

Workplace Sexual Harassment and Female Objectification: Feminist Perspectives on Violet Barungi's *Cassandra*

Mamadou Abdou Babou Ngom¹

¹ English Department, Faculty of the Humanities, Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar, Senegal (West Africa)

Correspondence: Mamadou Abdou Babou Ngom, Ph. D, English Department, Faculty of the Humanities, Cheikh Anta Diop University of Dakar, Senegal (West Africa). E-mail: lamzosaf@gmail.com

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Abstract

Using Violet Barungi's *Cassandra* as a stepping-stone, I seek in this research article to analyze how feminism can be an effective weapon against the dyadic straitjacket of sexual harassment on the job and female objectification. The paper argues that male leadership leverage their stranglehold over their female employees to morph them into mere sexual objects. At the root of working women's subservience to their male supervisors, the paper contends, lies deep-seated power dynamics heavily weighted in favour of men. The eponymous character's enactment of a gritty agency geared towards resisting crippling sexist practices in the workplace, and hidebound mindset in her society, bespeaks a dismissal of self-pity and discouragement that sometimes characterizes many women to their male-induced marginality.

Keywords: feminism, sexual harassment, 'de-subordination', intersecting, patriarchy

Arguably, Violet Barungi (1943–) is a grand old woman of Ugandan literature who is renowned for her unwavering advocacy of women's rights. She is a novelist, playwright, short story writer all into one. An alumna of Makerere University, Kampala, Violet Barungi broaches in her fictional opus such vexed themes as human relationships, feminist or gender issues, and the significance of girls' education as crucial to full emancipation. Her jaw-dropping artistic creativity shines through two beautiful novels, to wit *The Shadow and the Substance* cum *Cassandra*, not to mention a hefty body of children's books on top of three plays. Violet Barungi had her service to literature acknowledged internationally when she was conferred upon the British Council New Playwriting Award for Africa and the Middle East, thanks to her prominent play *Over My Dead Body*. Her bulky collection of essays resonates with subject matter pertaining to the interests of women and girls. She acted as editor for ten years for FEMRITE, whose mission "was to build a sustainable platform for women to contribute to national development through creative writing" (Perkins, 64). Her fictional and non-fictional work is a tribute to woman's agency.

The casting of the lead character in Violet Barungi's *Cassandra* is a stepping-stone for us to grapple with the slippery concept of 'feminism' in a rather summary way, before delving into the analysis of the novel proper. The word 'feminism' has had a chequered evolution since its eruption at the turn of the nineteenth-century. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines it as "the belief and aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men." The idea of boiling down "Feminism" to a female fight to win equal opportunity with men is not, though, appealing to a whole lot of women who are active in women's rights organizations. According to Bell Hook, the foremost shortcoming of this definition of woman's liberation, which she brands as political, stems from its "dismissal of race and class as factors that, in conjunction with sexism, determine the extent to which an individual will be discriminated against, exploited, or oppressed" (18). The thrust of Brook's argument is that women's experience of male dominance is not uniform. White females and black females cannot be lumped together as living under the same yoke of gender-induced discriminatory practices. She writes that:

Women in lower class and poor groups, particularly those who are non-white, would not have defined women's liberation as women gaining social equality with men since they are continually reminded in their everyday lives that all women do not share the same social status. Concurrently, they know that many males in their social groups are exploited and oppressed. Knowing that men in their groups do not have social, political, and economic power, they would not deem it liberatory to share their social status. (18)

What lies beneath the surface of Bell Hook's point is the exclusion of women of color as well as destitute ones from mainstream white feminism. She advocates a brand of "feminism" the agency of which is geared to the necessity of achieving every inch the eradication of the politics of male domination, which is at the root of men's subjugation of women. Dead convinced that "Feminism is a struggle to end sexist oppression," she makes out a strong case for the necessity to recognize race and class oppression as "feminist issues with as much relevance as sexist issues" (25). Meanwhile, Alison Jaggar traces the roots of feminism back to the 17th century when feminist voices started being heard in such Western countries as England, France and the United States (4). In Jaggar's estimation, the possibility of the nascent feminist voices was mediated by a context hallmarked by an era of political and economic changes that went a long towards utterly altering for the better "*women's situation and also the way in which women perceived their situation*" (4). Chronicling the history of feminism since its emergence, Alison Jaggar posits the advent of industrialization and democracy as the starting point of women's subservience to men:

Even though many women were employed in the factories, especially in the early ones, the industrialization of their traditional work meant that women's control diminished over such vital industries as food processing, textile manufacture and garment manufacture. Women's reduced contribution to the household increased their economic dependence on their husbands and diminished their power vis-à-vis their husbands. (4)

Even then, the shifting circumstances mediated by the new industrial society and the espousal of a new political system of rule fostered a new consciousness amongst women, and "*provided a basis for challenging traditional assumptions of women's natural subordination to men*" (4). As if registering an ingrained construction of feminism as a universal issue, Alison Jaggar gives it an all-encompassing definition: "*Now, 'feminism' is commonly used to refer to all those who seek, no matter on what grounds, to end women's subordination*" (5). Granted, the straitjacket of women's oppression at the hands of men cuts across racial and ethnic lines but the experience is lived differently depending on whether you are a black or white woman. Arguably, the political struggle of white feminists has been found wanting in many regards because of its lop-sidedness. If anything, African women and those from the diaspora felt excluded from that white female-driven pushback against male dominance, and, therefore, did not relate themselves to it. Hence the notion of Black feminism which emerged as a kind of counterblast to the racist edge of white feminists' praxis. Patricia Hill Collins emphasizes that "*Black feminist thought's identity as 'critical social theory' lies in its commitment to justice, both for U.S. Black women and for that other similarly oppressed groups*" (12). Regarding Black feminism as "*a social justice project*" and Black feminist thought "*as its intellectual center,*" Patricia Hill Collins urges U.S. Black women not to deviate from the path of the drive for empowerment. In the same breath, she warns them not to lose sight of the fact that "*U.S. Black feminism participates in a larger context of struggling for social justice that transcends U.S. borders*" (XI). The necessity for U.S. Black feminism to "*see commonalities that join Women of African descent as well as differences that emerge from our diverse national histories*" (XI) is only too obvious. Meanwhile, African women who are at the receiving end of intersecting oppressions within larger marginalized communities have floated the concept of "African feminism" to mark themselves out as a group whose experience bears testimony. Helen Chukwuma conceives of feminism from an African woman's perspective as "*a rejection of inferiority and a striving for recognition. It seeks to give the women a sense of the self as a worthy, effectual and contribution human being.*" She adds that "*Feminism is a reaction to such stereotypes which deny them a positive identity*" (IX). The intersecting yoke of gender, patriarchal system and the cumbersome legacy of colonialism mark African feminism off from Western feminism. No wonder that the praxis of African feminists is geared towards a collective pushback against gender-spiked practices cum other limitations that represent an albatross around the women's drive towards full emancipation. Ugandan writer and novelist Violet Barungi features amongst the crop of African feminists who broaches themes in her fictional opus that resonate with women's issues. She said in an interview:

Fictionalizing a theme like the liberation of women from oppressive traditional practices is a powerful way of calling attention to the social evils, for the written word tends to have a longer-lasting effect than a written one, or so I believe. Women readers are shown the way out of the darkness encompassing them into the light, using the characters in the novel as torchbearers or role-models. (Interview)

Her 1999 novel *Cassandra* is in whack with a continuum of fictional works hallmarked by a stubborn desire to highlight the bottlenecks stymieing African women's emancipation from the dead hand of male dominance. The story revolves around the life of a young driven woman, gone by the name of Cassandra Tibwita. Against a background of a male-dominated society where women are hard pressed to make something of themselves, the eponymous heroine, who earns her living as a staffer in a publishing firm, is grimly determined to be going

places. She fails to stick to her starry-eyed vow not to entangle herself with any man when one evening while walking back home she is given a lift by Raymond Agutamba—a guy notorious for having loose morals. Although displaying wariness in the beginning, she throws caution to the wind and wraps up getting into the car. That turns out to be a game changer in her life as Cassandra goes nuts about Raymond. The latter, lo and behold, has a skeleton in the cupboard—he’s sterile—that he conceals from Cassandra. To boot, he is divorced with a son whom Cassandra tries to curry favour with unavailingly. Raymond is a lady-killer whose winning card is his good looks. As time wears on, Cassandra feels like she has lost her sense of purpose. Actually, she is piggy in the middle between two brothers strenuously vying for her attentions—that is, Raymond and Bevis Agutamba. This one goes all-out to drive a wedge between his senior brother and Cassandra with an eye to avenging himself on Raymond. Quite unexpectedly, Cassandra becomes pregnant supposedly by Bevis but, surprisingly enough, looks to Raymond to own the pregnancy. Ray, as intimates affectionately call him, disavows the paternity, though. Two gruesome events go down that bring the best in Cassandra: the death of Ray’s son and the car crash that ultimately claims his life. Meanwhile, Bevis comes near to passing away following an attempt on his life. This paves the way for him and Cassandra to tie the knot. Despite the twists and turns that dot her life, Cassandra manages to bring to fruition her feminist ideals.

Violet Barungi’s deep-dyed belief in the possibility of women’s empowerment and freedom from the yoke of male dominance shines remarkably through the casting of her female characters. Her artistry is feminist-informed in that her characterization is framed in so percipient a way as to make it possible for women to rise above overwhelming odds and give a meaning to their lives. Witness the ups and downs of Cassandra. A young, beautiful woman of outstanding promise whose “almond eyes and the rhythmic swing to her body” have men fantasizing big time, she is dashed determined to pushback against old-school shibboleths the end game of which is to hamper women’s progress in society. Plainly, what marks Cassandra off from many other women faced with the same travails but with no prospect of seeing the light at the end of the tunnel is her status as an educated woman. From the get go, the reader has an inkling as to her sense of direction when, speaking through the narrator, she pledges to somewhat give men a wide berth owing to them being a drag on women’s advancement:

She was committed to making something worthwhile of her life and if she allowed anybody or anything to interfere with that commitment, she would end up like thousands of other women, behind a kitchen sink and a line of dropping nappies. Men were the reason why the majority of women were still lagging behind in social, economic and political development. Once you let a man into your life, it was good-bye to ambitions of meaningful existence. (3)

These utterances come in shadow of her chance encounter with Raymond who harbours designs on her. Since giving Cassandra a lift home, Ray has found it way difficult to get her off his mind (4). Accordingly, he goes all out to capture the young woman’s heart and reckon her among his sexual romps. Despite her sister’s exhortations to eschew Ray whom “*Every woman in town below the age of seventy knows about,*” Cassandra gives his overtures thumbs up. Her misbegotten call to date Ray is a vindication of sophisticated nineteenth-century German thinker Schopenhauer’s characterization of “love” as a “*malevolent demon*” (531). (I’ll come back to this later on in my analysis.) To be sure, in the world of *Cassandra*, women’s biggest prey are sexual predators who think nothing of using the perks conferred upon them by headship to let their sexual impulses run wild. The work place is shot through with a bunch of philanderers whose distinctive by-word is their sexual objectification of women. Career female workers don’t hesitate to gratify their bosses’ lustful desires with an eye to rising through the ranks. The relationship between Cassandra and her office-mate, Juliet, has soured from the get-go. The former’s grim determination to pull herself by her own bootstraps to reach the apex is a foil to the latter’s demeaning proclivity to dance to her boss’s tune to secure promotion. Juliet takes a jaundiced view of Cassandra’s arrival at Lotus International, believing mistakenly that Cassandra seeks frantically to curry favour with their superior for her own self-serving ends. The narrator describes Cassandra’s bitterness about her dashed hope for a good working relationship with Juliet, and the moral chasm between the two young women:

When she first joined Lotus International, commonly referred to as LI, and discovered that her office-mate was a girl of about her own age, she had been delighted and looked forward to a stimulating and pleasant relationship. But her hopes were dashed to the ground the minute the two of them took measure of each other and conceived a mutual dislike. To Cassandra, Juliet appeared shallow, vulgar, with no self-esteem at all. She gossiped incessantly and men seemed to be her only hobby. Juliet was no enamoured with the newcomer, regarding her a potential rival not only professionally but also for the affections of the head of the department. (11)

A thickset “with a build reminiscent of the fairy tale gorilla”, Mr. Wakilo is the Chief Editor and employer of the aforementioned women. His affair with his assistant editor is an open secret. Unlike Juliet who is cast in the mould of those women “whose ambition does not go beyond the boss’ pet, mistakenly equating a pat on the head with a badge of success,” Cassandra “as a matter of principle disapproves of men who used their privileged positions to exploit women” (11-2). Cassandra’s theory is a measure of her gutsy resolve to push back on the unconscionable practice of sexual harassment in the work place. The male hierarchical clout over women in the workplace is so cumbersome a straitjacket that it unflinchingly eats into women’s ability to harness their full potential. Catharine MacKinnon whose seminal work on the politics of sexual harassment, *Sexual Harassment on Working Women: A Case of Sex Discrimination*, is crucial to feminist theory defines that form of female subjugation as follows: “Sexual harassment, broadly defined, refers to the unwanted imposition of sexual requirements in the context of a relationship of unequal power” (132). Of note is MacKinnon’s theory that the stultifying dead hand of sexual harassment carries the strictures of gender-spiked inequality, and, quite astoundingly, is society-sanctioned. This helps account for the two-pronged characteristic of the root causes of the phenomenon:

Central to the concept is the use of power derived from one social sphere to lever benefits or impose deprivations in another. The major dynamic is best expressed as the reciprocal enforcement of inequalities. When one is sexual, the other is material, the cumulative sanction is particularly potent. (132)

Oftentimes, career-minded women are at the receiving end of sex-based discriminatory practice. Violet Barungi portrays a bunch of low-life male bosses who look on the working place as a site for unabashed sexual objectification of the woman. The body of the woman redounds to their personal aggrandizement. Their commands and attitudes to their female employees are disdain-spiked. The likes of Mr. Wakilo, as it turns out, are accustomed to have their female subordinates pandering to their every whim. Under the veneer of wholesome advice to Cassandra- “I have a feeling you’ll go far in this business if you keep your single-minded and creditable dedication to your job”-, the Chief Editor is a predatory heel of the blackest dye who resents being challenged and rebuffed by women working under him. By dint of his exchanges with Cassandra, he has some inkling as to her moral compass and professional mien that point to a principled woman with an eye towards reaching the apex of the career ladder without her superiors’ coattails. As if taking the wind out of Cassandra’s sails for the sake of overcoming her eventual chariness about dating him, Mr. Wakilo throws a puzzling caveat to Cassandra:

“Word of caution though,” the chief went on ponderously. “In life we come across all sorts of situations to which we very often react differently. It doesn’t always follow a different approach from ours is necessarily wrong, do you follow me?” (12)

Notwithstanding Cassandra’s blank look, Mr. Wakilo pursues his advice of sorts: “I guess what I am trying to say’s that however praiseworthy our own views are, we can’t always afford to be too rigid about them. We have to try to and understand and respect other people’s opinions and their judgements.” (12). Mr. Wakilo goes out of his way to deviate Cassandra from her straight and narrow. In an endeavour to succeed in his nefarious scheme, he thinks nothing of wrongfully tapping into the leverage he wields over his female employees. Catherine Mackinnon is at pains to emphasize that the key driver of crass sexual harassment of working women is men’s power afforded by their hierarchical clout:

Sexual harassment of women is particularly clear when male superiors on the job coercively initiate unwanted advances to women employees; sexual pressures by male coworkers and customers, when condoned or encouraged by employers, might also be included. Lack of reciprocal feeling on the woman’s part may be expressed by rejection or show of disinclination. (132)

As it happens, men’s enjoyment of positional authority in the working place makes for the pervasive occurrence of sexual harassment and objectification of the woman. Women’s powerlessness shines through their crippling inability to have a say in their superiors’ calls that have the potential for bruising them from a professional or psychological vantage point. As Chief Editor of Lotus International, the uber-bossy Wakilo includes Cassandra in the exclusive male group that is supposed to go Nairobi to represent LI for a seminar. Unsuspectingly, Cassandra takes him up on his offer. Marie Nalubega from the Production department smells a rat and strenuously strives to make Cassandra see reason. In her estimation, Cassandra is in “Wakilo’s sphere.” Going forward, she unremittingly seeks to sell an excuse to Cassandra to defuse the potential for a collision course with Juliet who mistakenly believes her to be gunning for Mr. Wakilo’s favours (15). As part of her efforts to dis-incentivize Cassandra to throw herself to the wolves, Marie tells her to her face that there are rumours which she had better not credit through a misguided call. Cassandra’s rebuttal that Mr. Wakilo “has not so much as

made a single step that could be interpreted as inappropriate” leaves her friend cold:

“He will soon, when he deems it the right moment. Ask yourself why you should be included in the team going for the seminar when there are already two members from Editorial going. Doesn’t it strike you as odd especially when you go as a replacement for Juliet?” (15)

At the workplace, women are at the sharpest end of the power dynamics. Their subservient place at the bottom rung of the hierarchical ladder mediates the possibility of male bosses having them at their beck-and-call. Women are targets of social influence whereas men brazenly bask in the role of influencing agents. The drive to push back against the agonizingly lop-sided power relations in the workplace turns out to be a tall order for the likes of Cassandra because the wheels of power rest with men. The despicably wanton license to ride roughshod over women in the workplace stems from the multifaceted advantages attendant upon the power that men feel endowed with. Actually, power (Note 1) allows men unfettered access to the female body, especially in a setting where power relationships between the two sexes are heavily weighted against the fair sex. Witness how Mr. Wakilo enjoys free rein to dictate to Cassandra, one amongst a bunch of her female employees working in LI:

“...Tell Sharp to bring the prelims too, at the same time even if they are not ready. I’ll need them for the meeting. Now, about the trip to the seminar in Nairobi, I’m putting you in charge of the preparations; coordinate with the transport officer and make sure that nothing’s left to chance. And also remind everybody going to see to their travel documents. Do you have a passport yourself?”

“Yes, got it a few months ago.”

“That’s fine. How do you and Juliet get on?” (11)

Hardly did Cassandra start to answer when he said, as if cutting the ground under her feet: “*You see, I’m thinking of shuffling you around a bit and I wondered whether you’d mind sharing with somebody else?*” (11). Cassandra is amenable to Wakilo’s idea “*provided that [she is] allowed to do [her] work in peace.*” (11-2). He purposefully paves the way for Cassandra to leapfrog Juliet. He sets his sights on the former although his affair with the latter is common knowledge. The mean-spirited Wakilo is hell-bent on enjoying the best of both worlds unbeknownst to both women. After a hell of a feisty resistance, Cassandra, albeit grudgingly, winds up caving in to Marie’s move that she back off from the Nairobi trip. Her well-meaning about-face has a sting in its tail, though: “*Juliet had been promoted Assistant Publicity Manager shortly after coming back from Nairobi*” (24). Little wonder that Cassandra feels empty. “*I don’t know what’s up, but I know what’s down: my spirits*” is her comeback to her workmate George after he calls her “*for their usual coffee break.*” The harrowingly gross phenomenon of sexual harassment is the bane of women on the job. It is a measure of the double whammy that they are at the receiving end of—that is, sexist strictures and the crippling of experience in terms of lack of material survival spawned inter alia by a crass paucity of job alternatives with its attendant downsides. Catharine Mackinnon writes that, “*Under the inequality approach, sexual harassment is seen to disadvantage women as a gender, within the social context in which women’s sexuality and material survival have been constructed and joined, to women’s detriment*” (136). Key to her analysis of sexual harassment in the workplace is her potent contention that women are at the intersection of two kinds of sexual harassment that stifle their halting agency towards effecting change:

Women’s experience of sexual harassment can be divided into two forms which merge at the edges and in the world. The first I term the quid pro quo, in which sexual compliance is exchanged, or proposed to be exchanged, for an employment opportunity. The second arises when sexual harassment is a persistent condition of work.... In the quid pro quo, the woman must comply sexually, or forfeit an employment opportunity.... In sexual harassment as a condition of work, the exchange of sex for employment benefit is less direct.

The quid pro quo sexual harassment befalls Juliet whilst Cassandra is the butt of *hostile environment* sexual harassment (aka condition of work sexual harassment). Owing to her superior’s sexual misconduct, Cassandra finds the atmosphere at LI a hellhole. Her angsty unease stems from *hostile environment* sexual harassment which carries the backwash effect of “*unreasonably interfering with an individual’s work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment*” (Gaines & Worrall, 285). At Ray’s behest, Cassandra walks him through the nature of her companionship with George with a view to allaying his suspicions. With a jaw-dropping self-possession and sincerity of purpose, she manages to use George as a front in order to keep ay bay gallivanting superiors:

Actually, George has been a kind of shield, you know, from unwelcome attention. You must be aware what goes on in big offices like LI where every man imagines that he is entitled to attention from every woman. So, George and I teamed up and well, that’s the extent of our relationship. (30)

Cassandra feels strange to say the least in that she, grieving inwardly, moves in a professional milieu where merit-based career prospects are a footnote to the vagaries of a male leadership who unabashedly wallow in the sexual objectification of their female employees. The crop of men who cash in on their leadership position to ride roughshod over women by coercing them into unwanted sex unconsciously display animal instincts as they act on the spur of the moment. Arthur Schopenhauer appositely writes:

When physical pleasures seduce a man from the right path, it is his sensual nature—the animal part of him—which is at fault. He is carried away by its attractions, and, overcome by the impression of the moment, he acts without thinking of the consequences. (13)

The phallic airiness as well as the misogynistic mindset that constructs the female body as a site of sexual gratification position women as mere nonentities. Accordingly, Farley likens sexual harassment to ‘extortion.’ She writes:

The end result of male sexual harassment of women on the job is the extortion of female subservience at work. As a consequence, the broad range of male aggression brought to bear against working women—which includes, but not limited to, forced sex either by rape or in exchange for work—cannot be seen as anything more (or less) than the means by which the extortion is affected. (Qtd. in Crouch 32)

Mr. Wakilo, Raymond Agutamba and other like-minded folks are a two-faced bunch whose strong partial for money, sex and power is, sad to say, geared towards stunting the full potential of ambitious educated women, thereby seeking to maintain them in a perpetual state of bondage. Violet Barungi’s commendable craftsmanship lies in her well-meaning narrative choice to create a cut-throat setting hallmarked by the pervasive dead hand of male dominance as a litmus test of feminist-minded characters’ resilience and guts to stick to the arduous path of resisting gendered subservience. As it happens, Cassandra foregrounds a feminism-informed perception that fosters both the commitment and capability of women to paddle their own canoe. In her estimation, money may be a valuable asset, yet it is not the be-all-and-end-all of life, marking herself off from women around her frantically embroiled in the rat-race: “*While Cassandra appreciated the role money could play in one’s life, she did not think it the right basis for a relationship. It stripped one of dignity, placing the recipient completely in the hands of the giver*” (22). In Cassandra’s scheme of things, keeping one’s sense of dignity and freedom takes precedence over worldly matters. Just as she draws the line at allowing her body to be used for sexual ends by philandering gov’ners, so does she jib at her mother and siblings preaching at her about how to conduct her life. When her mother learns about her entanglement with Ray, she is caught off guard, and cannot help but strive flat out to make Cassandra see reason. In a stormy one-on-one with her daughter, Mrs Mutono goes to great lengths to talk her into backing off her relationship with Ray. The thrust of the mother’s spiel is that he is a married man (124). Cassandra’s irony-tinged reply, “*Obviously, your informant omitted to mention that this married man’s separated from his wife,*” cuts no ice with Mrs Mutono who, instead, presses her advantage: “*Is he going to marry then?*” At bottom, Cassandra and her mother talk at cross purposes. They are poles apart in terms of world view. Mrs Mutono’s exhortations to her daughter to enter wedlock, failing her withdrawal from the love relationship with Ray, is anchored in a deep-seated rejection of casual love affair. Out of parental love she doubtless seeks to shield her daughter from the social stigma of living in sin, with the possibility of having a child out of wedlock. Conversely, marriage is anathema to Cassandra. She says to her sister Mellinda, “*I still regard it as a form of slavery*” (149). The strictures of married life are downright stifling. She is not about to mar her independence by entering in wedlock (149). She believes marriage to be a weighty move not to be trifled with. As she tries to get her sister Mellinda to open up about the reasons she’s kept under wraps her marriage with the wealthy man Horace, she points out that “*marriage’s a serious undertaking, not something you do on the spur of the moment*” (67). This stance on marriage is to all intents and purposes philosophically-grounded: “*...what makes it [marriage] stranger is the suggestion that it is to be a step taken without thought. And yet no step is more decisive, for nothing in life is as inexorable and masterful as the marriage tie...marriage is not something simple but something immensely complex and indeterminate*” (Kierkegaard, 93). The rationale behind her pushback is two-pronged. For a starter, she does not look on marriage as being the mainstay of a woman’s life. Secondly, her belief in dyed-in-the-wool feminist loadstar compels her to enact a point-blank refusal to be pushed around or imposed on a choice. She makes no bones about her steadfast determination to independently chart her own way through life, bagging in passing her mother’s hidebound mindset:

You know, Mama, you live in the dark old Ages. Today, women have more going for them than the subservient role designed for them by men. Marriage’s no longer the only goal. I’m not saying that marriage has no purpose to serve, it has. It’s still an honourable institution but it has ceased to be a must for every woman. Single women are no longer looked upon by society with pity, at best, and as misfits, at worst. Quite a number of them are, in fact, happy, and living meaningful lives. (125)

Deserving elaboration is Cassandra's dogged unwillingness to go down the path of marriage as per her mother's advice. Her strong stance bespeaks a feminist perception of marriage as being a drag on women's all-out drive for gender equality and dismantling of the straightjacket of patriarchal system. The purport of marriage in African societies, and, by extension, in Western ones, means that unmarried women are oftentimes the butt of stigmatization and marginalization. The potency of feminists' lackluster attitude to marriage lies in their view of it as somewhat a misogynistic institution that scorns women's effort to extricate themselves from subservience to men. In an article on marriage and feminism in late Victorian England, Philippa Levine underscores how marriage was treasured up back then:

[Marriage] was undoubtedly one of the major agencies to which women were exposed; the pressures it imposed were enormously persuasive and difficult to resist. Family expectation and even self-esteem competed with the public assessment of women on the basis of their marital status. For women, marriage and its effects permeated every aspect of their existence and shifted the focus of their emotional and social contracts...from their own families to those of their husbands. (150)

Cassandra has rough edges that her mum is hard put to it to fathom, much less smooth. By baulking at the idea of marriage, she also registers her non-acceptance of what French twentieth-century sophisticated sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls "*symbolic violence*," which he defines as "*the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity*" (4). Cassandra's praxis is feminist-informed. She passes herself off as a young woman who relishes in taking up challenges even though it means going against the grain of the established social norms. Driven by a will-power whose end result is full-blown emancipation and equality with men, there is a method to Cassandra's madness. From a Nietzschean philosophical vantage point, her propensity for setting herself challenges and striving with every fiber of her being to overcome them bears commending. The 19th-century renowned German thinker writes in *On the Genealogy of Morality*:

Every animal, including the *bête philosophe*, instinctively strives for an optimum of favourable conditions in which to fully release his power and achieve his maximum of power-sensation; every animal abhors equally instinctively, with an acute sense of smell that is 'than all reason', any kind of disturbance and hindrance that blocks or could block his path to the optimum... (76).

Cassandra feeds on her self-confidence and self-possession that allow her to navigate through the ups and downs of life undaunted. Little wonder that Mrs Mutono's admonition to her daughter that "*pain, regret, heartache, even recriminations*" will greet her misguided call to flout her advice and command, falls on stony ground: "*I'm sorry we don't see eye to eye on these matters but as I've already said, you have no reason to worry about me. I'm still the egoistic child whose eccentricities were a constant despair to you. I'm not about to change for anybody, or do anything, especially if it compromises my future*" (126-7). Not surprisingly, Mrs Mutono's warnings turn out to be prophetic as Cassandra's entanglement with Ray takes an anti-climactic twist-that is, the betrayal of her trust in him.

Cassandra provides a powerful counterblast to gender-spiked masculine discourse whose hallmark is its gross unwillingness to recognize women as a fully capable bunch deserving to be put on an equal footing with men. She projects kind of a manly mindset that shines through her propensity for putting herself into scrapes as a litmus test of her ability to rise to every challenge. The reader gets some inkling as to what makes Cassandra tick through the narrator's point that "*Cassandra belonged to the new feminist breed which liked nothing better than crossing swords with male fascists*" (142). In the beginning, she rules out engaging in love relationship prior to fulfilling her career goals but, in the end, she proves unable to stick to her vow. Entering into a relationship with Ray becomes an obsession notwithstanding the latter's commendable call to wear his heart on his sleeves from the get-go: "*I am married, Cassandra.*" Then in a courageously sincere move meant to salve his conscience in the event of things failing to pan out Cassandra's way, Ray decides to be cruel to be kind:

Life, Cassandra, is not simple mathematics where given formulae lead to accurate answers. It's a composite of 'ifs' and 'buts', a puzzle nobody has as yet succeeded in unravelling. Love, I'm afraid, is not the answer to everything as romantic as novels tell us. I'm not trying to disillusion you but I'd not be half the man I'm if I hid the truth from you, didn't point the pitfalls in your path or the options open to you. I know you take life seriously and are determined to make it to the top of your career...? (31)

The gravitas of the foregoing narrative belies Mrs Mutono's stereotypical image of Ray. Deserving elaboration is the significance of Ray's one-on-one with Cassandra as being informative from a three-pronged perspective-that is, it has an instructive, moral and power dynamics edge to it. Actually, it espouses Giddens' classification when it comes to the production of communication: "*The production of interaction has three fundamental elements: its constitution as 'meaningful'; its constitution as a moral order; and its constitution as*

the operations of relations of power" (110). Since "*orientation to difference is central to all three elements*" (Higgins & Smith, 17), Cassandra understandably enacts a discursive pushback on Ray's sanctimonious spiel, the end game of which is to get him to buy into the reasons for her change of heart. Confessing to herself that, "*I'm a woman; with a woman's needs and desires, I cannot forever remain shrouded in innocence*" (31), she flies into Ray's arms beseechingly:

Do you know what you are proposing? Tearing my heart out and sending me back an empty shell. You've given me a glimpse of paradise, don't turn me away at the gate. I suppose I sound silly to you...but I've never felt like this before and I've never been good at expressing my feelings either. You must also remember, before you indulge in feelings of guilt, that I took the initiative for this situation. I know how awkward it is but I also know that I couldn't stay away from you. (31-2)

Come to think of it, Cassandra is caught big time in the vortex of falling and being in love. Her readiness to lose what nineteenth-century uber-perceptive German thinker Schopenhauer calls "*female honor*" (Note 2) for the sake of going out with Ray bespeaks the degree to which she is overwhelmingly nuts about him: "*Please love me and let me love you...if my virginity's proving to be an obstacle to our relationship, I can easily get rid of it...with the help of somebody like George*" (35). The overpowering nature of love factors, doubtless, into Cassandra's ill-informed decision to date a man whose by-word is his moniker "*a heartbreaker*". There is something of a magic feel to love that makes it extremely hard to resist by either man or woman. Arthur Schopenhauer gives us a sense of the powerful force of love:

Next to the love of life, it shows itself here as the strongest and most active of all motives, and incessantly lay claim to half the powers and thoughts of the younger portion of mankind. It is the ultimate goal of almost all human effort. ... Every day it brews and hatches the worst and most perplexing quarrels and disputes, destroys the most valuable relationships, and breaks the strongest bonds. (531)

Cassandra does not bother about antagonizing her mum and siblings to make Ray her significant other. She regards him as a knight in shining armour. Thus, she genuinely reveals the *impelling motive* (Note 3) behind her adamant refusal to toe her mother's line, spinning "*the advent of Raymond as a timely rescue from degenerating into the rat race*" (36). Through the narrator we learn that Cassandra has a deep-seated consciousness about her status as a role model, and that she is not about to embrace a course of action that will put paid to her life goals (36). As times goes by, though, she realizes with a tinge of regret (without ever going public about it) that her stubborn decision to go out with Ray may be misguided after all. Indeed, her relationship with Ray is not every bit as hunky-dory as she would like even though it has got to a rosy promising start, with Ray heaping presents on her, and taking her out to high-end places. For one thing, Ray's kid brother, Bevis, reveals himself to be a rotten apple in the relationship. Actually, in his relentless drive to avenge himself on his brother (against whom he bears a grudge for stabbing him in back when they were in their prime), he seeks to drive a wedge between Cassandra and Ray, hoping against hope that she shifts her love on to him. This despite his reassurances to his elder sister Stella, who is plain displeased at their rivaling, that "*the woman who can separate us is not yet born*" (54). To be sure, he brazenly wallows in lying and deception as his narrative is purposefully framed in such a way as to suit his own self-serving ends, i.e., to poison Cassandra's mind against Ray and, ultimately, date her. Little wonder that eighteenth-century renowned German thinker Immanuel Kant calls liars contemptible people. In his estimation, by telling "*intentional untruth*", a man "*throws away and, as it were, annihilates his dignity as a human being*," for a liar is a "thing". Kant writes: "*A human being who does not believe himself what he tells to another (even if the other is a merely ideal person) has even less worth than if he were a thing*" (6: 430). Cassandra sees through him. She can't brook Bevis' unconscionable proclivity to fish in troubled waters, and makes no bones about telling him to his face: "*You see, I thought of you as a pretty harmless person, incapable, or more accurately, disinclined to sully your reputation by stooping to trickery to achieve your ends. But then it had become such an obsession with you to separate me from Ray that you were prepared to try anything to achieve it...?*" (185-6). Unabashedly, Bevis owns up to his shenanigans and comes clean about his motives meltingly: "*I wanted your relationship with Ray to end because I knew there was no future for you in it. I wanted you for my own. I love you, Cassandra, I have loved you for a long time. Believe me...If you don't believe me, you can ask any member of my family, they'll confirm what I've told you*" (186). For all that sob story, Cassandra won't budge. True to type as a dyed-in-the-wool feminist whose trademark agency is geared towards gender equality cum female emancipation from the crippling strictures of patriarchy, she projects an image of herself as a principled woman who makes no secret of her animus against men's tendency to use women as a plaything. Her dry reply to Bevis is telling: "*No, thank you. The less I have to do with the lot of you, the happier I'll be. I wouldn't believe anything coming from any of you. That's one valuable lesson I've learnt from my experience*" (186). She does not suffer the Agutambas gladly anymore. As it turns out, Ray and Cassandra's relationship took

a nasty twist just like that, leading to their separation. That is, Ray offhandedly disowns Cassandra's pregnancy upon being informed. The picture gets clearer when, in answer to her lover's question, "*Are you suggesting that I've been going around with other men behind your back?*" Ray does not pull any punches: "*The facts seem to suggest so*" (166). Going forward, Cassandra waxes indignant. The tempestuous one-on-one between the former partners is, in no small measure, significant as it shows the depth of the disenchantment gripping them. Two souls broken as a result of betrayal and mistrust. Cassandra feels insulted by the idea that "*she's been going around like a common slut*" (166). Conversely, Ray is downright apoplectic about being taken for a ride all along by Cassandra, asking her woozily "*...my God, Cassandra, don't you feel even a little remorse for the sucker you've been stringing along?*" (169). Ray's genuine wrath lies in his confession that he is sterile. Hence his determined submission "*...it's physically impossible for me to be [responsible]. That's all I'm prepared to say on the matter*" (166). Cassandra's comeback, "*But you have Steve...*" is met with a cast-iron disclaimer: "*What I tried to tell you and what I want to tell you now's that I can't have children... I have Steve...but that was before I developed the condition which resulted in my sterility*" (167). Nonetheless, she is not about to take this humiliation lying down. In a last-ditch attempt to claim the moral high ground, she points out:

The facts are that you are so afraid of responsibilities that you'll go to any length to deny it [the paternity of her pregnancy]. What you've always been scared of is making a commitment, isn't it? ... I can and will take care of my baby without any help from anybody. My only reason for telling you was because I thought you'd want to know. It seems I was grossly mistaken. (166)

Going forward, Cassandra is in a quandary. Her submission that "*the laugh is on me*" (185) speaks volumes about her disenchantment. But, as stated earlier, Cassandra's bouncebackability is second to none. More significantly, her brand of feminism is underpinned by a strong sense of moral responsibility that shepherds her behaviour. Hence the recurrent dust-ups with her siblings. Upon learning that Cassandra is expecting a baby, her elder sister Mellinda, fully aware that "*even in this so-called permissive society of ours, a certain amount of stigma's bound to attach to a child born under such circumstances*" (147), goes out of her way to twist her kid sister's arm in favour of having an abortion. She recommends her a colleague doctor of hers who owns a clinic in town. After diagnosing Cassandra pregnant by "*two weeks at a guess*," the said doctor, who's already been briefed by Mellinda, offers in a roundabout way "*to arrange for her to terminate the pregnancy*" (146). (He stops short of telling her that Mellinda has undertaken to defray all the financial expenses.) Still Cassandra isn't having any of it: "*You mean help me abort? No, I intend to keep the baby*" (146-7). Cassandra claims the moral high ground. Her pushback narrative has a religious edge to it. Sixteenth-century French theologian, John Calvin writes in his Commentaries that

The fetus, though enclosed in the womb of his mother, is already a human being, and it is a monstrous crime to rob it of life which it has not yet begun to enjoy. If it seems more horrible to kill a man in his own house than in a field, because a man's house is his place of most secure refuge, it ought surely to be deemed more atrocious to destroy a fetus in the womb before it has come to light. (3: 41-2)

In light of the foregoing, it comes as no surprise that Cassandra witheringly cuts short Mellinda as she tries flat out to push her down the track of abortion, which idea pricks her conscience: "*No... I'm not going to play God. I don't have the right to decide who lives and who doesn't. That is His prerogative and His alone*" (149). Cassandra is a pro-life feminist. Actually, pro-life feminism came into being in the early 1970s following the expulsion from the "Ohio Chapter of the National Organization for Women" of Pat Goltz who dared register her objection to the abortion stance of mainstream American feminism (Naranjo-Huebl et al., 220). In a powerful article in *The American Feminist*, Hellen Kennedy Johnson captures the spirit of pro-feminism, aka FFL or Feminism for life:

The intolerance of the liberal establishment toward anyone who is a feminist and does not support the abortion-choice movement belies the fundamental ethics of the first wave feminist movement. Since the beginning of the second wave women's movement, mainstream feminists abruptly moved away from these foundational principles promoting the sanctity of all human life. (12)

Indeed, first wave feminists took a hardline stance on abortion. A leading advocate of women's rights in the nineteenth-century, Mattie Brinkerhoff writes in no uncertain terms that, "*When a man steals to satisfy hunger, we may safely conclude that there is something wrong in society-so when a woman destroys the life of her unborn child, it is an evidence that either by education or circumstances she has been greatly wronged*" (Qtd. in *The American Feminist* 2). Cassandra's espousal of a brand of feminism that offers a counter discourse to the rhetoric of the pro-choice movement foregrounds the sanctity of human life as against the short-lived advantages of abortion. In Elizabeth Fox-Genovese's estimation, pro-life feminism is mould-breaking in that it emphasizes

the unique mind-blowing experience of childbearing and childrearing as part of its pushback drive on abortion rights feminists: “*Insisting that women do really have a choice, FFL is reminding us that the true support for women’s rights is to be pro-life and cherish and honor women’s capacity to bear and nurture life*” (Qtd. in Kennedy 13). Being a feminist does not by any stretch of the imagination preclude the experience of motherhood. Cassandra’s worth as a mettlesome woman finds expression in her managing to juggle mothering and her feminist lodestar, thereby giving the lie to her mother cum other relatives who have gone to any lengths to get her going down the road of abortion.

Much as the female gent in *Cassandra* are faced with structural strictures, they are not taking it in strides. There is a concerted push-back on what Critcher calls “*structures*” that stymie the realization of their stomach for emancipation from male dominance. According to Critcher, structures refer to “*those objective aspects of anyone’s life-situation which appear beyond the individual’s control having their sources in the distribution of power and wealth*” (Critcher, 168). In the same breath, she contends that “*taken together, such structural factors place the individual or family in relation to other individuals or families*” (168). Driven by the consciousness that “*the power relations between woman and men are constituted structurally,*” women suffering the straitjacket of male dominance embark upon what Ralph Miliband terms “*de-subordination*”. He elaborates upon the word as follows:

I will call de-subordination for want of a better term to convey what is involved. De-subordination (italicized in the article; so, it I who underline) means that people who find themselves in subordinate positions, and notably the people who work in factories, mines, offices, shops, hospitals and so on do what they can to mitigate, resist and transform the conditions of their subordination. (402)

Then Miliband lays out the conditions in which *de-subordination* can be enacted: “*The process occurs where subordination is most evident and felt, namely ‘at the point of production’ and at the workplace in general; but also wherever else a condition of subordination exists, for instance as it is experienced by women in the home, and outside*” (402). Cassandra and her friend Marie’s project epitomizes two young women’s dogged determination to throw off the yoke of their subordination to men. In the aftermath of Mr. Wakilo’s passing supposedly from AIDS, LI goes through a bad patch as the late managing director’s replacement “*seemed to have come with the sole purpose of lining his pockets, regardless of whether the company went bankrupt or not*” (241). With rumours of retrenchment on everyone’s lips, Cassandra and Marie see the writing on the wall for Lotus International. If anything, the two women take the thoughtful call to “*make graceful exits [rather] than wait to to be shoved out of the door*” (241). Marie runs past Cassandra the idea of setting up a publishing house of their own. At first glance, Cassandra is amenable to the idea but her enthusiasm soon wears off when she thinks of the good money necessary to get the project off the ground—that is, twenty-five million shillings (242). Marie gets to overcome Cassandra’s reticence by talking her into accepting Dan Kizito’s offer of a loan, which loan comes, nonetheless, with strings attached: “*He’s not offering charity, you know. We’ll be expected to pay it back in full plus interest*” (243). After a slew of hassles over securing the requisite capital to get started, the jointly-owned publishing house finally takes off. Cassandra and Marie felt that it was time for them to hand in their resignation. The new company is known under the initials SBS, with Marie acting as Director and Cassandra as Chief Editor (245). The two women have risen to considerable prominence not least because of their success in breaking the glass ceiling when it comes to female entrepreneurship. By an awesome quirk of fate, Cassandra finds herself “*the person who wielded most control over the business, shaping it and giving it the legacy of efficiency and reliability*” (245). The trailblazing move of the young women turns out to be the yardstick by which to gauge womanly determination and success. Witness how Nabuunya, Dorcas and Juma—respectively low-level secretary, Office Manager and personal secretary to the two executives and Marketing Manager—sort of fantasize about being in Cassandra’s shoes (246).

When all is said and done, suffice to say that *Cassandra* stands as a blistering indictment of male subjugation of women at the same time that it extols the praxis of female agency as a way out of subordination. The eponymous character’s grim determination to push back against those old-school shibboleths that feed into women’s marginality vis-à-vis men encapsulates a feminist consciousness that has the potential for packing a real punch. Cassandra has shown that with grittiness cum rock-solid sense of purpose, women can free themselves from the stultifying shackles of subservience spawned by male-driven sexist practices in order to achieve emancipation and autonomy.

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Notes

Note 1. Arguably, power is at the root of women’s subjugation by men. It is at the root of any situation where one human being is left at the tender mercy of another human being. Nineteenth and twentieth-centuries German percipient sociologist Max Weber defines power as follows: “By power is meant the opportunity existing within a social relationship which permits one to carry out one’s will even against the resistance and regardless of the basis on which this opportunity rests” (Qtd. in Fenelon: 29). Women’s struggle to cast off the crippling shackles of male dominance should be geared toward whittling men’s power. To that effect, working women ought to fight for institutional changes, and structural ones within the work place. Only then will they be able to work their way up to leadership position. If anything, women’s access to leadership position curtails, in some way, men’s power. Margaret A. Crouch appositely writes that: “Men impose sexual behavior on women in the context of work only because they are in a position to do so, and because it maintains their position of superiority in the workplace” (33). A working woman in leadership position is shielded from the distressing experience of sexual harassment of any ilk.

Note 2. In *The Wisdom of Life and Other Essays*, eighteenth-century renowned philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer broaches inter alia the subject of honor. The universal feature of honor, he says, lies in the fact

that it “*is recognized everywhere as something particularly valuable*” (54). From the get-go, the philosopher makes a point of owning up to the intricacy of honor, going as far to say that it “*is a much larger question than rank.*” The meaning of honor shifts according as it is considered from an objective or subjective angle: “*I prefer to say, honor is, on its objective side, other people’s opinion of what we are worth; on its subjective side, it is the respect we pay to this opinion*” (54). He distinguishes between three kinds of honor—that is, civic honor, official honor and sexual honor. He claims that civic honor is more overriding as it “*consists in the assumption that we shall pay unconditional respect to the rights of others, and, therefore, never use any unjust or unlawful means of getting what we want*” (56). Civic honor is the bedrock to any peaceable intercourse between man and. To put it differently, if civic honor is not upheld in a society, that society may be headed for twentieth-century French sociologist calls ‘*anomie*’. Any course of action that runs counter to this ‘*peaceable intercourse*’ mars civic honor. As regards, official honor, it has gravitas in the eyes of Schopenhauer and, accordingly, no one should play fast and loose with it. When we talk about official honor, we primarily think of the middle class, but Schopenhauer is at pains to emphasize that “*it applies to all, not excepting the highest*” (57). He then defines official honor as “*the general opinion of other people that a man who fills any office has the necessary qualities for the particular discharge of all the duties which appertain to it*” (58). Speaking of female honor, it refers to “*general opinion in regard to a girl that she is pure, and in regard to a wife that she is faithful*” (59-60). The reason for this, Schopenhauer explains, is that there is a mutual interdependence between men and women, the bottom line being that “*Women depend upon men in all the relations of life*” while “*men upon women, it might be said, in one only*” (60). In light of this this, there should be an arrangement based on a division of labour of sorts, namely “*men undertaking responsibility for all woman’s needs and also for the children that spring from their union*” (60). In order for this plan to work out well, women (whose common foe, to the philosopher’s mind is man) should get their act together and present an undivided front so as to “*lay siege to and conquer him, and so get possession of him and a share of those good things*” (60). By “*those good things*”, Schopenhauer hints at all the earthly good things that man enjoys by virtue of his physical strength and superior intellect. That being said, women need to fulfil one condition in order for this form of covenant to pay off: “*To this end the honor of all women depend upon the enforcement of the rule that no woman should give herself to a man except in marriage, in order that every man may be forced, as it were, to surrender and ally himself with a woman*” (60). Schopenhauer’s views on sexual honor may sound odd and anachronistic to a modern-day feminist. Nevertheless, they speak volumes about the degree to which chastity was held in high esteem in his own time.

Note 3. In his *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, British Enlightenment-age thinker, Jeremy Bentham, broaches no end of topics, chief amongst which are *Motives*. Key in in his classification is what he calls *impelling motive* as opposed to *restraining motive*. According to Bentham “*any motive, the influence of which tends to dispose him (man) in the action in question, may be termed an impelling motive*” whilst “*any motive, the influence of which tends to dispose him not to engage in it, a restraining motive*” (102). Any man who contemplates embarking upon a course of action is torn between these two forces. In Cassandra’s case, the *impelling motive* overrides the *restraining motive* as she sees her interests best served in disregarding her mother’s advice to ditch Ray. Thanks to Ray, she has avoided moving with the tide and, by extension, embracing the rat race that turns out to be the undoing of many a girl.

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