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## Womanist Tenets in Selected Novels of Chika Unigwe and Terry Mcmillan

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, the deployment of womanist tenets in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009) and Terry McMillan's *Disappearing Acts* (1989) was examined with a view to critique the convergences and divergences in both novelists' utilisation of womanist tenets. Both novels were subjected to comparative and critical textual analyses employing womanist tenets including female bonding, family centredness, gender complementariness and motherhood. In both novels, four female characters were used to appropriate the womanist tenet of female bonding. In Unigwe's novel, they were depicted to seek greener pastures, but in McMillan's novel, they were portrayed to be economically independent. All the female characters realise that it is better to live with their male counterparts than living alone. This foregrounds the womanist tenet of male complementariness. It is shown that a collaboration among family members is the only panacea to societal ills and that motherhood must be cherished by women; as it is not seen as a burden. However, parents must collectively raise their children to achieve a balanced physical and psychological worldview. Both novels are stuffed with relevant womanist doctrines. Therefore, Womanism is a quintessential theoretical tool for expressing women's plight and exploits in African and African American novels.

**Keywords:** Womanism, Female bonding, Family centredness, Gender complementariness, Motherhood.

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### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1 Background to the study

In spite of African and African American women's contributions to their respective societies, they are not given the credit they deserve, and they are often victims of oppression in its various manifestations: exploitation, discrimination and general social prejudice. Where women occupy prestigious positions or have gained significant autonomy, they have had to struggle much harder than the men in order to move from inferior positions or gain independence.

Feminism is a theory of female legal power which introduces tension across gender lines due to its promotion of equality between the sexes. Bardwick (1980) defines feminism as "an implicit rejection

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of the style created by strongly coercive norms that define and restrict what women are and can do" (5). Selden and Widdowson (1976) anchor on the fact that feminism "identifies ways in which women are disadvantaged and seek ways of giving them self-worth" (295). Also, Dinshaw (2007) says modern feminism is associated with "social movement for the advancement of women in Western Europe and the United State of America in the eighteen Century and based on the principles of equality and emancipation in secular societies (11). However, *The Second Sex* (1976) by Beauvoir provides the yardstick and pattern for serious wave of feminism in the 20th Century where she avers patriarchy as the source of women's oppression. She further views marriage and motherhood as factors that hinder women from achieving their aspirations in life. She encourages lesbianism which some critics such as Charlotte, Brunch and Adrienne Rich endorse as being radical in nature. Millet (1966) in *Sexual Politics* agrees with Beauvoir's acceptance of lesbianism.

However, the western view of feminism is universal in outlook, but with a false impression that women, irrespective of their colour, are carried along. As a result of cultural differences between Western and African American women, womanism emerges as a yardstick for guiding the interpretation, evaluation and analyses of African women's writings and problems. Walker (1983) realises that African and other third-world countries are not included in Western style feminism. Hence, Ogunyemi (1985) asserts;

Womanism is black centered; it is an accommodation. It believes in the freedom and independence of women like radical, but unlike radical feminism, it wants meaningful union between black women and black men and black children and will see to it that men begin to change from their sexist stand (63).

Many great African and African American writers, such as Chinua Achebe, Elechi Amadi, Ngugi wa Thiong'O, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, Chika Unigwe, Chimamanda Adichie, Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, Alice Walker, Terry Macmillan, among many others, openly voice their indebtedness to the great stories of their lands. The disturbing question is that if the African and African American women have been a channel through which societal norms and values, myths, legends and historical facts are passed down from one generation to the other, why is she misrepresented and dehumanised by the phallic writers who were formerly part of her audience at the story-telling session.

Female writers have always struggled for their rights through their writings. As a quest to fight for good placement and question the patriarchal dominated theories, feminism and its other variants sprang up. One of such is Womanism which Walker (1983) propounded as a term to separate western feminism and black feminism. Ezeigbo (2012) argues that womanism is a coinage used to describe the feminist engagement of black women or women of colour as opposed to feminism used by white women. Due to misrepresentations of women, social feminism and womanism investigate literary works from a different angle. Since written literature was initially controlled and produced by men, social feminists and womanists recover the written works of women to deconstruct sexual oppression, denial of women to basic rights of life, misrepresentation of women, as well as other things detrimental to women.

## 1.2 Statement of the research problem

The novels of Unigwe and McMillan are replete with womanist tenets. However, most of the existing studies on these novels share common methods and approaches to literary valuation. They have mostly looked at the images of African women by single authors or a couple of authors who belong to the same period. Some have also focused on either male or female authors. In this type of quest, one cannot but notice a certain research gap. A comparative analysis of womanist tenets in African and African American novels is therefore pertinent. Hence, this paper applies the womanist critical approach to investigate two purposively selected African and African American novels with a view to isolating and critiquing the womanist tenets in them. These texts are Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009) and McMillan's *Disappearing Acts* (1989).

## 1.3 Aim and objectives of the study

The aim of this study is to investigate the employment of womanist tenets in Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Terry McMillan's *Disappearing Acts*. The specific objectives of the study are:

- i. To examine how female characters are depicted in the selected novels from the perspective of Womanism.
- ii. To critique the images and roles ascribed to women characters in the novels showcasing womanist tenets.

#### 1.4 Research questions

- i. How do the selected writers depict female characters in their novels using the tenets of Womanism?
- ii. What are the images and roles exhibited by women characters to reveal womanist tenets in the selected novels?

#### 1.5 Methodology

This study is basically comparative, critical descriptive and analytical. In this process, two selected African and African American novels are critically analysed by extracting instances of the tenets of womanism in them. Secondary texts are used to aid the analyses of the primary texts, with a view to making the textual scrutiny robust. Library research method, content analysis and internet materials are also employed in interpreting the selected texts.

#### 1.6 Theoretical framework

Womanism is used as the theoretical framework of this study. The term *Womanism* was coined by Alice Walker, an African-American novelist, poet and feminist. In her book, *In Search of our Mothers' Garden* (1983), Walker draws a line between the West and the Black Feminist movements. In her definition, she eulogises black feminists or feminists of colour, who believe in the unity between black men and women as against the Western separatists who do not subscribe to complementarity between male and female. The womanist ideology also lays emphasis on sharing and caring (Okonjo-Ogunyemi, 1988). Both Walker and Okonjo-Ogunyemi seek to project the needs of the Black Woman within the context of patriarchal, colonial and post-colonial experiences. Okonjo-Ogunyemi (1998) believes that the ultimate aim of womanism is the unity of blacks anywhere; she stresses that a womanist is committed to the core and loves struggling for survival of both sexes in society. Hudson-Weems (1993) avers that, like black feminism, womanism strays away from the white patriarchal values posed by feminism. The major aim of womanism is to aid in bringing to light the independence and authenticity of the African race.

Joyce Ladner, quoted in Humm (1994), notes that "black women do not perceive their enemy to be black men, but rather the enemy is considered to be the oppressive forces in the larger society which subjugates black men, women and children" (52). Ntiri (2001) opines that "men and women must work together to make the world a better place" (174), while Yaa Asantewaa (2001) is of the opinion that "without the male, African-American women lack the means to create a structured family" (529). Womanism embraces the concept of a "collective struggle"; A womanist also values one of her most important connections in life; it is genuine sisterhood. Toni Morrison (1992) states that "women who stop the promotion of other women and other women must come to their aids" (137). Women should, therefore, support their fellow female from all forms of oppression. Womanists team up with men to find the ultimate panacea for racial oppression.

African women have a unique place in the history of image changes. Traditionally, they were well esteemed as the givers of life, the carriers of life and queen mothers, but as colonialism came into the picture, the image of the African woman started dwindling. African American women started with hundreds of years of enslavement, oppression, coupled with the separation of their families and forced labour among men and women. The images of the African-American women varied from being a worker, a mother with torn-apart families which destroyed them physically, emotionally and psychologically, that pain became a reality they had to live with. This was seen during slavery. After the abolition of slavery, another image of the African American woman emerged as they found it difficult to gain employment; they also experienced lack of quality education, poor transportation and unpleasant work environment. Due to these problems, traditional patriarchal household arrangement broke down. In this vein, socio-economic problems brought about a change in the image of women. After some time, African Americans were given access to quality education, and women took advantage of that.

This opened up their level of awareness to their civil rights, and they joined political groups. On the part of the African American men, going to school was not a priority. Therefore, they sought illegal employment in drug markets (Collins. 2000). As a result of this, they fell under the control of criminal justice system. This brought about another changing image of African American women as the issue of single mothers increased. These women automatically assumed their traditional roles as mothers and caregivers, as well as their absent husbands' role within the family. The idea of extended family which they inherited from Africa started collapsing at this point due to economic pressure. African American women were saddled with the responsibilities of single-handedly raising their families. This brought about another image of strong black women and weak faceless men.

An exploration of the changing images and womanist tenets in African and African American women will contribute new knowledge to how these women are viewed and will give a better understanding in knowing who they are and their standpoints. Health-wise, this would help to improve the mental state of women, thereby enhancing a lot of coping strategies with adaptive methods which can be passed down. A new orientation that images of women can change at any time due to unique experiences will be formed; therefore, adaptive methods are dynamic.

In Africa today, it is seen that a lot of women are raising their children singlehandedly, and the issue of female-headed homes are on the increase. The thing that makes womanism different from other variants of feminism is the much attention on African American female. Sotunsa (2008) believes that three things are central in distinguishing feminism from womanism. They are racial, sexist and classicist issues. Similarly, womanism focuses on family relationship, the importance of motherhood and sisterhood. For Christian (1985), the concept of motherhood "is of central importance in both the philosophy of African American peoples... It is related to the historical process with its intertwining of tradition, enslavement and the struggle for their people's freedom." (8)

Womanism preaches open-arm accommodation to all. This makes the male to be welcomed and appreciated. Hudson-Weems (1993) opines that the African womanist welcomes male presence and participation in her struggle; moreover, the African womanist desires positive male companionship" (8). In this vein, womanism promotes, among other things, self-naming and defining, family as the centre of life, sisterhood, healthy and positive male and female relationship. It gives women a vintage point and platform to discuss issues about their lives in their own way and explore the positive qualities of women who she describes as the "very foundation of life whether they know it or not" (Hudson-Weems, 2007:66)

### 1.7 Significance of the study

It is believed that this study will provide useful information to different bodies in society about the different images of the woman and what brings about these different images as they evolve. The different institutions investigating the behavioural pattern of the present-day woman will need to understand the reasons for her present behaviour. This will most likely foster a better marital relationship among the Africans and African Americans. Their marriages will be able to showcase a more healthy relationship and reduce the divorce rate which is becoming rampant and detrimental to the society. The study will certainly extend the existing frontiers of knowledge in contemporary African and African American novels.

### 1.8 Scope of the study

This study examines the womanist tenets deployed in two purposively selected African and African American novels (Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Terry McMillan's *Disappearing Acts*). Relevant extracts are selected from the novels and analysed, using womanism as theoretical framework. The selected writers offer a quintessential template for assessing the tenets of womanism in their texts. This promotes complimentary roles of male and female in the society and the families, which are essential tools for societal regeneration and cohesion.

## 2. Womanism and Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*

Female writing in Nigeria started with Flora Nwapa, as the first Nigerian female novelist with published works. According to Mojola (1998), Nwapa's works were specifically on "her commitment to the cause of women and their freedom from practices and beliefs" (18). Shortly after Nwapa, Nigerian



female writers at home and in the diaspora emerged, including Buchi Emecheta, Ifeoma Okoye, Zainab Alkali and the like. Their writings challenge existing patriarchal modes. Chukwuana (2000) observes that their writings "address the subjugating position of women in the marriage institution and the attendant problems" (26) such as woman's right to choose a marriage mate and not to have one forced on her, childlessness, marital infidelity and economic independence. In Mary Kolawole's (2000) view, these emerging female writers are "presenting and representing their gender" (26). The issue of representing women in the light of their various challenges in different spheres of life is what is seen in Chika Unigwe's writings. Like the earlier generations of Nigerian writers, Chika Unigwe deals with modern women and their challenges, such as economic dependence, childlessness, drug addiction, polygamy, lesbianism, homosexuality and forced marriages they encounter, as well as marital infidelity. Manama Ba's, *So Long a Letter* (1981), through female characters, provides answers to the above challenges.

Unigwe in her narrative moves her story-line beyond depicting issues pertaining to denial of opportunities for the girl-child and the economic exploitation of the female gender to contemporary issues that reflect and refract living in the twenty-first century. She depicts that times and issues are changing through topical themes such as susceptibility of women to HIV/AIDS, challenges of couples in same sex marriages, women's right to casual sex, abortion, fertility treatments, artificial reproduction and alternative prostitutions in advanced dimension. Nigerian ladies are taken to different parts of the world for prostitution. These showcase the changes in the country and the world at large.

Unigwe in *On Black Sisters' Street* equally emulates the pattern of many female writers who highlights the challenges women face in playing different roles, as well as contending with as a result of the economic and political situations in the country. In this novel, Unigwe reorders the traditional notions of marriage, family, motherhood, quest for materialism, decadence in the society, as well as other contemporary issues. Sisi reveals that love is not a necessity for marriage as she says "she had given up on as a prerequisite for marriage" (30). Also, Efe at the age of sixteen started having sex with Titus who was forty years old. She engages in this because she has to take care of her siblings after the demise of her mother. She says; "if Titus was what she had to endure to get the things she wanted, then, so be it. Efe says "Dat one na small price to pay" (58). Tenets of womanism such as sisterhood are seen in the text. Efe's sister supports her during pregnancy, as well as when she travels out of the country by taking care of her son Lucky Ikponwosa. Efe recalls, "in fact, in the thirteen years Efe will be abroad Rita would become such a mother to L.I (85). Also, the three African women (Joyce, Ema and Efe) team up with a sisterhood spirit to fight their oppressor after the death of Sisi.

Sisi reflects the postmodern tendency in her by questioning tradition, saying "Peter had nothing to offer me. Maybe after she had made her money and if Peter was still available, she will marry him... one could buy anything, an attentive husband included" (118). Traditionally, the man provides and marries a woman and not the other way round. However, in Sisi's postmodern world, she prostitutes to make money and wants to marry Peter or even buy an attentive husband.

Womanism, as a theory, is postmodern in nature. It emanated as a result of rejection of some aspects of feminism. Due to contact with the global world, through the social media, multiculturalism, education and the like, changes in different aspects of the human race are evolving. It embraces vivid presentation of what is happening around the world at this present dispensation. Therefore, the expression of sexual descriptions, such as lesbianism, homosexuality, incest and any relationship must not be pretended about because they are happening right among people. Therefore, they are motifs in womanist narratives.

In a tenet of womanism, the ideal of existentialism is frowned upon, but living a communal lifestyle is preached. In this vein, Unigwe, after the expression of Woolf (1989), presents the fact that financial and economic independence of women is not enough or sufficient for her emancipation because they do not have "a room of their own" (6). The four female protagonists in *On Black Sisters' Street* are aiming at becoming financially independent, but in their quests, they desire to get married and have individual families of their own. Sisi proclaims thus;

...instead she tried to crowd her head with visions of a future where she would have earned enough to buy herself a good man who would father her children (172)

From the above expression from Sisi, no matter the wealth she makes, her husband (the male figure) is necessary in her life. In Joyce's expression, she declares that "her desire is to settle with a man.. .I thought I would marry, give my parents grandchildren, work in the government hospital" (243)

The issue of man-hating is at the apex of radical feminism, but womanism is immersed in female's struggle for emancipation and self-discovery, but as Kolawole (1997) explains, "it emphasises the impact of the collective values and not individuality" (203). Unigwe further portrays Efe as someone who has given birth to a child, whose father refuses to identify with him. Yet, she still desires to have a relationship and hopes that the relationship culminates into marriage;

She hoped she had given enough hints that she was available but not loose, the sort of girl he could have an affair with but treat with respect at the same time. And if she played her cards right even marry (80)

The centrality of the family as the primary source of life is at the heart of womanism. Kolawole (1997) further reiterates that womanism sees "cohesion of the family as the stability of life and society because Womanism sees the family as a step in the right direction toward ending every form of societal ills" (197). From the foregoing, Unigwe's female protagonists are not men haters. This is one of the strong points of womanism; womanists try to bring their men to a point of compromise, acceptance and harmonious living in order to build a formidable society and a good legacy for posterity. Titus's wife exemplifies this tendency thus:

None would share the money she had waited so patiently and so good humouredly for Titus to make. It was her right and her children's legacy, and so she guarded it jealously (74)

There seems to be a radical change in their approach about marriage, career and motherhood. Castle (2007) suggests that "there is an epistemological shift in the way we know and view the world." (144). In *On Black Sisters' Street*, Unigwe admonishes women to embrace their career as well as their marriages. It can also be part of the direct or indirect changes or demands of the postmodern era. Kehinde (2001) argues that; "it may not mean an overstatement to state that some of the female writers are reactionaries. That is, they write totally in rejection of the image projected by male writers" (107). At this rate, Unigwe's protagonists are only trying to cope with what they have no influence over than to cope with it, but there is a longing to get married as Joyce maintains in *On Black Sisters' Street*:

..she told them how often she thought of marriage these days.

Of being a mother and a wife. (199)

Sisterhood is another articulation of womanism. It is a belief that coming together helps in achieving missions greatly. It is equally in line with the African concept of communal living. As a result of this, Audre Lorde, in Kolawole (1997), says:

the masters tool will never demolish the masters house. This shows two major trends in 'African women's polemics - they are not only criticizing Western hegemonic methods, they are formulating new definitions and worldview. To this end, the ultimate is on enhancing cultural identity, even as they reject the image of Black women as victims (99)

Walker, in her classic *In Search of Our Mother's Garden: A womanist Prose* (1983), counsels women to appreciate and prefer women's culture. This is a clear cultural delineation which is important in creating women's self-definition. Unigwe, in *On Black Sisters' Street*, captures this succinctly when her four female protagonists are lured to Belgium. They are always at logger heads. They refuse to focus on their common enemies, Dele and Madam (their tool of oppression), who perpetually keep them in bondage. Dele, Madam and Segun are their weapons of torment as Dele constantly threatens "no try cross me o. Nobody dey cross Senghor Dele" (217). Sisi crosses Senghor Dele's path as she "filled in a Western Union money transfer form and sent three hundred euros to her parents" (285). She refuses to pay Dele's dues; she laments, "and Dele Oh well, Dele has more than enough girls working for him; he doesn't need me" (283). This earns her a permanent state of silence (death). Sisi confirms prophetically:

Yes' again and said to the room as if she was addressing a Sisi that was separate from her, "Tomorrow, it will be all over. Tomorrow, you shall be dead (273)

After the death of Sisi, in their state of their mourning, they open up on their past by telling how and why they find themselves in Belgium. They equally decide to collectively seek help; hence, Ama declares:

Now we are sister'. ...she knew that they would be friends forever... their conviction gives them some relief (290)

After ascertaining the fact that they are sisters, they collectively decide to fight their common enemies by asking of what steps they need to take. In the midst of their dilemma on the death of one of their sisters, Madam tells them "Tomorrow, I want all of you back at work. I have to find a replacement" (289). In rebellion against this enemy, Joyce replies:

We're human beings! Why should we take it? Sisi is dead and all Madam can think about is business" Doesn't Sisi deserve respect from her? What are we doing? Why should she treat us any old how and we just take it like dogs? (289)

From the above, there is an agitation for change from an oppressor; they are conscientised to rebel against their oppressor. The beauty of sisterhood is candidly reflected. The use of pronouns 'we' and 'us', from the above questions, shows a mode for change is put in gear as they collectively look for a solution Ama asks:

What do you suggest we do? Ama asks,... we fit go to de police Efe answer... we are not happy here. None of us is, we work hard to make someone else rich. Madam treats us like animals. Why are we doing this? But I want to make sure that Madam and Dele get punished (290)

As the three female protagonists reach this consensus, there is a resolution. This is after the proverbial saying "in unity we stand". Unanimously, women can come together to collectively achieve success against any opposition. This is one of the basic tenets of womanism.

### 3. Towards a womanist reading of McMillan's disappearing acts

Literature portrays many things about a writer and the society which he or she mirrors. Probably that is the reason why Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1972) describes a writer as a "kind of sensitive needle" (47) The novel examined in this section is that of an African American female writer, with an intention to isolate and critique the womanist tenets in the work. Terry McMillan is recognised as one of the prominent innovative forces in contemporary African American female fiction. For her first novel, *Mama* (1987), she has garnered attention to herself. She often depicts the lives of economically successful African American women. Her focus on love and sexual relationships, her urban characters and her depictions of true friendship among women have won her a wide audience. By the time she published *Disappearing Acts* (1989), she earned her reputation as an innovative new voice of middle-class African American. *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) earned her a prediction of a potential contemporary writer coming true. *How Stella got her Groove Back* (1996) became an instant success and was adapted for film. Others are: *A Day Late and a Dollar Short* (2001) and *The Interruption of Everything* (2005).

In *Disappearing Acts* (1989), McMillan features the relationship between Zora Banks, a junior high school music teacher who aspires to become a singer and Franklin Swift, a high school dropout, who works intermittently at the construction site. The different backgrounds become the greatest challenge to the relationship. Zora Banks is in search of an eligible African American man.

I like a clean tall smart, honest, sensuous, spontaneous, energetic, aggressive man with white teeth who smells good and reads a good book every now and then, who votes and wants to make contributions to the world (18)

From the above, McMillan tries to depict African American women as being in quest of a pursuit of the survival of an entire race (male and female). This is responsible for a relationship with their fellow African American men, which is a womanist tenet. This tradition, according to Lehodziec (2009), embodies the genius originality and particular concerns of black female writers (38).

A notable instance of the reflections of womanism in McMillan's *Disappearing Acts* is appreciation of sisterhood. This is in line with a tenet of womanism. African Americans are highly communal in nature. Therefore, the issues of the family, community and sisterhood are very keen in McMillan's novels. As Hudson-Weems (2007) expresses in her definition of womanism; it promotes, among other things, self-naming and defining, family as the centre of life, sisterhood, healthy and positive male and female relationships. It gives women a good vantage point to discuss issues about their lives in their own way and explore the positive qualities of women whom she describes as the "very foundation of life whether they know it or not" (66). In *Disappearing Acts*, Zora comments about a collective wholeness thus:

As it stands, I don't most of my singing in the shower. I get clean and let out pain at the same time-watch it go down the drain. And not just my pain but everybody else's that I've known who's ever felt or known hurt. And there are millions of us. (23)

*Disappearing Acts* centres on four strong intelligent African American women. The protagonist, Zora Banks, is a music teacher who aspires to become a singer. Claudette is a lawyer. Most of the women Franklin had relationship with before Zora Banks are all professionals. Gloria works at the Welfare Department; Theresa works as a banker, Pamela is an aspiring Secretary. This is an emerging image of African American women who belonged to the low social hierarchy in American society before now. However, McMillan's writing portrays African American women in the middle-class communities.

Female bonding means that all women are seen as a class oppressed by a common enemy (man). This bonding is pinned on the deep sympathy women have for one another. From the African American female's standpoint, the community has been oppressed and alienated, for this reason, women forcefully attain their goal through female bonding in life and fiction. African Americans have a common history of subordination and repression and have developed a tradition of female bonding, which empowers women. Fox-Genovese (1994) supports this assertion: "female bonding is the female model which has to replace the male model of individualism, men have wreaked havoc out of domination, but women with their politics of partnership will bring a renewed commitment of life" (12). Giving a voice of female bonding is DeVaux (1983) in Claudia Tate who says "I see greater commitment among black women writers to understand self, multiplied in terms of community, the community, multiplied in terms of the world" (223). This is also one of the reflections of womanism in *Disappearing Acts*.

Zora wants to hide her pregnancy from her friends, Portia, Marie and Claudette, but she thinks: "I know it was stupid of me to invite Portia and Marie too, but I wanted them all here. I had to tell somebody. And I can't keep this to myself. Not this time" (144). After this meeting with her friend, she decides to go for an abortion, and her friends contribute money for them to support her financially and physically. Female-bonding involves identifying with one another. Female bonding in McMillan's *Disappearing Acts* goes further when Zora Banks unravels her mind to her female friends. She tells her friends that she has been pretending that her relationship with Franklin is hitch free. Zora says:

Up to now, I've done a pretty good job of dealing with things. Faking it is what I've really been doing. Pretending that nothing is wrong. That Franklin's being married hasn't bothered me. That his being out of work hasn't bothered me. That his not having a formal education hasn't bothered me. But it's getting too hard, this acting. I'm scared of what the outcome of everything will be. Me and him (213)

From the above, Zora trusts her friends more than Franklin, her boyfriend. She cannot disclose her feelings to him but confidently reveals her thought to her friend. This is female bonding that Alice Walker (1983) proclaims as "... appreciates and prefers women culture, a woman who loves other women" (18).

McMillan concentrates fully on the bonds between women, their intimacy and how their friendship enriches one another. Portia counsels Zora that "to wait too long" personally, I wouldn't wait that long" (148). Claudette uses that opportunity to relay her experience with her husband, Allen, when she has to do the job and pay all the bills when he is getting his education. She explains further: "I was making all the money, paying all the bills - while he studied ... it is called commitment. And don't think that Allen and I are always lovey-dovey. Honey, we argue, scream, slam doors... You've got to take the bitter and the sweet" (149). Such an expression is an eye-opener to Zora for her to know that she is not the only one in this kind of situation. This has a cushioning effect on Zora. In *Disappearing Acts*, Zora sees it as an obligation to confide in her friends. Portia tells Zora the truth about how she feels about Zora's relationship with Franklin when they are eating dinner. Portia laments thus:

You need to check yourself girlfriend. Your whole world is starting to revolve around this man. don't nobody see you anymore, "sure Zora." You even starting to fool yourself. You better be careful, or you gon' start disappearing a little bit at a time, and before you know it, you gon' be just like them damn step rod wives. Won't even remember who Zora Banks was (217)

Zora later realises that Portia's verdict on Franklin comes out true. At this point, she has no choice than to reveal some of his deficiencies. This portrays a rich and intimate relationship. In *Disappearing Acts*, Zora suddenly realises that her feeling of love and affection for Franklin disappears



when a stronger feeling of racism, sexism and unfulfilled role expectations is exhibited by him. A true feeling of openness and trust ensues when she is around her friends. Finally, female bonding in *Disappearing Acts* is portrayed as a healthy relationship which helps women to move in the right direction. It offers the women a sense of peace, intimacy, fulfilment and healing. It alleviates their mental trauma while equipping them to make constructive contribution to their environment.

Womanism celebrates motherhood. This is well enunciated in McMillan's *Disappearing Acts*. Zora tells of how her mother has died and Marguerite, her stepmother plays the role of a mother perfectly. Zora confirms that she tries to be a good mother:

my real mama died in a car accidents when I three years old, which was how I got stuck with Marguerite as a replacement. Not that she has not been a nice stepmother, she did teach me how to cook, how to shave my armpits and legs and told me when to douche (22).

McMillan uses her four female characters in *Disappearing Acts* to question the impression of radical feminists on the issue of motherhood. They see motherhood as an inhibiting experience for women and it reinforces patriarchy where men's domination over women becomes well enhanced. Deckard (1979), quoted by Sha Pam (2004) posits that; "The revolutionary force in question reside with women, and for a new society to emerge, women must be freed from the tyranny of their reproductive biology" (5). This is one of the points of divergence. Although McMillan is a product of the Western world, she embraces the concept of womanism on the issue of motherhood. Walker (1983) observes that both feminism and womanism are as similar as they are divergent, or as she puts it "as purple is to lavender" (12). Kolawole (1997) therefore sums up the ideology of motherhood thus:

African woman cherishes her role as a homemaker, as well as her status as a mother or potential mother. She does not necessarily see these roles as liabilities (31)

From the above, McMillan in *Disappearing Acts* uses Claudette to express the point that African American women cherish their roles as mothers and explore the positive qualities that come with being a woman and mother. Claudette gets pregnant of her second child and happily tells her friends about it, thus; "Guess who's pregnant?" (84). Marie responds like a radical feminist harshly thus; "cause I don't like 'em,' that's why. They get on my nerves, I don't have the patience"(84) This is a radical feminist voice. However, Claudette who speaks from the womanist perspective gives her view about motherhood thus:

"They are a lot of fun, "Claudette said." Anybody '11 get on your nerves when you see them three hundred and sixty-five days a year. True, kids are definitely a lot of work, but they're worth it. It does make things a hell helluva lot easier when you've got a husband that helps you (84-85)

However, the notion of getting married comes before having children because it guarantees commitment. The security of having a father to raise a child is paramount in McMillan's protagonist Zora Banks. Yaa Asatewaa (2001) supports this assertion when he avers thus: "without the male, African American women lack the means to create a structured family (174). A collective upbringing of the children to him is the "ultimate panacea for racial oppression"(174) This ideology drives Zora when she gets pregnant by Franklin Swift; she opts for an abortion as she explains:

Lots of women are having babies these days without being married, but I never imagined myself giving birth without having a husband to go along with (144)

This expression is in concordance with Claudette's standpoint. Portia equally reiterates this point further thus: "I wouldn't have nobody's baby without a diamond on my finger" (147). From the above, McMillan uses it as a corrective tool to stop the stereotype of having faceless father image in African American family. If the couple are married before child-bearing, they will collectively produce a physical and psychologically balanced offspring and to a large extent, void of becoming a menace to the society. When Zora and Franklin visit his family during the thanksgiving period, Zora establishes a similar point when Darlene, Franklin's sister, tells Zora: "You and Franklin could make some pretty babies"(167) Zora replies thus; "so it'll be some time before we start thinking about babies. Besides, marriage comes first" (167). From this assertion, Kolawole (1997) advocates: "Womanism does not see motherhood as a burden to be disposed of at any slightest opportunity rather, what it is against is the manipulation of such traits to hold women down" (197). McMillan succinctly corroborates this standpoint when Zora Banks aborts her pregnancy because she is not yet married to Franklin Swift.

Although she feels psychologically traumatised, she tries to express that motherhood is not supposed to be a burden but an enhancement of the women's strength in a positive and wholesome way.

The centrality of the family as the primary source of life is at the heart of womanism. Ndibe, m Kolawole (1997), points out that, "made-in-the west feminism appears to have declared war against the family" (198), but womanism sees the cohesion of the family as the stability of life and society. Similarly, Hudson-Weems (1993) sheds her view: "the major aim of womanism is to aid in winging to light the independence and authenticity of the African race (14). The present downplay of the family will erode this ultimate goal. Invariably, single motherhood and faceless father image are responsible for the high crime rate, drug use, alcoholism, suicide and many pervasions seen in society today. McMillan shows that the family is important in molding of life and leaving a worthy legacy for posterity through her character, Zora Banks. She visits Franklin Swift's parents thanksgiving. Franklin tries to discourage Zora, but she rebukes his negative expressions about family thus:

Franklin, you shouldn't feel that way about your own sister... Franklin, you can be so cruel sometimes, you know that? I mean, she's your sister, not some stranger. (117)

Anally, when Franklin decides to take Zora home to meet his family during the thanksgiving, he is Zora ahead, but she further corrects Franklin to talk positively about his family in the Following:

So, I'll finally get to meet the whole clan huh?" I guess so. But don't go getting all excited. You'll probably wish you never had" What a nice thing to say about your family (117)

In the midst of the preparation of food, Zora, enjoying herself, opines: "You know, you guys make a handsome family"(166). Franklin and Zora visit her family, and Franklin realises that her family is really warm and comfortable, he concludes that;" it was the best Christmas I've had in a long time" he said" in a long, long time. Thank you baby"(197). Franklin even appreciates Zora's father because, he discusses with him as a son. Franklin sums it up thus:

A lotta things, we had a real good man-to-man talk, something I been hoping to do with my own pops, but this was the next-best thing (197).

#### 4.0 Conclusion

The tenets of womanism, such as sister bonding, motherhood, centrality of the family and gender complementary, are adherently utilised by Unigwe in *On Black Sister^ Street* and McMillan in *Disappearing Acts*.

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