere Mugo is a prominent African woman writer. There is a vision that she outlines through her creative *oeuvre* for the African and global social orders. Her largest creative output has been in poetry where she has published the two collections, Daughter of My People, Sing! (1976) and My Mother's Poem and Other Songs (1994). In relation to poetry, Eldred D. Jones rightly observes that it is the most private genre of literature. Isidore Okpewho, in, The Heritage of African Poetry, expounds why this is so by arguing that poetry touches people deeply emotionally such that they experience pain or pleasure, and that it provokes our minds to think deeply about human phenomena. The study is therefore justified in focusing on Micere Mugo's poetry on the grounds that it is through her poetry that she sets forth her most heartfelt private view about the various issues that define Africa and the world. Through this poetry, she aims to transpose readers to her universe.

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Feminism is often perceived as an irrelevant Western discourse that is complicit with European cultural imperialism. Kolawole asserts that "African women who accept feminism, whether Black or Western, risk being viewed as parrots" (13). Many African feminists have been condemned and misunderstood: “those who declare themselves to be feminist in Africa are not truly African or are suffering from mental colonialism, upholding views which do not belong on African soil and which have no worth for African cultures or peoples” (Dosekun 41). Because the term “feminism" has negative connotations in Africa even by female writers and is sometimes regarded as a curse, African critics engineer a number of alternative interrelated terms such as African feminism, Womanism, Nego-feminism, Motherism, and others, which will be dealt with in some detail in the following pages.

Womanism, as shown through the literary texts of such theorists of the movement as Alice Walker and Barbara Christian, states that "womanist theory has always played a pivotal role in consciousness-raising, while it also acts in the public spotlight to improve the life of women in general" (Peter 204). Alice Walker and Barbara Christian's literary works illustrate the transformative power of womanism in raising awareness and advocating for women's betterment. Ogunyemi states: "Womanism is black centered; it is accommodationist. It believes in the freedom and independence of women like feminism; unlike radical feminism, it wants meaningful union between black women and black men" (60). That is to say, it seeks harmony rather than schism: unifying ranks to struggle against the iniquitous grip of colonization.

African feminism as a term serves as the domesticated version of the ideology of feminism. It “condemns all forms of patriarchy which dehumanize woman and portrays her as a second-class citizen. Rooted in African historical and cultural experiences, it advances the view of the complementarity between man and woman by stressing the Male-Female principle

in the creative order" (Maduka 8-9). African feminism is thus a theory that "combines feminist concerns with African concerns" (Nadaswaran 146). To Okonjo "black womanism is a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womanhood" (63).

According to Nnaemeka, Africans themselves should set their priorities and agendas:

> Anyone who wishes to participate in our struggle must do so in the context of our agenda. In the same way, African women who wish to contribute to global struggles (and many do) should do so with a deep respect for the paradigms and strategies that people of those areas have established. In our enthusiasm to liberate others, we must not be blind to our own enslavement. Activities of women globally should be mutually liberating (57).

Thus, Mugo launches her reform project by liberating women in Africa, followed by women in African diaspora, and then proceeds to the rest of the world. Mugo commences her reform initiative by first empowering women in Africa, laying a solid foundation for broader change. Once African women are uplifted, she extends her efforts to support women in the African diaspora. With these communities strengthened, Mugo's vision then reaches out to women across the globe. Her strategy unfolds like a ripple effect, beginning locally and expanding globally to create the long cherished impact.

A Postcolonial Feminist Reading of Mugo's Oeuvre

The poems under study in this paper embody Mugo's lifelong concerns as a vigorous campaigner for human rights as well as women's rights. Accordingly, "women and issues of gender, liberation struggles and resistance in a Pan Africanist and Internationalist perspective" cut a high profile in the poems

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which “display a conscious, high level of gender sensitivity and highlight women as actors in history” (Mugo Preface xx). The poems within the ambit of this paper vividly mirror Mugo's passionate advocacy for both human and women's rights. One can safely assume that women can draw strength from perusing such poems.

One of the most notable influences on Mugo was Ugandan poet Okelo Oculi whose credit was acknowledged by Mugo herself who said that as she was finalizing the poems in this collection, Oculi “first introduced me to the concept of 'exploding silences' as a major task in poetry composition.” (Mugo Preface ix) These silences, Mugo believes, are necessary “as a means of regrouping and replenishing our emotional needs, revitalizing our imaginative and intellectual energies, recharging the battery of life when the level goes low.” In this way, “we take a planned retreat, sketch commas, dictate full-stops, curve question marks and emphasize the exclamation marks of our lives. Positive and voluntary silences are enriching and rejuvenating, not suffocating” (Mugo, preface ix-x). Thus, inspired by Oculi, Mugo declares outspokenly at the very first stanza of “Mother Afrika’s Matriots” that her objective is to break the silence of the long ages of the past and to turn a new page in the history of African women: "

We shall begin
with dynamizing
freezing silences
now paralyzing
our womanful lives
we shall recount
our herstory
dramatizing it
and illustrating it
with rainbow colours (29)

Fanon believes that “the colonized man who writes for his people ought to use the past with the intention of opening the

future, as an invitation to action and a basis for hope." (*Wretched* 232) Mohanty opines "We Africans must realize that our survival depends to a large extent on our ability to reclaim our history" (88). In similar ways, Bell Hooks correctly notes, "our struggle is also the struggle of memory against forgetting" (Kundera 4). This is exactly the path Mugo steered in this collection of poems that draws on the strategy of looking forward by looking backward.

Mugo believes that her primary duty is to restore the glory of prominent African women from the past, aiming to empower contemporary women by acquainting them with the remarkable achievements of their foremothers. This perspective aligns seamlessly with Ngozi Acholonu's assertion: "Unearthing the past is essential to empower women in the present" (12). Consequently, the following poem can be regarded as a historical document celebrating womanhood. By highlighting the legacy of these trailblazing women, Mugo offers a source of inspiration and strength for the current generation and posterity. Her work bridges the yawning gap between past and present, inculcating a sense of continuity and resilience. This approach not only valorizes the contributions of past heroines but also serves as a catalyst for future progress. Ultimately, Mugo's poetry points up the importance of historical awareness in the ongoing fight for gender equality and empowerment.

We will pour lavish libation
Honouring
Named
Unnamable
yet to be named
Mother Africa's matriots (29).

Mugo's intention is to glorify influential women in African history, narrating the enduring legacy of African women and honoring immortal female figures of the past, thereby rewriting the history of feminism. Feminism thus serves as

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Mugo's gateway to addressing significant intellectual, political, and cultural issues. The poem recollects the souls and memories of departed African heroines to inspire and revitalize contemporary women.

We will sing
without counting time
we will dance
hearts touching earth
we will map
the A and the Z
of our unfolding epic journey
of womanful living
we will compose
immortal verse
in living praise of
Mother Afrika's matriots (30)

In pre-colonial times, African queen mothers "were not just women rulers; they were women who ruled by supporting, protecting, and nurturing" "(Hanson 220) . The Asante queen mother, for example, used to have her say and to participate in state councils and her authority was highly respected by the elders of the tribe. In these pre-colonial societies, what distinguished women was "not their subordination to men or even their inferiority but the kinds of power and authority that certain women could wield." (Wilson-Tagoe 128)

To refute the colonialist argument that the black race has produced no great civilization, Cheikh Anta Diop embarks on the job of demonstrating the African origin and character of ancient Egyptian civilization. As Diop writes, "Greece borrowed from Egypt all the elements of her civilization, even the cult of the gods, and that Egypt was the cradle of civilization" (xv). In agreement with Diop, Mugo gives countless examples of African women figures with outstanding achievements to the well- being of Africa and the world so as to emphasize her firm belief that Africa, not Europe, is the birthplace of feminism:

> Nefertiti, …….., granary of culture whose stunning reign rained sparkling stars.
> Hatshepsut, grand political architect who artfully engraved plateaus of human development while Europe still slept.
> Cleopatra, commanderess of matriotic forces, strategist of unfathomable battlecraft whose stature not even William can shake or spear. (30)

She trusts the exceptional power of contemporary African women to restore the fighting spirit of the past, as shown in the following lines:

> They will explode imperialist history's
> incarcerating myths
> They will light undying flames
> of liberating visions (34).

Generally speaking, Mugo's female personae have the attitude of traditional women in African cultures, "unlike the educated and Christianized ones," whom Zulu Sofola condemned as "dewomanized," referring to those women who are brainwashed by Western values "imbibed through education and Westernization and therefore lack the open and bold manner of their traditional sisters in the rural areas" (61). Zulu Sofola criticizes these Westernized women as "dewomanized," suggesting they have been distanced from their cultural roots. He argues that education and Westernization have divested them of the strength and assertiveness seen in their rural, traditional sisters. This distinction underscores the tension between maintaining cultural identity and the influence of Western values on African women.

> They will accurately shape
> the A and the Z
> of our unfolding pilgrimage
> through history

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through living
through being (30)

Mugo also remembers Muthoni wa Kirima, a remarkable figure who was a general in the Mau Mau liberation war against colonial administration in Kenya; women of Mozambique and Angola; and a host of other fighters for African liberation. He alludes to these fearless women warriors in order "to show that valor and courage are feminine characteristics". She employs such words as "herstory" and "matriots" as contrasts to male-inspired "history," and "patriots," as she sings the praises of women from "Zimbabwe and South Afrika," through the continent to Egypt and the African diaspora" (Okafor 12):

Muthoni wa Kirima, last fieldmarshall of the Mau Mau
land freedom army
Mother Afrika's matriots
will rise the earthshaking power of…
They will rise with the roaring fury of:
the Dakar railway strike women (33)

Mugo's reform project of regeneration is predicated on "a return to the original inspiration, the idealized past, which can even go so far as to imagine a golden age, serves as a source dictating the obligation to be up to its standards" (Kebede, 147). African women, act as fighters, tacticians, and instigators; and through these roles reveal their revolutionary outlook toward the struggle against subjugation. Mugo's use of the poetic persona is exceptionally feminist and the characters she refers to are celebrated for their dedication to advancing the cause of women.

They will rise with the sweeping force
of Mother Afrika's struggling women
our matriots will surely rise
with the gun salute (33).

Hudson-Weems defines Africana feminism as: "neither an outgrowth nor an addendum to feminism. Africana womanism is an ideology created and designed for all women of African

descent. It is grounded in African culture and therefore it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs and desire of Africana women" (22). Defending outstanding African American women (whom she calls Africana women) and acknowledging their contributions to the enhancement of the United States, Hudson-Weems argues that it is the "ultimate in racist arrogance and domination to suggest that authentic activity of women resides with white women" (Hornsby 398).She asserts that those Africana women were feminists even if they did not singularly and exclusively focus on women's issues. For her, the struggles of African American women are an original site for understanding women's movements. White feminists have benefitted and learned from abolitionists, civil rights workers, and African women activists (Hudson-Weems 153). In similar ways, Dreserova believes that many contemporary African American feminists "build their theories on the ideas of their foremothers who raised their voice to speak of race and gender before 1960s—such as Sojourner Truth, Frances E. W. Harper, and Ida B. Wells" (11).

Hudson-Weems lists a catalogue of Africana (of African descent) women activists in America such as Sojourner Truth, "militant abolition spokesperson and universal suffragist"; Harriet Tubman, an "Underground Railroad conductor," and Ida B. Wells, "anti-lynching crusader" who fought with pen and voice against lynching. She argues that Black women have always had their own genuine activities and "can be considered pre-feminists. In view of the activities of early Africana women such as those mentioned above and countless other unsung Africana heroines, what white feminists have done in reality was to take the life-style and techniques of Africana women activists and used them as models or blueprints for the framework of their theory" (qtd in Hudson-Weems 22). Similarly, Mugo glorifies a score of African women in diaspora in her poem, moving from

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Africa to African diaspora, widening the scope of her endeavors to empower and strengthen more women around the world:

> Harriet Tubman, orature artist from Afrika's health uncaptured guerilla of the Underground Railroad whose untiring feet carved corridors of freedom south to north.
>
> Sojourner Truth, earthquake that shook pillars of racism and sexism
>
> Ida B. Wells, journalist-activist, source of liberating consciousness. (31-32)

This is only a selection of the long list of heroines immortalized by Mugo in the poem. Those timeless figures have fought tirelessly and fearlessly for the well-being of women in general and African women in particular. Thanks to Tubman, hundreds of African slaves have been freed forever. Mary Prince wrote the first slave narrative autobiography ever, where she gave a first-hand description of the brutalities of enslavement. Sojourner Truth was an active spokeswoman for the abolition of slavery and especially for black women's rights. She exerted "heroic efforts to preserve their self-respect as women despite slavery's attempts to turn them into its helpless, hopeless victims" (Andrews 139).

In "Mother Afrika's Matriots," Mugo limits her celebration to the unprecedented achievements of women, whether in Africa or diaspora, in a declaration of independence from the shackles of Western feminism. The second poem- "To Be a Feminist Is"- casts more light on the complementary relationship between all women and between men and women. Mugo avails herself of vivid imagery and powerful metaphors to accentuate the importance of unity and mutual respect among genders. She challenges the conventional narratives of feminism by emphasizing indigenous values and collective progress. Further, her work promotes a more inclusive and holistic view of gender equality that resonates with diverse cultural experiences. By so doing, Mugo redefines feminism in a way that pays tribute to African women's unique struggles and triumphs.

African Feminism "advocates mutuality and respect in the place of hierarchy, abuse, oppression and exploitation. It strives for peace, justice, and freedom. It is for all these reasons opposed to neo-liberalism and corruption, imperialism and racism" (Dosekun 46). This African version of feminism is inclusive, viewing human life as a whole rather than through a dichotomous or exclusive lens. Steady believes that for African feminists, "the male is not the "other" but part of the human same" (qtd in Sackey 50). Alice Walker believes a womanist is "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female," womanists are not separatists but are rather "traditionally universalist" (xi).

In "Ain't I a Woman," Bell Hooks thrusts this dimension of feminism into focus: "To me, feminism is not simply a struggle to end male chauvinism or a movement to ensure that women will have equal rights with men; it is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates Western culture on various levels—sex, race, and class" (qtd in Adeleke 35)

To be a feminist is
to denounce patriarchy
and the caging of women. (36)

Mugo stresses that, as a woman, she is more qualified than men to give a comprehensive definition of feminism. In her widely anthologized poem "To Be a Feminist," she not only provides the context of women's struggles but also tackles one of the thorniest issues in contemporary discourse -feminism. The poem attempts to repudiate some of the major Western feminist concepts, especially as regards gender and class while rejecting the view that feminism is not a priority for Africana women. For to be a feminist, the poem argues, is "to unseat domination/…to shake hands. With people's struggles". (41). It is a set of

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guidelines that connects women's struggles to other dominated groups.

It is
To wipe the fuzziness
Of colonial hangovers
To uproot the weeds
Of neo-colonial pestilence. (37)

African womanism is not antagonistic, "it seeks male support. More importantly, it prizes and praises womanhood, …Women should take pride in being women. It is an emancipatory program of African women and at the same time a tool of liberation of all Africans from all forms of oppression, including, but not limited to, racism, sexism, and capitalism" (Chidam'modzi 5) :

For me
To be a feminist is
To celebrate my mother
To poeticize my sisters
To message their failures
To savour their intellect
To drink their feelings
And to embrace
Their achievements (36)

Anti-racist Africans endeavored to travel the distance between the different trends of feminism in order to reach a wider collectivity and inclusivity of women. In African feminism, all kinds of racism and discrimination should be uprooted. She calls for feminism that not only addresses gender inequality but also remedies racial and socioeconomic injustices. By doing so, Mugo aspires to develop feminism that is not merely about gender, but rather about creating a fair and even-handed society where everyone is treated on an equal footing. Mugo, in her multi-dimensional exceptional vision of feminism, declares that to be a feminist is:

to hurl
through the cannon

of my exploding righteous fury
the cannibal named capitalism
it is to pronounce a death sentence
on the ogre named imperialism.
to strangulate classism
to fumigate ethnic cleansing.(37)

African feminism thus aims at reforming society in its totality and is not restricted to the betterment of women. African feminists, represented by Mugo, are single-mindedly devoted to social justice and equality. Their approach is holistic in the sense that it asserts that true progress can only be achieved when all forms of oppression are rectified. Mugo's work exemplifies this by advocating for the subversion of systemic barriers that affect not just women, but entire communities. By pushing for inclusive policies that do not tear up the fabric of society and sow the seeds of affection, African feminists seek to uplift everyone, ensuring that no one is left behind in the quest for a just society. This comprehensive vision of feminism underscores the interconnectedness of all struggles for freedom and equality.

African womanism invites a recognition of the important relatedness of people's being. Hudson-Weems writes about "liberating an entire people"; of the importance of an all-inclusive harmony and collectivism rather than a one-dimensional and isolated notion of individuality. She maintains it is by "necessity" that the first concern must be with "ridding society of racism, a problem which invariably affects our entire family, or total existence". Racism necessitates a frontal and collective struggle against it and Western feminist individualism alike". (Hudson-Weems, 149) Likewise, Mugo writes that to be a feminist is:

to unhood racism
to decry Zionism
to detonate apartheid
to obliterate "tribalism" it is

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to necklace homophobia
to drown fanaticism (37)

African womanism, according to Sofola, "expresses holistic harmony and communalism rather than individual isolation. The African experience of exploitation demands recognition of the relatedness of humans to build their own resilient communities"`(54.) Similar ideas are echoed by Mugo, for to be a feminist is:

to breathe the air
of unpolluted peoplehood
and to sing in harmony with nature
it is to shake hands
with people's struggles
it is to conceive and deliver a human world. (40-41)

Black feminism as a reform project aims at liberating African women via uprooting the negative concepts that stand in their way towards accomplishment of their identity such as sexism, classism, and racism. The dream of gender equality unites all feminists and people. What makes Black feminists unique is their single-handed care about racial and class equality. Therefore, African feminists speak about the "intersectional position of black women"—being both black and female. (Dreserova 11) It should be noted, nevertheless, that women need to reform themselves first and then go into partnership with men:

to be a feminist is
to embrace my womanness
the womanness of all my mothers
all my sisters
It is to hug the female principle
and the metaphors of life that decorate my being (36)

Patriarchy, which goes hand in hand with colonialism, usually puts men on the top of the social ladder while ignoring women altogether. According to Graça Machel, "in the struggle

for gender equality, we face foes without and foes within. The foes without are the negative cultural practices that perpetuate gender inequality. The foes within are the fears and insecurities that make us doubt our strength and capacity" (39). This stands in contrast with traditional African societies where no hierarchy exists between men and women but rather a complementary co-existence. In order to restore their lost position, what women need most is to start with empowering themselves and their sisters before calling on their brothers to join the reform program:

to be a feminist is
to celebrate my birth as a girl
to ululate that my gender
is female
it is to make contact with my being.
to speak out loud
to articulate my name
to assert that I am
to declare that woman is. (38)

Chukwuma contends that “the irony of the African female writers’ late entry into the creative arena is that women are tradition bearers, tradition–effecters and transmitters in the home (102). Further, the colonial educational system excluded the woman resulting in her social, cultural and political dislocation in the new dispensation. Her subsequent silence has yet to be addressed in contemporary African experience. In an article entitled "African Women and African Classics," Okell Oculli ends her essay challenging African women to "return to their historic position of power as the creators and carriers of classical literature of African descent"(23). Mugo encourages women to have their say outspokenly- as their grandmothers used to do in the golden days of the past:

to be a feminist is
to speak out loud

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to articulate my name
to assert that I am
to declare that woman is
it is to water my fertility
to woman my womb (38)

On their way of regaining the glory of the past, Mugo believes that women are heroines and fighters who can fly higher and higher as leaders of the world:

it is to grow wings and fly
to unlimited heights
it is to ride the sun of my visions.
to celebrate my mother
to poetize my sisters
to message their failures (38)

African feminists argue that pre-colonial Africa was defined by gender complementarity, not subordination. This assessment implies that Africa still has much fluidity between public and private domains that give rise to male domination and female subordination. Nnaemeka (2004) coined the term nego-feminism to highlight the tensions and aspirations of African feminisms. She speaks of this as the feminism of compromise. First, "nego-feminism is the feminism of negotiation; second nego-feminism stands for "no ego" feminism." In the foundation of communal values in many African cultures are "the principles of negotiation, give and take, compromise and balance. African feminism challenges through negotiations and compromise." (22). For Ifeyinwa Iweriebor, African feminism is "integrationist rather than separatist". Its tactics use negotiation, confrontation, consensus, and compromise. It is often reformist (303). Again, typical ideas are uttered by Mugo:

For me
To be a feminist is
To have dialogue
With my father
And my brother
To invite their partnership

As fellow guerillas
It is
To march with them
To the war-torn zone
Of Afrikana survival
It is
To jointly raise with them
The victory salute (39)

Finally, the last alternative proposed by African women authors to replace feminism is motherism, a term devised by Catherine Acholonu and derives its force "from the core values informing the African way of life" (233). Acholonu dismisses the terms "patriarchy" and "matriarchy" which she considers Eurocentric and opts for patrifocality and matrifocality because men and women are complementary opposites in traditional African society, such that no gender dominates the totality of the social life of the people. Men are dominant in socio-political spheres of life while women have the upper hand in spiritual and metaphysical segments" (233). This family-oriented aspect of African feminism is also stressed by Mugo in the poem as she salutes African mothers for shouldering the responsibility towards future generations:

To be a feminist is:
to curdle my children's hopes
to infuse their veins with the spirit of
never-say-die
it is to fan their wind of resistance
to stroke them with optimism
it is to give them to humanity. (39)

Before the end of the groundbreaking poem, Mugo underlines the most important lessons in her textbook poem about her own definition of feminism. By echoing Leymah Gbowee's words who once said: "We must ensure our daughters grow up in a world where they can aspire to anything their hearts

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desire, and that they will live in a society that respects their rights and dignity" (123), Mugo insists on mythologizing noteworthy African women in pre-colonial as well as postcolonial Africa and on studying their struggles for women's rights meticulously so that modern women can be inspired by these glorious histories. She strongly believes that understanding the past is crucial for forging a better future where women can thrive and succeed. By documenting and celebrating the accomplishments of these influential women, Mugo creates a legacy of empowerment and resilience. This historical awareness undoubtedly fosters a sense of pride and possibility among contemporary women. Ultimately, Mugo's definition of feminism is deeply rooted in the rich heritage and enduring spirit of African womanhood. The following lines attest to this:

To be a feminist is
to be me
an Afrikan woman
all Afrikana women
and all who have walked
their path of thorns
it is
to know herstory
word for word
it is
to look history
in the face
and declare
that I am
because woman is.
it is to be more than a survivor
it is to be a creator
it is to be a woman. (41- 42)

Conclusion

In the final analysis, this study has attempted to amply show how Mugo has deftly employed various feminist theories to empower African women, reeling under the yoke of colonialism. Her transformative strategy emphasizes collective struggle and the consciousness-raising of African and Africana women, aspiring to extend this empowerment to women of all races globally. Although she enlists women as leaders in the struggle, she also acknowledges the essential role of male partnership in achieving her lifelong mission of restoring women's elevated status in African societies. Mugo contends that it is shameful for modern African women to lag behind, given that they are the granddaughters of the pioneers of feminism and should be following in their footsteps.

As a human rights activist attuned to the pulse of African women, Mugo has, to a large measure, succeeded in broadening the scope of feminism to combat the scourge of colonialism, including racism, classism, Zionism, apartheid, and more. In so doing, she has not confined herself to the conventional parameters of poetry, rather she has employed it as a vehicle for resistance. Her modern version of feminism primarily seeks to eradicate all forms of discrimination and to unite all gender-oppressed people in their struggle against the evils of patriarchal colonialism. In her poems, she illuminates the contributions of African women from the past, often employing dramatic devices like the chorus to remind contemporary African women of their foremothers' exploits. This poetic endeavor not only inspires today's African women to reclaim their spiritual values but also encourages them to reconsider their past exploitation and revisit their leading roles. Mugo's persistent efforts for the empowerment of African women have borne fruit. Her compatriot, Wangari Maathai, was awarded the prestigious Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, becoming the first African woman to receive this honor. This worldwide recognition can be jointly accorded to Mugo for her tireless work in advocating for women's rights and social justice.

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