

Abstract

Female ambition does not follow a particular trend of dominance over men, but rather takes on various forms, means, and attendant achievements. When this is represented in literary texts it forces a recreation and agreeable imitation of the society. Reading and analysis of Michael Afenfia's text, *Rain Can Never Know* points to this fact, but the novel has not received the critical attention it deserves. This paper, therefore, examines these female characters closely, focusing on their ambition and its nature; how their minds shape it, the practical steps they take and their ultimate achievements due to their aspiration. An analytical method is employed as well as the employment of a hybridised theory: psychoanalytical feminism. The analysis suggests that two forms of ambition are present: the goal to be independent and to be securely dependent. Achieving these goals takes different forms and paths of intelligent hard work, betrayal, stealing, and unwavering support. Outcomes are divided between arguable success and complete failure. In light of these, the portrayal of ambition challenges anti-feminist motifs in literature, where there is one fully developed female character and other female characters who remain two-dimensional throughout the text.

Keywords: Female, Characterisation, Psychoanalytic feminism, Ambition, Afenfia

Introduction

Literature is often read as a mirror of society, exposing its flaws and issues. Yet it does more than that. It also goes deeper and brings the individual to the limelight, showing how their actions, dreams, and reactions help shape the social world around them. Readers often see themselves in literature or recognise certain parts of themselves or others, and this ability for literature to allow for identification is why it continues to matter. The individual is the focus whether as a protagonist, antagonist, major or minor character. Beneath the surface, there are impulses and mental forces that push the narrative forward. Among these forces, ambition and literary portrayal of this stands out and it is the focus of this paper. Ahmat Jaelani describes ambition as "the persistent and generalised striving for success, attainment, and accomplishment" (23), while Timothy Judge and John Kammeyer-Mueller add that "it is a human attitude that is automatic in human life, involving persistence and long suffering" (759). Put simply, ambition is a powerful human drive. It can take any human to any height, what differs remains the steps and paths one takes toward its fulfilment. Literature, the mirror of society, captures these different images of ambition, triumphs, failures and the consequences it can have on bystanders.

Discussions surrounding ambition in literature shows root in the Elizabethan period as the drama of that period features Shakespeare and his contemporaries, who repeatedly caution about the dangers of unchecked ambition. As Elius Hossain and Sayada Habib observe, "ambition is one of the central themes in *Macbeth* and *Doctor Faustus* by Shakespeare and Marlowe, respectively, as they both portray the process and result of ambition corrupting the mind" (476). Literary studies on this theme reveal that ambition in both plays is essentially an era-appropriate cautionary tale. This is done through characters who would have otherwise met different fates based on their lots in life. The Victorian age continued the literary tradition of reflecting ambition in characters, and the societal and class upheaval of the era accentuates this. The rise of financial opportunities, education and urbanisation, lower-class members, and the new middle class effectively allowed for change their economic power and social influence. Thus, Arif Dwi Cahyono asserts that the "reflection of ambition in Victorian literature is a true recreation of a society and human identity" (125). Thus, through characters like Pip in *Great Expectations* and Michael Henchard in *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, Victorian era literary texts portray the human drive to change the future and achieve certain goals personal to them. Ambition is still a thematic preoccupation from the Victorian period to the present century. Roy

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notes that ambition “has always been portrayed in one or two ways, positive, culminating in the success of the character, or a negative, ending with irreparable damage of the character” (64). The growing rise of feminism in the previous century, however, changed the way women’s ambition is portrayed. Women had always been shown to be ambitious, yet literary criticism of the period largely ignored them as central. Lady Macbeth is a good example. Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* is more ambitious than her husband, but it is the male character that criticism focuses on. Scholars such as Nila Khan prove that “Shakespeare’s women often play pivotal roles that drive the narrative forward and influence the actions of the male protagonists” (146). Ambition, therefore, is not an exclusive male trait, but a human trait. Contemporary female writers foreground this as reality, portraying women as complex characters, mostly positively, summarising Sima Singh assertion that “Mr Bennett can never match his wife’s resourcefulness in setting up their children in Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*; Molly Gibson being better than any son in Gaskell’s *Wives and Daughters*; and Maggie Tulliver being simply better than her brother in Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss*” (40).

Following the second generation of African literature, Allagbe and Alou note “female characters in African texts were portrayed as their real-life counterparts: under the constraints of patriarchy” (70). These texts served as pushback against the system. Female writers strived for the imitation of women who navigate the system successfully with strength and independence. In many cases, the female characters embody what female readers might aspire to. This paper examines ambition as a driving force behind the pursuit of goals and self-interest, especially as it is reflected in feminist based African texts. The reading of the text suggests that Michael Afenfia’s *Rain Can Never Know* proves the fact that within the same society (and text), different women can portray distinct aspects of ambition to varied ends and through diverse means.

Theoretical Framework

The paper uses a hybrid theory: Psychoanalytic feminism. The psychoanalytic literary theory provides a way to explore the influence of desires, the unconscious, and motivations on the characters in a literary text. The theory was developed in the 20th century with contributions from Jacques Lacan in the mid-20th century which expanded the theory. Feminist theory, on the other hand, offers a framework for exploring women’s representation in literature with contributions from Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar which expanded the approach to the literary sphere.

In this study, a hybrid approach, psychoanalytic feminism, is adopted to capture both the unconscious motivations of female characters and social realities affecting women. Julia Kristeva’s model of psychoanalytic feminism is the strand of this analysis. Her framework explores two concepts, the “semiotic” and the “symbolic”. She links them to the maternal as well as women’s bodily experience, and the understanding of women beyond objectivity and the patriarchy. The model, also presents the fact that the identity of a woman is not stable but fluid. This is simply due to the influences of language, culture, and desire. This model allows us to analyse female characters’ actions as dynamic due to internal and external influences.

Emily Zakin and Claudia Leeb argue that the two theories align due to feminists approaching psychoanalysis from an expansionist viewpoint, as the influence of societal oppression is first felt in the mind. In other words, a combination of the theories provides a lens to understand the social structures that allow the suppression of women, and the inevitable psychological events that happen as a result, resistance or navigation of such suppression. In other words, the outer and inner aspects of the female experience in society, even as Manisha Kale et al states that “this connection is natural, and literary texts analysed from this lens capture the essence and well-roundedness of female struggles in society” (63).

This study uses the hybrid approach to examine Afenfia’s *Rain Can Never Know*, examining the different aspects of ambition in his female characters: the societal situations that establish their ambition and the psychological mechanisms that drive their ambitions.

Brief Summary of Michael Afenfia’s *Rain Can Never Know*

Afenfia’s novel follows the life and events of Rain, an ambitious young woman with a troubled past and a life of betrayal, lust, and danger. Rain works for Chief Edozie who is a business mogul with a troubled spiritual history. She works as an assistant but is unsatisfied as she believes she can do more. She complains until she gets the

promotion she wants, only to be made a spy to discover a fraud within the company ranks by her department boss, Mr Wakama, who turns out to be the culprit who embezzles money from the company. He is found dead some days after the discovery, and this hurts Rain, who found out that he is her biological father, who raped her mother in her teenage years and fled. Rain's life is filled with one complication after another. She mourns the death of her biological father in the midst of coming to terms with the fact that he raped her mother. At the same time, with her mother's admission that she knows and believes her that her stepfather raped her. Also, Rain's boyfriend cheats on her with her best friend Annabel. Meanwhile, her boss, Chief Edozie, plans to kill her for a sacrifice to save his own life from a family curse.

Despite all of this, Rain continues to survive, with mistakes of her own, she ceremoniously forgives her stepfather, makes her existence known to her biological father's family, breaks up with her boyfriend, ends her relationship with her best friend, survives the attempted killing by telling Chief the truth, saving his company during his transitional period and becomes his wife, and seeing to her ambitions.

Textual Representation of Female Ambition

Michael Afenfia's novel, *Rain Can Never Know*, is a textual representation of female ambition. The female characters in Afenfia's text are driven to different heights due to the circumstances around them. While their ambitions are tied to financial status, what drives them, plus the means they employ to achieve them and their ends are widely different. The women in the text who display ambitiousness include Rain, Annabel, Ohita, and Rain's mother, four of the major female characters in the text. Each of them represents the ambition to be independent and securely dependent. The protagonist, Rain, aims to be an independent woman in society. Her goal in life is to rise in her career to the top and to explore her potential. This drive is so powerful that when she begins working at a prodigious establishment, she detests her staple position which reduces her potential to nothing more than a serving girl. Afenfia introduces her in the following way:

Rain didn't like her job. She didn't care very much for her role or lack of in Edozie Express. Her fervent prayer every morning she showed up for work was that her boss would notice her frustration and do something about it. She believed that she was way smarter than the rudimentary and repetitive tasks required of her as his errand girl and nothing more. Her most complex duty was working the broken coffee machine for Chief Edozie and his unending stream of girlfriends and business partners (6).

The above quotation reveals Rain's disillusionment with her lot in life and career. Rain believes in her potential and ability to contribute to the company and society. She desires to become a rich woman whose brains, not beauty or connections, make her. Thus, despite her big pay for doing practically nothing except being a glorified PA and house help, Rain is not satisfied and wants to be noticed. Rain's frustration is a disruption of the patriarchal structure around her and her emotional response is intense, representing the semiotic dimension of meaning. This is someone who takes pride in the works of her hand instead of the alternative, which is the submission of her growth to the system. Chief Edozie is a symbolic representation of the patriarchal structure as he treats her with excessive care and wants to provide for her based on her beauty and personality, yet she strongly refuses this. Afenfia's description of Rain's dream tallies with the idea that there are "an overwhelming number of obstacles that specifically inhibit women's progress and limit their access to top position like leadership" (Ouardima 1701). However, his wife, Ohita's takes a different approach and seeks to gain from the system. Ohita's maternal instinct makes her steal from her husband in order to offer them a future after her husband dies. Afenfia writes:

In the last sixteen months, she had made seven trips to Port Harcourt. The meetings were necessary for her future and that of her two children. Ohita had invested so much time and effort in praying for her husband to overcome his predicament, but in the event that the prayers failed and Chief Edozie didn't make it to fifty-five, she wanted to be sure that she and her children were well taken care of financially and that they would be all right for the rest of their lives (84).

In the above quotation, Ohita goes to so many churches to help her husband, who has a death sentence as soon as he turns fifty-five. She spends significant money on seeds and tithes to help her husband, but Ohita's thought process is straightforward. She schemes, and her goal in life is to be able to take care of her children in the foreseeable future without her husband. To achieve this, Ohita steals from her husband. Thus, the steps to her ambition involve not hard work on her own, but pilfering her husband's wealth. On the one hand, she fights to save him and extend his

life; on the other hand, she fights to secure the future of her children and herself in case anything goes wrong. She genuinely fears that he would favour his children by his first wife, and as such, she seeks to secure her own. Plainly, Ohita reckons Rain as a threat to this maternal-driven plan of hers and she takes necessary steps to eliminate Rain from the picture.

From the foregoing, it is clear that both women have one critical ambition in life which is to be independent and take care of themselves and those they love outside the lordship of a man. It is interesting to note how both approach this ambition through the same primordial maternal drive yet strikingly different steps. Rain wants to work hard; Ohita prefers to amass wealth illegally. This drive is emotional and none of the women expresses the basis of their actions in conversation, which aligns with the return to the pre-linguistic state that Kristeva highlights. Rain is a rape victim who never wants to remain in the clutches of men as long as she lives, while Ohita is afraid that her husband's children from his first marriage would be favoured in the will over hers. As a result, the women are strict in chasing down their goals and aim to become self-sufficient at the end of the day.

Their characters are in contrast to Annabel and Rain's mother. Annabel's bodily experience leads her to accept the patriarchal system around her. She is a lady who, in her formative years, experiences sex and the financial reward that comes from it and this guides her view of the world around her. Annabel wants Rain's boyfriend because she sees his potential and as such, she nurtures him as a mother would, with the aim of depending on him securely as his spouse in the future. While this pales in comparison to the high dreams of the protagonist, Annabel's ambition is also valid as she genuinely believes and feels that this is the best she can achieve, thus she works hard for it. The act of stealing her best friend's boyfriend is a step she takes to achieve her goals. This drive erodes her feelings of loyalty to Rain, who at this point is busy fighting for a better future for herself. Afenfia writes:

The plan was for Annabel to spend the night with him, but until he confirmed from Rain that she was in Port Harcourt and wouldn't be back for another day or two, he wouldn't be able to completely relax and enjoy the few hours of wild, crazy and forbidden sex they had arranged. David knew it was going to be wild and crazy because Annie was very graphic about what she wanted them to do with each other, and she promised to come with toys. As for being forbidden, they hadn't really talked about it, but Annie didn't seem to mind that she and Rain were best friends (26).

The above quotation shows Annabel's forbidden act with David, and while he thinks it is normal, she is scheming for her own future, based on his potential. Annabel not only cheats with him but also actively tries to initiate a break-up between him and Rain. She hides her waist beads under his bed and advises Rain to break up when she finds out, "Rain, you're being too trusting and forgiving with this," Annabel scoffed" (52). When that does not work, she tries blackmail, anger, tears and begging to keep David all to herself. Essentially, Rain and Annabel are a world apart, yet Rain genuinely believes in her friend and does not see the strings that control Annabel's secret actions just as Annabel does not understand what drives her friend, Rain.

In the same vein, the protagonist's mother ignores all the horrors that happen in her matrimonial home due to the same maternal instinct. Her husband, Rain's stepfather, rapes her daughter while Rain believes he is her biological father. This is a brutal and traumatic experience, yet she does not offer succour to her daughter, nor does she admit that she believes her. She remains adamant in her refusal to acknowledge the incident, even as she requests Rain's forgiveness. This worsens the effect on Rain, who runs away from home, yet she adamantly asks Rain to forgive him and to come visit regularly. Her decision to play the supportive wife despite her husband raping her daughter and herself being a victim of rape, traces back to Kristeva's insistence on the maternal and emotional drive of the female. She wants to maintain her family for the sake of her children, to secure their present and future and strips her first daughter of the protection of a mother:

Rain, I was scared. I wanted to believe you. I wanted to tell you I believed you. But believing you and admitting anything would have meant destroying him and all of us. I had to protect his reputation and his career because doing otherwise would have been tantamount to throwing away the life he worked so hard to build for all of us Mum, he is not my father. No father would do what that man did to me. I was a child, Mum! I was only fifteen! (Afenfia 31).

Her actions are not a disruption of the patriarchal structure but a grim acceptance of its ability to provide and inability to purge certain negative aspects of it. Thus, she and Annabel take the same route, which is different from Rain and Ohita, although it is the same maternal and emotional instinct that moves them. The former form a group of dependents whose decision to accept the system they live in clashes with the latter, which forms a group of independent women who exploit the system for their own independence.

Another tenet in Kristeva's model is the idea of subject-in-process. This, she insists, reflects that identity is unstable and constantly shifts, and this resonates with the novel under study. Annabel, who the novel initially presents as confident and sneaky, gradually becomes unconfident, depressed and emotionally explosive:

Annabel knew she was dealing with depression, but no one would believe that a pretty girl with boobs the size of an average watermelon and a backside Nicki Minaj would die for could be depressed. The truth, however, was that she was sad and desperately in need of a steady man in her life. For a long time, she hadn't dated the kind of men that flocked around her during her undergraduate days and even when she first concluded her National Youth Service and began working. She couldn't even remember the last time she had a reasonable boyfriend or even a sugar daddy who spent money on her and took care of her bodily needs at the same time (Afenia 133).

Here, Annabel's descent into depression is an illustration of Kristeva's belief that subjectivity is fluid and that is continuously shaped by cultural pressures. She is a beneficiary of men's ability to spend on a woman for her ability to offer a sexy body, but for a while, she seems to have fallen out of favour in the system and this seriously affects her mind. Rain shifts between identities throughout the novel: she is a loyal girlfriend, a workaholic, and a daughter. These overlapping roles show that female identity cannot be fixed in a box. Earlier in the story, Rain tries to avoid Chief Edozie's sexual advances, but she ultimately becomes entangled in them. Rain faces multiple and competing demands: her mother urges her to forgive her stepfather to avoid a political scandal, Chief Edozie's advances on her as a prime candidate for his ritual sacrifice; and she suspects her boyfriend of infidelity. These pressures culminate in Rain's own act of infidelity. This disrupts her image as a loyal girlfriend. Her identity, therefore, cannot be fixed or neatly defined by the reader; rather, it is continually reshaped by external pressures:

Rain didn't know what else to say, so she decided to pull away from her boss's embrace. As she did, shifting her head slowly to one corner, her face rubbed against his, and their lips touched slightly. It was a mistake that shouldn't have happened, but when it did, neither of them wanted to make amends... They made love once, but Chief Edozie held on to her long after they finished (Afenia 144).

Also, Ohita starts the novel as an unrelenting wife on a mission to save her husband from assured death at the hands of a family curse. The novel shows that in a bid to secure her children's future in the life they are accustomed to, she starts putting money away and stealing from his businesses. Her change is a result of his love for his children from his first marriage. She descends more, ready to kill Rain to continue her actions. Rain's mother starts as a mother who takes her husband's side though he is her daughter's rapist. She maintains her stance for long, she later abandons her husband when he rapes a three girls in his hotel, and she can no longer cover up for him.

These fluid identities also subscribe to the tenet of abjection. Kristeva asserts this as the rejection of what threatens identity, and this deepens the understanding of the women in the text. The patriarchal system produces scenes of abjection, sexual abuse, financial instability, societal, and coverage. This erodes the boundaries of what makes a modern woman and which sustains identity. Rain's stance against receiving free money offers a scene of abjection, because it takes her back to her teenage age, where she is raped and no one believes her because of the wealth the man hords over the family. It destabilises her sense of self, challenging the symbolic order of independence that she has built and imagines for herself. Likewise, Ohita takes a harsh stance against Rain as an obstacle to her mission to secure her children's future.

Annabel would rather destroy Rain's life, by comparison, if it means allowing her to keep David. Rain's mother rejects Rain's testimony that her husband rapes her in order to retain the family status. It challenges her idea of a wife in a secure and model family. Afenia shows, that of the two groups, the independent group transforming abjection into agency, as Rain and Ohita do by working the system to be able to stand on their own, exploiting the system for their independence.

The novel is a reflection of Kristeva's subtle rejection of the portrayal of fixed definitions of who a woman is. Afenia's refusal to present a single model of female ambition is a crucial aspect of the novel, which contributes to its holistic portrayal of the multifaceted nature of female ambition. His portrayal of female ambition falls into two broad categories and within each category, there is an innate conflict. Afenia shows that the independent group represents women who want to be independent. The second group symbolises women who want to be dependent on the patriarchal system of their society. The first group comprise of Rain, the protagonist, and Ohita, the wife of Chief Edozie; women who are dogged in their pursuit of financial independence. The second group comprise of Annabel and Rain's mother, who are also steadfast in their pursuit of dependence and are not ashamed of the need to depend on men for their place in society.

Afenia continues by exploring the conflicting means of attaining ambition that the women in these groups adopt. Rain, in the first group, plans to and works very hard to be independent. She prioritises her job, and even her boyfriend complains, "with Rain, he was a distant second after her job... she was all about her career and changing the world. Rain had big dreams. She wanted to be the next Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala" (Afenia 78). She is so capable and aware of her potential that she actively fights against stagnation. She takes charge of Chief Edozie's family and business when he is indisposed, and keeps everything afloat until he returns. Even when she marries him, she still plans to get a business degree and to stand on her own. Ohita, however, plans to steal to be independent. She fights to save her husband's life, but puts money aside to protect her and her children's future. She states that "EE finances belong to my husband, and I am entitled to every kobo of it. And I swear, if Chief finds out that I've been stealing his money, that girl will pay" (Afenia 100). She is resourceful and intelligent, and when her husband divorces her, she still sees her children's future as secure. She walks away with enough money in her bank account to be financially independent. Rain's hard work undoubtedly contrasts with Ohita's easy approach.

In the second group, Annabel seduces her best friend's boyfriend and grooms him to be her husband. His potential to take care of her drives her and she has no intention of working harder for herself and is ready to put all of herself in his care. As such, she attempts to split them up, "Rain, you can date any kind of guy in this town you want, D3 isn't good enough for you" (Afenia 53). Annabel fails to achieve her ambition to be securely dependent on David. In contrast, Rain's mother already has everything she needs and it is her ambition to protect it and remain dependent on her husband's position of wealth and a high standing in society. She is so dependent that she wants nothing to spoil this; nagging Rain, "we talked about this the last time you visited. Rain, you have to forgive your father... my husband, otherwise you'd be going into marriage with too much baggage, and any man you marry would suffer for something he doesn't know anything about" (102).

Annabel's sneaky and traitorous fight to be dependent, evidently contrasts with Rain's mother's resistance to change to her dependency. These differences are a reflection of Kristeva's belief that "woman" is not a stable category and cements Afenia's stance on female ambition through this lens. This fluidity is due to many factors, with ambition being the focus of this paper.

Recommendations and Conclusion

The paper asserts that ambition in female characters creates a complete picture of literary writing and criticism as it accentuates the "human" in the definition of it as a driving force and attribute of humans. Very few texts focus on female characters' ambitions, and this reflects in contemporary literary criticism. Afenia chooses to focus on this, even attempting and achieving a well-rounded characterisation in this regard. Through Kristeva's lens, literary critics can reliably suggest that Afenia's novel is an exploration of the instability of female ambition in the face of patriarchy, and about the powerful roles of emotions, the maternal and the body in ambition. Essentially, the novel reveals the different images of female ambition, its subjectivity and the complex influences that shape it

The following are the recommendations:

1. Literary research should focus on both representation of the dependence of women on the existing patriarchal system and their rejection of it.
2. Literary scholarship should analyse how ambition intersects with gender expectations, social class, motherhood, and sexuality in literary texts.
3. There should be comparative studies of African textual representation of female ambition and other continents are imperative.

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