GYNOCRITICISM AND SEXUAL REVOLUTION IN MONA ELTAHAWY'S HEADSCARVES AND HYMENS AND KOPANO MALTWA'S PERIOD PAIN

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Abstract

This study examines the representation of female sexuality, bodily autonomy, and resistance in Mona Eltahawy's *Headscarves and Hymens* and Kopano Matlwa's *Period Pain*. It positions these works within the framework of gynocriticism and the sexual revolution, with resonance to Nigerian feminist concerns about gender, culture, and postcoloniality. The study investigates how both authors challenge patriarchal constraints, religious orthodoxy, and socio-cultural norms. It explores how these factors regulate women's bodies and sexual agency in African and Middle Eastern contexts, mirroring Nigerian struggles against gendered violence and colonial legacies. The study draws on Elaine Showalter's gynocriticism, Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectional feminism, and postcolonial feminist perspectives to analyse how these texts construct female-centred narratives that subvert dominant gender ideologies. It further aligns these frameworks with Nigerian calls for culturally specific agency. A qualitative textual analysis is employed to explore the language, themes, and characterisation that articulate women's struggles for self-definition and liberation. Findings reveal that both texts serve as feminist interventions that reclaim the female body as a site of resistance by advocating for sexual autonomy and gender equality. Thus, it addresses Nigerian feminist priorities of bodily integrity and cultural reclamation. This research contributes to feminist literary discourse by demonstrating how literature functions as a platform for challenging and reshaping gendered power structures.

Keywords: Gynocriticism, Sexual Revolution, Intersectionality, Postcolonial Feminism, Women's Writing, Patriarchal Norms

Introduction

Feminist literary criticism serves as a vital framework for interrogating the patriarchal structures embedded within literary narratives. It foregrounds women's experiences and voices that have long been side-lined in traditional literary discourse. This critical approach gains salience in African and Middle Eastern contexts, where gender oppression intersects with the legacies of colonialism, cultural imperialism, and religious orthodoxy. These intersections demand a conscientious analysis that accounts for both the universal dimensions of patriarchal control and the specificities of local cultural and historical conditions. In this regard, Mona Eltahawy's *Headscarves and Hymens: Why the Middle East Needs a Sexual Revolution* and Kopano Matlwa's *Period Pain* emerge as significant texts that challenge gendered power dynamics. Through gynocriticism and the concept of sexual revolution, both works present feminist interventions rooted in their respective Middle Eastern and South African contexts.

Eltahawy's *Headscarves and Hymens* critiques the systemic subjugation of women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). She argues that practices such as veiling, honour killings, and female genital mutilation function as mechanisms of patriarchal domination rather than expressions of cultural or religious identity (Eltahawy 45). To restore women's bodily autonomy, her work advocates for a sexual revolution. This places her critique within a larger postcolonial feminist discourse that opposes both Western feminist universalism and regional patriarchal traditions. Similarly, Matlwa's *Period Pain* examines the intersectional struggles of women in post-apartheid South Africa. The novel addresses menstrual health, gender-based violence, and racial

inequality through the experiences of Masechaba, a trainee doctor managing a fractured healthcare system (Matlwa 102). Matlwa's narrative draws attention to the enduring effects of colonial and apartheid legacies on South African society. This aligns with postcolonial feminist efforts to address the compounded oppressions faced by African women.

This study employs Elaine Showalter's gynocriticism, which emphasises the distinctiveness of women's writing as a literary tradition that subverts male-centric norms (Showalter 11). Showalter's framework, articulated in *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, provides a foundation for analysing how Eltahawy and Matlwa center female experiences to challenge patriarchal ideologies. Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, which was first presented in "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Colour," supports this strategy. It sheds light on how the oppression portrayed in these texts is shaped by the intersecting axes of gender, race, and class (Crenshaw 1244). Furthermore, Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí's *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, which exemplifies postcolonial feminist theory, criticises the imposition of Western gender constructs on African societies. It provides a culturally specific viewpoint that connects with Matlwa's South African context and informs Eltahawy's antagonism to homogenised feminist narratives (Oyěwùmí 10).

The analysis is further enriched by Nigerian feminist scholarship, which provides a regionally relevant framework for interpreting these works. Mary Kolawole's *Womanism and African Consciousness* advocates for a womanist approach that prioritises African women's agency and cultural contexts, distinct from Western feminist paradigms (Kolawole 24). This perspective aligns with the gynocritical focus on women's voices and enhances the study's relevance to Nigerian

academic discourse. Similarly, Chioma Opara's "A House Integrated: Reflections on the Nuances of African Feminism" calls for an integrated feminist approach that bridges local specificities with global feminist concerns. This offers a lens to examine the universal yet context-specific nature of Eltahawy and Matlwa's critiques (Opara 15). Oyěwùmí's work further questions the universality of Western gender categories, asserting that pre-colonial Yoruba society structured social roles based on seniority rather than biological sex. This critique parallels the culturally specific resistance depicted in both primary texts, which challenge imposed gender norms within their respective contexts (Oyěwùmí 31).

This paper argues that *Headscarves and Hymens,* and *Period Pain* function as feminist literary interventions that reclaim the female body as a site of resistance. They promote sexual autonomy and gender equality while confronting intersectional oppressions. Through qualitative textual analysis, the study examines how these works amplify women's voices, challenge gendered power structures, and contribute to feminist literary discourse. The research conveys the writings' global impact by bridging the cultural contexts of South Africa and the MENA region with Nigerian scholastic traditions through the incorporation of Nigerian feminist perspectives. This approach not only deepens the understanding of Eltahawy and Matlwa's contributions but also positions their works within a broader feminist framework that speaks to the complexities of gender in postcolonial societies.

Literature Review

In feminist literature, the idea of sexual revolution expands on gynocriticism by addressing the reclaiming of women's sexuality and physical autonomy as acts of resistance. Barbara Smith's essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" emphasises how Black women writers use literature to challenge sexual oppression. She argues that "a Black feminist approach to literature would insist that the personal and

political dimensions of Black women's lives are inextricably linked to their creative expression" (Smith 168). This perspective aligns with Eltahawy's call for a sexual revolution in the Middle East, where she critiques practices like veiling as tools of control rather than choice (Eltahawy 45). Similarly, Nigerian scholar Chioma Opara, in *A House Integrated: Reflections on the Nuances of African Feminism*, contends that African feminist literature reimagines the female body as a site of agency. She asserts, "The African woman's body, once a colonial commodity, is reclaimed in literature as a symbol of resilience and defiance against multiple oppressions" (Opara 15). Opara's work, rooted in Nigerian literary traditions, connects Matlwa's depiction of menstrual health and violence to broader African feminist concerns. She emphasizes the need to address culturally specific gender oppressions, aligning with Smith's focus on the intersection of personal and political experiences.

Previous studies on *Headscarves and Hymens* and *Period Pain* offer valuable insights but also reveal gaps that this paper seeks to address through a comparative gynocritical lens. Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (1992) traces the transformation of gender roles in Islamic societies from pre-Islamic Arabia to the modern era. She examines how colonial encounters shaped modern discussions about gender and Islam by influencing customs like veiling. Ahmed critiques contemporary feminist interpretations, including Eltahawy's (Ahmed 224). This historical contextualisation deepens postcolonial feminist discourse by framing veiling within a broader power dynamic, aligning with Eltahawy's critique of Middle Eastern patriarchy (*Headscarves and Hymens* 45). However, it favours historical study over textual engagement and ignores the gynocritical aspect of Eltahawy's work as a literary act of resistance. Pumla Dineo Gqola's article "How the 'Cult of Femininity' and Violent Masculinities Support Endemic Gender-Based Violence in

Contemporary South Africa," published in *African Identities* (2009), examines the socio-cultural roots of gender-based violence in post-apartheid South Africa, linking it to patriarchal and colonial ideologies. Gqola asserts, "The persistent violence against women in South Africa reflects a toxic interplay of patriarchal norms and colonial legacies that dehumanise Black female bodies" (Gqola 15). This intersectional analysis aligns with Matlwa's depiction of violence and racial oppression in *Period Pain* (102), emphasising the structural forces shaping her protagonist's experiences. However, it does not fully meet this paper's objectives, as it prioritises sociological critique over a gynocritical examination of Matlwa's narrative strategies, overlooking her literary voice as a feminist intervention.

A more direct engagement with *Period Pain* comes from Sarah Comyn and Porscha Fermanis's article "Rethinking Nineteenth-Century Literary Culture: Southern Settler Fiction and the Transnational Challenge," published in *Victorian Studies* (2021). Comyn and Fermanis offer a comparative analysis of *Period Pain* alongside other Southern African texts, positioning Matlwa's work within broader regional discourses on race and gender. They argue, "Matlwa's *Period Pain* exposes the intersections of race, gender, and bodily autonomy in a post-apartheid context, revealing how colonial legacies persist in shaping contemporary settler identities and violences" (Comyn and Fermanis 208). While this intersectional reading connects to Matlwa's themes, its focus on settler fiction limits its scope to historical literary culture rather than a contemporary gynocritical comparison. Similarly, Noha F. Abdel-Mottaleb's "Mona Eltahawy's *Headscarves and Hymens*: A Neo-Orientalist Discourse in Feminist Clothing," published in *Middle East Critique* (2020), critiques Eltahawy's work. She argues, "Eltahawy's narrative risks reinforcing neo-Orientalist stereotypes by framing Middle Eastern women as passive victims awaiting Western-inspired liberation, undermining their

agency in local feminist movements" (Abdel-Mottaleb 315). This postcolonial feminist critique identifies a key tension in Eltahawy's approach, particularly in framing Middle Eastern women's agency. However, it does not use a literary comparison with Matlwa, creating space for this study's integrated analysis. These works draw attention to the need for a comparative gynocritical analysis that uses intersectionality and postcolonial feminism to connect Eltahawy and Matlwa's texts. While existing research has addressed these texts individually, few studies have undertaken a comparative analysis through these combined lenses, nor have they fully engaged Nigerian feminist perspectives in such a framework. This paper positions the current study as a contribution to feminist literary criticism by addressing these gaps. It examines how *Headscarves and Hymens* and *Period Pain* advance feminist discourse through their distinct yet interconnected approaches to gender oppression.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs a multi-faceted theoretical framework rooted in feminist literary criticism, specifically drawing on gynocriticism, intersectionality, and postcolonial feminism. These approaches collectively offer a comprehensive framework for examining *Headscarves and Hymens* and *Period Pain*. They reveal how both texts challenge patriarchal norms, centre women's experiences, and engage with the intersecting oppressions of gender, race, class, and colonial legacies.

Gynocriticism, as developed by Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, positions women's writing as a distinct literary tradition that subverts male-dominated narratives. Showalter's concept of "double-voiced discourse" accentuates how women's texts weave together dominant and subversive meanings to challenge patriarchal ideologies (Showalter 11). In applying gynocriticism, this study examines how Eltahawy and

Matlwa reclaim narrative authority and foreground women's lived experiences. In *Headscarves and Hymens*, Eltahawy critiques practices such as veiling and honor killings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, amplifying the subversive voices of women silenced by patriarchal and religious norms. This analysis reveals the "muted story" beneath dominant cultural narratives, exposing hidden truths of oppression and resistance. Likewise, in *Period Pain*, Matlwa centers Masechaba, a Black South African woman, to contest the patriarchal and racialised narratives prevalent in South African literature. Through Masechaba's experiences, the novel constructs a "double-voiced discourse" of resistance against gendered and racial oppression. This framework examines the literary devices both authors use to affirm women's agency from this point of view.

Feminist literary analysis is further enhanced by the use of intersectionality, which provides insight into the intersecting oppressions that influence women's experiences. Kimberlé Crenshaw's seminal article "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color" introduces intersectionality as a tool for analysing the interplay of gender, race, and class. She asserts that "because the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism, any analysis that does not take intersectionality into account cannot sufficiently address the particular manner in which Black women are subordinated" (Crenshaw 140). This study applies intersectionality to uncover the compounded oppressions depicted in the texts. In *Period Pain*, this perspective situates Masechaba's struggles within the realities of being a Black South African woman. Her challenges, including limited healthcare access and gender-based violence, are compounded by the intersections of race, gender, and poverty in a post-apartheid society. In *Headscarves and Hymens*, intersectionality clarifies Eltahawy's critique of religious, cultural, and gendered oppressions in the MENA region. Her

discussion of veiling and female genital mutilation stresses these practices as mechanisms of control over women's bodies. Hence, this approach emphasises the characters' multifaceted problems and shows how both authors convey the interaction of oppressions in their cultural contexts.

Postcolonial feminism expands these frameworks by examining how colonial histories shape gendered oppression. This perspective is particularly relevant in African and Middle Eastern contexts, where women's writing engages with the intersecting legacies of patriarchy and colonialism. Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí's *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* critiques the application of Western gender norms to African societies. She argues, "The imposition of Western gender categories on Yoruba society transformed social organisation, subordinating women in ways that were not inherent to precolonial structures" (Oyěwùmí 10). This study uses postcolonial feminism to explore how colonial histories shape gendered power dynamics. In *Period Pain*, this framework examines how apartheid's racial and gender hierarchies continue to shape contemporary South Africa. Masechaba's experiences with healthcare disparities and violence explicate the lasting impact of colonial and apartheid systems. In *Headscarves and Hymens*, postcolonial feminism contextualises Eltahawy's resistance to both local patriarchal norms and Western feminist universalism. The postcolonial realities of the MENA region reveal how colonial histories continue to shape contemporary gender politics. Oyěwùmí's critique of colonial gender imposition draws attention to their engagement with postcolonial resistance. This perspective accentuates how both texts engage with culturally specific forms of gendered oppression, resisting universalising feminist narratives.

The integration of gynocriticism, intersectionality, and postcolonial feminism provides a comprehensive framework for

analysing *Headscarves and Hymens* and *Period Pain*. These theories engage with the gendered, racial, and colonial dimensions of the research questions, providing an extensive analytical framework. Alternative approaches, such as liberal feminism or structuralism, may not fully capture these intersecting layers of oppression and resistance. For instance, liberal feminism's emphasis on individual rights may overlook the cultural and historical specificities of the MENA region and post-apartheid South Africa. Similarly, structuralism's focus on universal patterns could obscure the intersectional complexities that shape gendered experiences in both texts. By integrating these frameworks, this study examines how Eltahawy and Matlwa challenge patriarchal norms and reclaim bodily autonomy. It attests that their works contribute to feminist literary discourse while aligning with a global feminist perspective that values diverse, culturally grounded insights.

Analysis

This paper offers a comprehensive analysis of *Headscarves and Hymens* and *Period Pain*, emphasising their critiques of patriarchal systems while contextualising them within their cultural frameworks. Furthermore, it examines the history, motivations, thematic explorations, and theoretical foundations of each text.

Headscarves and Hymens by Mona Eltahawy

Mona Eltahawy is an Egyptian-American journalist and feminist activist. She wrote *Headscarves and Hymens* in response to the Arab Spring (2010–2012). This series of uprisings promised democratic reform across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) but ultimately failed to dismantle entrenched gender inequalities. Eltahawy was born in Egypt and later emigrated to the United States. She brings a transnational perspective to her work, informed by her experiences of misogyny in both the MENA region and the West. Her goal is to stimulate a sexual revolution that opposes the structural oppression of

women behind the pretence of cultural and religious traditions. She writes, "This book is a manifesto, a call to arms for a revolution that has been simmering beneath the surface for far too long—a sexual revolution that will upend the patriarchal order and grant women the freedoms they have been denied" (Eltahawy 13). This declaration establishes her intent to disrupt the status quo, positioning her text as both a critique and a catalyst for change.

Eltahawy's encounters with oppression, including her arrest and assault by Egyptian police during the 2011 protests, further fuel her urgency. She reflects, "I have felt the weight of this oppression on my own body—broken bones, bruised flesh, a voice silenced by force. But I will not be silent anymore, and neither should any woman" (Eltahawy 22). This visceral connection to her subject matter accentuates her authority and lends her analysis an embodied authenticity, aligning with feminist calls to validate personal experience as a source of knowledge.

Eltahawy's analysis focuses on three major practices: female genital mutilation (FGM), honour killings, and veiling. She presents these practices as interconnected patriarchal control mechanisms rather than discrete cultural artefacts. Her analysis of the veil is particularly scathing, rejecting its portrayal as a voluntary expression of piety. She asserts:

> "The veil is not a choice. It is a form of control, a way to keep women hidden and submissive. It is a symbol of a system that denies women their basic rights and freedoms, reducing them to property rather than individuals with agency. The veil is not about piety; it is about power—power over women's bodies, their movements, their very existence in public spaces." (Eltahawy 45)

This passage dismantles the liberal feminist defense of veiling as empowerment, instead exposing its role in erasing women's visibility and autonomy. Eltahawy elaborates further, noting the societal complicity in this oppression: "When a girl is veiled at puberty, it is not just her family that enforces it—it is the street, the mosque, the state. Every institution conspires to tell her that her body is a source of shame, a danger that must be concealed" (Eltahawy 47). This systemic perspective reveals the veil as a cultural edifice upheld by collective patriarchal interests, not individual choice.

Her discussion of honor killings similarly reframes them as acts of domination rather than cultural honor. She writes:

> "Honor killings are not about honor; they are about power. They are a brutal reminder that women's bodies and lives are not their own but belong to their families and communities, to be controlled and punished at will by those who claim authority over them. These killings are not isolated incidents but part of a broader system of violence that polices women's behavior and sexuality." (Eltahawy 78)

This passage underlines the communal ownership of women's bodies, a theme she reinforces with chilling detail: "A father kills his daughter for speaking to a boy, a brother stabs his sister for refusing a marriage—each act is a performance of power, a warning to other women to stay in line" (Eltahawy 80). By cataloguing these acts, Eltahawy exposes their performative nature, designed to perpetuate fear and compliance.

On FGM, Eltahawy delivers a harrowing critique of its physical and psychological toll, arguing:

> "FGM is not just about tradition; it is about power. It is a brutal assertion of control over women's sexuality,

> often justified by religion and culture, but rooted in a patriarchal desire to subjugate women's bodies and deny their pleasure. It is a practice that mutilates not just the body but the spirit, leaving scars that last a lifetime." (Eltahawy 92)

She amplifies this with a personal anecdote: "I spoke to a woman who, at eight years old, was held down by her aunts as a midwife cut her with a rusty blade. She told me, 'They took my body from me that day, and I've been searching for it ever since'" (Eltahawy 94). The testimony gives her argument a human face by demonstrating how FGM deprives women of their sexual and physiological autonomy, a loss that has an impact on future generations.

Eltahawy also critiques the broader socio-political context, arguing that these practices are upheld by a "trifecta of misogyny—state, street, and home" (Eltahawy 30). She elaborates: "In the Middle East, women face a triple oppression: the state legislates their inequality, the street harasses and assaults them, and the home confines and silences them. This trifecta ensures that no space is safe, no rebellion unpunished." (Eltahawy 31)

Mona Eltahawy's *Headscarves and Hymens* engages deeply with gynocriticism by foregrounding women's voices and experiences. It seeks to dismantle the male-centric narratives that dominate literary and cultural discourse in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Showalter defines gynocriticism as a method that seeks to "construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature" (Showalter 11). Eltahawy embodies this principle by amplifying what Showalter terms the "muted story"—the suppressed narratives of MENA women, which are often obscured by patriarchal hegemony. Her confrontational rhetoric, exemplified in her declaration, "I will not whisper when I should shout" (Eltahawy 17), reflects a distinctly female subjectivity that resists the silencing imposed by traditional gender

norms, aligning with gynocriticism's mission to reclaim narrative authority for women writers.

This subversive stance is complemented by her application of intersectionality, which elucidates the complex interplay of gender with religion, culture, and class in her analysis of women's oppression. Eltahawy writes, "To be a woman in the Middle East is to navigate a maze of oppressions—gendered, religious, economic—all of which lock together to keep us down" (Eltahawy 55). This assertion explains how intersecting forces create a complex system of subjugation, reinforcing the structural barriers that limit women's autonomy in the MENA region. Her critique of the veil's religious justification further accentuates this intersectional approach: "The clerics say it's God's will, but it's men's hands that pull the strings" (Eltahawy 49), revealing how religious authority serves as a mechanism to amplify gender-based oppression, intertwining spiritual doctrine with patriarchal power.

Additionally, postcolonial feminism enriches Eltahawy's critique by placing her arguments within the tension between local traditions and Western imperialism, a dynamic she contends with acute awareness. She contends,

> "The veil is not just a religious symbol; it is a product of a postcolonial identity crisis, where the rejection of Western imperialism has led to an embrace of patriarchal traditions as a form of cultural resistance. But this resistance comes at the cost of women's bodies and freedoms, trapping them in a narrative that equates their subjugation with cultural authenticity" (Eltahawy 60).

This passage critiques the postcolonial tendency to romanticise oppressive customs as acts of anti-Western defiance, a theme she revisits with incisive clarity: "We reject the West's bombs and its feminism, only to cling to our chains and call them heritage" (Eltahawy 62).

Through this lens, Eltahawy advocates for a feminism that eschews both Western universalism and local patriarchal traditions. It proposes instead a revolutionary paradigm tailored to the specific realities of MENA women. This call echoes with the need to forge a culturally grounded yet liberatory feminist discourse.

Period Pain by Kopano Matlwa

Kopano Matlwa is a South African physician and novelist. She wrote *Period Pain* to probe the persistent struggles of Black women in post-apartheid South Africa, a nation ostensibly liberated yet still shackled by racial and gender inequalities. *Period Pain* was published in 2010. The novel reflects Matlwa's medical background, which sharpens her focus on bodily experiences—menstruation, illness, and violence—as entry points into broader socio-political critiques. Her protagonist, Masechaba, a young doctor, embodies these struggles, narrating her life with raw intimacy. Matlwa's purpose is clear: "I wanted to write the pain that no one sees, the quiet suffering of women like me, who carry the weight of a history that isn't done with us yet" (Matlwa 5). This mission positions her work as a feminist intervention. It exposes the intersectional burdens of race, gender, and class in a supposedly "new" South Africa. Matlwa's medical training informs her visceral depictions, as she notes: "As a doctor, I've seen bodies broken by poverty and violence, women whose pain is ignored because of their skin and their sex" (Matlwa 7). This perspective drives her to center Masechaba's narrative, making *Period Pain* a tribute to the resilience and vulnerability of Black South African women.

Matlwa's novel explores menstrual health, gender-based violence, and healthcare disparities as interconnected issues that reveal the intersectional nature of oppression in post-apartheid South Africa. Her treatment of menstruation transcends biology, framing it as a socio-economic battleground:

> "Periods are not just a biological inconvenience; they are a battleground where poverty, gender, and race collide. For many girls, missing school because of a period is not just a health issue—it's a denial of their right to education, a barrier to their future. In a country where sanitary products are a luxury, menstruation becomes a symbol of inequality, a monthly reminder of how little the system cares for girls like us." (Matlwa 102)

This passage exposes how menstruation exacerbates existing disparities, a theme Matlwa deepens: "I remember my first period—hiding the stains, begging for pads we couldn't afford. It wasn't just shame; it was survival" (Matlwa 104). This personal reflection ties Masechaba's experience to a collective struggle and draws attention to the economic and educational toll on Black girls.

Gender-based violence emerges as another focal point, with Masechaba's rape serving as a brutal nexus of race and gender. She recounts:

> "The men who raped me didn't just see a woman; they saw a Black woman, someone they could violate without consequence. In their eyes, my body was a battlefield for their rage, my skin a marker of my disposability in a world that still sees me as less. The violence was not just gendered; it was racialized, a legacy of a system that has always devalued Black lives." (Matlwa 150)

This harrowing passage reveals the compounded violence Black women face, a point Matlwa reinforces: "Afterwards, I scrubbed my skin until it bled, as if I could wash away the Blackness they hated, the womanhood they punished" (Matlwa 152). This self-directed violence reflects the internalised trauma of racialised misogyny, echoing apartheid's dehumanising legacy.

Healthcare disparities further illustrate systemic neglect, as Masechaba observes:

> "The clinic was overcrowded, understaffed, and under-resourced. Women like me—Black, poor, and female—were the last to be seen, the last to be cared for. Our pain was invisible, our bodies disposable in a system that still saw us through the lens of apartheid, where our worth was measured by our race and class." (Matlwa 89)

She elaborates on the personal cost: "I sat there bleeding, ignored, while the hours ticked by. My pain didn't matter because I didn't matter—not to them" (Matlwa 91). This neglect mirrors the broader societal indifference to Black women's suffering, a theme Matlwa ties to historical continuity:

> "Apartheid may be over, but its ghosts still haunt us. The healthcare system, the education system, the very fabric of our society is still scarred by the racial and gender inequalities it entrenched. For women like me, the struggle continues, not just against patriarchy, but against the colonial legacy that devalues our lives and denies our humanity." (Matlwa 120)

This contention places Masechaba's struggles in the context of a shared past and calls for a feminist response that is sensitive to racial and gender justice.

Kopano Matlwa's *Period Pain* aligns with gynocriticism by granting voice to Masechaba's subjective experience within a South African society that seeks to silence her. The novel foregrounds a distinctly female narrative that resists patriarchal suppression. Showalter's notion of "double-voiced discourse" (Showalter 11) is evident in Masechaba's introspective reflections. Her assertion, "I write this to remember who I am, beneath their labels, their violence, their

neglect" (Matlwa 10), serves as an act of self-narration. This statement reclaims her agency and counters the dual erasures of patriarchy and racial marginalisation. This gynocritical lens emphasises Matlwa's commitment to centering women's lived realities. It offers a subversive counter-narrative to dominant discourses.

Intersectionality forms the foundational bedrock of Matlwa's critique. It captures how Masechaba's struggles embody the confluence of race, gender, and class in a post-apartheid context. Masechaba muses, "To be a Black woman here is to carry three burdens at once, each heavier than the last" (Matlwa 130). This statement poignantly echoes Crenshaw's framework, underscoring the compounded nature of overlapping oppressions. This intersectional perspective is vividly illustrated in her depiction of healthcare disparities: "The white patients got beds; we got benches. The men got seen; we got sidelined" (Matlwa 92). This passage starkly portrays how multiple identity markers—race and gender—dictate differential access and treatment, reinforcing systemic inequities.

Postcolonial feminism further frames Matlwa's interrogation of post-apartheid realities. The legacies of colonialism and apartheid continue to perpetuate gender inequity, complicating the promise of liberation. She writes, "We were promised freedom, but the chains are still there tighter for women, heavier for Black women" (Matlwa 140). This statement critiques the failure of South Africa's post-apartheid narrative to fully enfranchise its most marginalised citizens. This continuity is painfully evident in Masechaba's experience of rape, which she connects to racialised violence. She states, "They raped me because they could, because history told them my body was theirs to take" (Matlwa 154). This statement positions her trauma within a broader historical narrative of colonial entitlement and racial subjugation. Through this postcolonial feminist lens, Matlwa calls for a feminism that directly addresses these intertwined oppressions. She advocates for

a feminist approach that is firmly rooted in the specific historical wounds of South Africa rather than adopting universalist feminist paradigms.

Discussion

Comparative Analysis

Mona Eltahawy's *Headscarves and Hymens* and Kopano Matlwa's *Period Pain* present starkly divergent modalities of feminist resistance. Each text is rooted in culturally specific responses to patriarchal domination. Eltahawy's militant, public-facing activism directly assaults systemic misogyny in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), while Matlwa's introspective narrative subtly subverts South African patriarchy through Masechaba's endurance. Taiwo Kolawole's womanist framework emphasises resistance that is culturally embedded, communal, and attuned to survival. This perspective explains how these approaches, though distinct, coalesce around a shared goal of dismantling gendered oppression. This comparative analysis probes the efficacy and limitations of their strategies, interrogating whether confrontation or narrative subtlety better galvanises feminist transformation.

Eltahawy's text is a clarion call, wielding unapologetic rhetoric to expose and dismantle patriarchal structures. She asserts, "We Arab women live in a culture that is fundamentally hostile to us, enforced by men's contempt, their incessant need to police our bodies and our minds, and their determination to keep us out of public space unless we conform to their rules" (Eltahawy 7). This passage encapsulates her diagnostic fury, framing misogyny as a pervasive epidemic. She writes, "The pulsating heart of misogyny in the Middle East beats on because it is upheld by a toxic mix of culture and religion that few dare to challenge or even name" (Eltahawy 15). This positions her as a revolutionary truth-sayer. Her activism was shaped by personal trauma. She states, "I became a feminist because I saw with my own eyes how

women in Saudi Arabia were treated as perpetual minors, needing male permission for every aspect of their lives" (Eltahawy 10). Her advocacy draws on historical precedents, such as Huda Shaarawi, who publicly removed her face veil in Cairo in 1923. This act of defiance rippled across the region, inspiring women to reject both the physical and symbolic constraints of patriarchy (Eltahawy 24). Eltahawy's strategy is both collective and confrontational. She calls for a "double revolution" against external oppressors and internalized submission (Eltahawy 18). However, this stance risks alienating those who are unprepared for such radical change.

In contrast, Matlwa's *Period Pain* employs a muted, introspective resistance, embedding feminist critique within Masechaba's corporeal and emotional landscape. Her isolation is poignantly captured: "I became a loner. Not because I wanted to be alone, but because it was easier for everyone that way—my bleeding made me a burden, a secret no one wanted to share" (Matlwa 11). This reflection reveals how her excessive menstrual bleeding becomes a metaphor for societal rejection. She describes it as "a curse I couldn't escape, a flood that drowned me every month, making me wish I could cut the abhorrent organ out of me and destroy it forever" (Matlwa 13). After experiencing rape, her resilience emerges subtly. She states, "I can't lie here forever. I have to get up and move past this, wash the blood off my thighs, pretend it never happened, and find a way to live again" (Matlwa 92). Naming her daughter Mpho signifies a quiet triumph over trauma. She states, "She's my Mpho, my gift, born from the wreckage of that night, a reason to keep going when all I wanted was to disappear into the earth" (Matlwa 98). Matlwa's approach, unlike Eltahawy's, prioritises personal agency over public spectacle. This raises questions about whether such subtlety can drive systemic change or merely ensure individual survival.

Kolawole's womanist lens sharpens this contrast, framing Eltahawy's activism as a communal uprising; "To the girls of the Middle

East and North Africa: Be immodest, rebel, disobey, and know you deserve to be free, because freedom isn't given, it's taken by those who demand it" (Eltahawy 3). This aligned with Middle Eastern traditions of collective defiance. Matlwa's resistance, however, embodies womanist resilience. Masechaba's survival is evident in her declaration: "I'm still being raped even now, even when I'm not, but I won't let it define me; I'll raise Mpho to know she's enough, despite what this world does to us" (Matlwa 77). This reflects a South African ethos of enduring communal violence.

Contributions to Nigerian Feminist Discourse

Mona Eltahawy's *Headscarves and Hymens* and Kopano Matlwa's *Period Pain* enrich feminist discourse by engaging Nigerian feminist objectives, as articulated by Chinweizu Opara's vision of integrating diverse voices and Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí's call for African gender epistemologies. Rather than simply echoing these frameworks, the texts present culturally distinct yet rich narratives. They offer a dynamic interplay of resistance that both complements and complicates Nigerian feminist objectives. This integrated analysis emphasises Opara's and Oyěwùmí's perspectives by examining how Eltahawy's militant activism and Matlwa's introspective subtlety jointly challenge universalist feminist paradigms. It also raises critical questions about their relevance to Nigerian contexts.

Opara's advocacy for a feminist discourse that bridges elite and grassroots voices finds robust expression in both Eltahawy's and Matlwa's works, which fuse personal trauma with collective critique to amplify the marginalized. Eltahawy intertwines her violation with systemic abuses. She recounts, "I was sexually assaulted by security forces during clashes on Mohamed Mahmoud Street in November 2011, my arms broken, my body violated, yet I emerged angrier, more determined to fight back" (Eltahawy 19). She also highlights broader injustices, such as "virginity tests imposed on female activists arrested

during the Arab Spring, a humiliating ritual to break their spirits and assert male control over their bodies" (Eltahawy 14). This synthesis culminates in her reference to the "Blue Bra Girl, beaten and stripped by soldiers in Tahrir Square, her blue bra exposed to the world, a symbol of resistance and shame intertwined" (Eltahawy 19). This anonymous figure's suffering connects Eltahawy's elite narrative with grassroots realities. Similarly, Matlwa intertwines Masechaba's despair with South Africa's societal collapse. She reflects, "I'm haunted by the faces of the patients I neglected, rushed through, walked past, ignored women like me, bleeding out in a hospital that's falling apart, a country that doesn't care" (Matlwa 76). Through this, she foregrounds the faceless patients who mirror her marginalisation. For Opara, this integration is essential. However, Eltahawy's globalised militancy, "I write this from New York, but my heart remains in Cairo, in Tunis, in Riyadh" (Eltahawy 150), and Matlwa's professional lens as a doctor (Matlwa 13) introduce a tension.

Oyěwùmí's insistence on African gender epistemologies, which rejects Western binaries in favour of culturally rooted frameworks, is vividly realised in both texts. Their emphasis on embodied resistance and regional legacies challenges the dominance of Eurocentric feminist thought. Eltahawy reclaims a Middle Eastern feminist genealogy, asserting, "Nawal El Saadawi, an Egyptian physician, writer, and activist, taught me that our fight isn't borrowed from the West but born from our own soil, our own struggles" (Eltahawy 16). This statement aligns with Oyěwùmí's call to centre indigenous ontologies. Her catalog of regional misogyny, "Name me an Arab country, and I'll recite a litany of abuses against women occurring in that country, from child marriage to honor killings, all upheld by men in power" (Eltahawy 7), grounds her critique in a specific socio-cultural context. This parallels Nigerian analyses of localised patriarchy, such as widowhood rites. Matlwa, meanwhile, anchors Masechaba's agency in African corporeality. She

states speaking about the child she bore when raped, "She's my Mpho, my gift, born from the wreckage of that night, a reason to keep going when all I wanted was to disappear into the earth" (Matlwa 98). This transforms her rape into a redemptive act that challenges Western gender norms. Her bleeding body, "a curse I couldn't escape, a flood that drowned me every month, making me wish I could cut the abhorrent organ out of me and destroy it forever" (Matlwa 13), becomes a visceral text of resistance. This echoes Oyěwùmí's emphasis on lived experience over abstract theory.

Implications for the Feminist Movement and Activism in Nigeria

The significance of Mona Eltahawy's *Headscarves and Hymens* and Kopano Matlwa's *Period Pain* for Nigerian feminist activism is exemplified by the #BeingFemaleinNigeria movement (Adebayo, 2022). Both works offer trenchant critiques of patriarchal oppression. They resonate with grassroots struggles, despite ongoing critiques of their elite feminist underpinnings. The #BeingFemaleinNigeria movement is a digital outcry against everyday sexism, ranging from street harassment to institutional erasure. It also interrogates the disconnect between privileged feminist voices and the lived realities of ordinary Nigerian women. Eltahawy's militant activism and Matlwa's introspective narrative offer distinct strategies for confronting these challenges. Both align with the movement's aims, while exposing fault lines that provoke scholarly and practical debate about their relevance and adaptability in Nigeria's diverse socio-cultural landscape.

Eltahawy's unyielding activism provides Nigerian feminists with a provocative model for directly challenging systemic patriarchy, resonating with #BeingFemaleinNigeria's push for transformative societal shifts. Her declaration, "The battles over women's bodies can be won only by a revolution of the mind, a refusal to accept the shame and silence imposed on us by men who fear our power" (Eltahawy 22), serves as a rallying cry. It mirrors the movement's emphasis on

dismantling ingrained attitudes that normalize gendered violence and subjugation. Her trauma, "I am angry for all the hundreds of thousands of other women who continue to be violated in ways much worse than I was, their stories buried under layers of fear and complicity" (Eltahawy 22), reflects the experiences of Nigerian women. It echoes their struggles with pervasive street harassment, police indifference, and cultural silencing, as documented in #BeingFemaleinNigeria testimonies. This alignment suggests a bold strategy of visibility and confrontation. Her invocation of the "Blue Bra Girl, beaten and stripped by soldiers in Tahrir Square, her blue bra exposed to the world, a symbol of resistance and shame intertwined" (Eltahawy 19) exemplifies this approach. It parallels Nigerian calls for a public reckoning with gendered injustice. Yet, her elite positioning as a global commentator is evident in her statement, "I write this from New York, but my heart remains in Cairo, in Tunis, in Riyadh" (Page 150). This raises Adebayo's critique of privileged feminist narratives that may fail to grasp the granular realities of Nigeria's non-urban or working-class women. This tension challenges Nigerian activists to weigh whether Eltahawy's cosmopolitan radicalism can galvanise grassroots momentum or if it risks alienating those it seeks to empower.

In contrast, Matlwa's narrative subtlety provides Nigerian feminists with a quieter yet potent framework for personal empowerment within oppressive structures. This approach aligns with #BeingFemaleinNigeria's focus on resilience and bodily autonomy amidst systemic violence. Masechaba's resolve, "I can't lie here forever. I must get up and move past this, wash the blood off my thighs, pretend it never happened, and find a way to live again" (Matlwa 92), serves as evidence of survival. It mirrors the tenacity of Nigerian women contending daily with patriarchal assaults, from market catcalls to domestic abuse. Her rape narrative, "I was correctively raped because they thought my kindness to foreigners was a betrayal, my body a lesson

to be taught, my blood a price I had to pay" (Matlwa 78), reflects the brutal enforcement of patriarchal control. Her subsequent reclamation through motherhood, "She's my Mpho, my gift, born from the wreckage of that night, a reason to keep going when all I wanted was to disappear into the earth" (Page 98), aligns with the movement's emphasis on reclaiming agency over violated bodies. This introspective resistance speaks to Nigerian women's lived endurance, yet her elite status as a doctor, "I became a doctor because I thought I could fix myself, get the abhorrent organ cut out of me and destroyed, escape the bleeding that defined me" (Matlwa 13), positions her at a remove from the non-elite majority Adebayo champions. This professional lens risks rendering her narrative less relatable to Nigeria's rural or informally employed women, prompting scrutiny of whether her subtlety can inspire collective action or merely console individual survival.

Conclusion

This study reveals that Mona Eltahawy's *Headscarves and Hymens* and Kopano Matlwa's *Period Pain* significantly enhance feminist literary discourse. They amplify women's voices and address intersectional oppressions through gynocriticism, intersectionality, and postcolonial feminism. These works offer valuable insights that resonate with Nigerian feminist concerns about gender, culture, and postcoloniality. Their contributions, enriched by Nigerian scholarly perspectives, underscore culturally specific resistance strategies—direct activism and introspective resilience. They highlight tensions between elite narratives and grassroots realities. In doing so, these works advance a nuanced African feminist praxis. For future research, exploring Nigerian women's writing through these theoretical lenses could further elucidate local feminist traditions. This approach would build on historical studies to centre non-elite voices and foster a more inclusive literary canon that bridges cultural specificity with broader liberation goals.

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