

## ***And They Call Themselves Feminists: A Poetry Collection*, by Naomi Nkealah**

Poets Printery. 2017. pp. 80.  
ISBN: 978-0620770439

### **Reviewed by Bibi Faatima Kader**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5572-0927>

University of the Witwatersrand, Department of Critical Diversity Studies, South Africa

faatimakader@gmail.com

*And They Call Themselves Feminists* by Naomi Nkealah is an anthology of poems depicting the sexism that is prominent within society and the stereotypes regarding females that accompany it. These poems also aim to dispel these societal impressions by including feminist voices which dismiss the notion of gender discrimination and society's perception of a feminist. A strong element of female empowerment is a common theme in the anthology. The anthology has 51 poems bound together by the central theme of feminism.

Society's expectations of women have not changed even as we live in a modern world. With the advancement of technology and medicine, the age-old succession of questions has remained: when are you getting married, and thereafter when are you having a baby? This is a stereotypical progression of the life of every woman, to which society expects conformity. When a woman has been married for a long time and is unsuccessful in producing a child, she is shunned by her own and her husband's family, as well as society. This reality is vividly illustrated in the second poem in the anthology titled "The Cry of a Barren Woman." The speaker in this poem (p. 10) laments her unfortunate predicament:

My kinsmen have abandoned me  
They dread the putrid smell  
Of the barren wife.

In such situations, many cultures often encourage the man to marry a second wife in order to provide a progeny, as the wife is then labelled a worthless being, as is evident



in the lines (p. 10) below, and the husband, spurred on by his family and community, says “I do” again:

Sister-in-law warned me last night:  
“We will get him another wife”

The poem ends with two powerful lines (p. 11) that serve as a refrain throughout:

It is no joke  
This state of mine

These lines convey the depth of pain women experience when they fail to meet patriarchal expectations of motherhood. The poem ultimately condemns patriarchy for inflicting such psychological pain on women.

Marriage is a theme that features in several poems in the anthology, offering a critical insight into the realities of this lawful relationship. Far from being glamourised, marriage is portrayed with all its challenges. In the poem “MBA,” the writer deviates from the issue of childlessness and sheds light on what often happens behind closed doors: the abuse—be it verbal, physical or sexual. Women are often trapped in violent marriages as they are fearful of stroking their partners’ anger into a veld fire and getting incinerated within it. The poem “MBA” conveys this point beautifully in its use of the acronym to mean “Molested, Battered and Abandoned.”

The theme of disillusioned marriages is also represented in the poem “Mapule,” which unveils other aspects of the lives of women living in violent marriages: the guilt that the man feels after beating his wife, the compensation he seeks to make for hurting her, and the pretense of a happy marriage they both put out to society. The following lines (p. 16) are eye-opening:

Mapule battered the pleasure of life  
For the security of wife  
[...]  
Gold graced her neck in the day,  
Pain warmed her bed at night.

These lines evoke familiar images of battered women who drive around wearing expensive jewellery in flashy cars, meanwhile their marriages are a sham, with domestic violence as their pinnacle. The poem seems to be asking the question: is it worth the battering or exchanging a safe life for a financially secure one that jeopardises one’s safety?

A pertinent issue that is still prominent within society is that of sons being revered more than daughters. Through the centuries until today, sons are considered to be the iconic

children of families and are valued for the masculinity they display. By contrast, daughters are relegated to a lower position within the family hierarchy and stereotyped into performing the role of home-makers, simply because of the societal belief that men are superior to women. The poem “Rambo” demonstrates this sexist ideology by using an almost militaristic approach. The speaker states (p. 44):

That was my father  
Or the name my aunty gave him  
A man who ran his household like a military camp  
[...]  
Now he wonders why I am not married at 35  
Or why my brother is still “unsettled” at 33  
But he is more worried about his son than me  
Which leaves me perplexed about the erudite sensibilities  
Of the male clan

The assumed superiority of men is mocked in this poem when it is revealed that men are also stereotyped to their own disadvantage.

The poem “A Portrait of the Lion as a King” supports the view that a man’s position in society is deemed superior to that of a woman. It is a metaphorical poem which provides an insight into how men have internalised that superiority complex and thus become arrogant, whilst expecting an almost god-like worship from women and punishing those who counter their viewpoints or think otherwise. Such men are compared (p. 46) to a lion:

prowling his dominion  
conscious, like Lear of old,  
of the divine privileges  
due a man of his status  
To whose will all must bend  
Lest their unbending be their undoing.

The use of the words “of his kingdom” and “his subjects” in the poem serves to emphasise that the poet is speaking of a male figure.

Media plays a prominent role in promoting gender stereotypes and this is exemplified in the three-part poem “The Things I Learn from Nollywood.” The film industry depicts a husband cheating as a normalised notion and promotes the acceptance of this by his wife. In part one of the poem subtitled “Lesson 1: Matrimony,” the speaker states (p. 61) with suppressed anger:

Husbands cheat on their wives  
in their matrimonial homes  
on their matrimonial beds

with their matrimonial photos looking on, or consenting,  
to the matrimonial betrayal  
and betrayed wives are told  
to accept male infidelity  
as a normal part of matrimonial life,  
as a test to matrimonial resilience

The poem projects the way wives are ill-treated by both their husbands and other women (especially their mothers-in-law) through their infidelity and the condoning of such infidelity. “The Things I Learn from Nollywood” also shows how families encourage the trade of a daughter to a rich man in return for a financial boost to get the family out of poverty. This projects the idea that women are objects to be used or commodities to be sold. The speaker in part two of the poem subtitled “Lesson 2: Maidenhood” says sarcastically in the last stanza (p. 62):

Mother, push your maiden daughter to marry the prince, to dress up in fine lace  
for him ... so that your  
family’s poverty can be erased by his generosity, his overwhelming gratitude to  
you for giving him a virgin wife.

Such is the level to which women are reduced when they are married off to the highest bidder. The poet is critical of both this practice and the film industry’s promotion of it.

Women are also objectified as food for consumption, as depicted in the poem “Police Encounters.” The poem has three parts that project different encounters with police in South Africa. In part three of the poem, the speaker is a woman accosted by a police officer on her way to Limpopo from Johannesburg. She confesses (p. 54):

Then I met this police man  
And he couldn’t keep his eyes off my behind  
[...]  
Police stops and checks are things I’m used to  
But a full body scan from luscious eyes  
Is something I wasn’t anticipating

In many ways, these lines suggest that women’s bodies are not safe from harm even from the police.

In the poem “Mothers Know Best” a young woman who is of maternal age is assumed by another woman to be a mother. As mentioned previously, the progression of a woman’s life in a patriarchal society dictates that at a specific age she is expected to marry and have children. However, the woman in the poem has chosen not to be a mother, going against patriarchy’s expectations. This shows that there are women who refuse to conform to society and its conventional doctrines. The challenge however is that they will continue to face pressure to conform, even from fellow women. The

speaker in the poem narrates an incident in which she is approached by another woman in a shoe shop who is seeking her help to figure out the shoe size of her nine-year-old son. The woman assumes that the speaker (p. 70) is a mother, like herself:

And she comes  
Assuming I am a comrade  
In the great race for Motherhood  
[...]  
But of course I should be,  
Would have been, had others had their way

Due to this supposed progression of life that every woman should experience, women who are of maternal age and have chosen not to be mothers are still shamed by society for deviating from its standards. Therefore, in the poem (p. 71), the speaker responds in a manner that makes a mockery of this quintessential ideology, creating and engaging in a false reality wherein she even speaks of her son being disabled in order to form a maternal connection with this stranger, keeping the stereotype alive:

“How old is your oldest?”  
The question is not unexpected  
Surely, I should have more than one  
You don’t just get to know kids’ shoe sizes  
Without having a *number* of them  
“He turned 7 last month”  
She looks pleased at this response

Although the speaker is not a mother, she hesitates to offend the other woman by revealing that information. She plays along and in the end concludes that all women are victims of a patriarchal system that makes motherhood compulsory for women: “We are friends in the struggle / The struggle to meet the demands of motherhood” (p. 71).

Women can also be the culprits in ensuring that society’s rigid view of men and their attributed stereotypes remain intact. A poem that speaks true of this is “To Desperate Women,” which showcases how women stereotype men, exemplifying that men can be victims of society. In “To Desperate Women,” an old woman is providing advice to young women about what type of man to marry and begins her warnings with the cliché of a taxi driver who works all the time and uses profanities and would not be suitable for marriage. She continues this condescending description of men by listing (p. 41) the other types of men these women should not marry:

Never marry an old bachelor  
He won’t change his habits  
And will remain a bachelor  
Ten years into your marriage

The principle of feminism is to ensure that women are treated as equals to men, and a vital value of feminism is that men are not to be treated as inferior or in a patronising manner. In a sense, part of feminism is to break society's and patriarchy's stereotypes, be it about men or women.

“And They Call Themselves Feminists” is the title poem that presents a cynical voice with regards to how feminists are viewed by society. This represents the manner in which society packages almost every facet of human life into a box that only has one definition. The stereotype that society and patriarchy propagate about feminism is that a feminist cannot have a sex life, as the popular notion is that all feminists hate men. This is illustrated in the first stanza of the poem (p. 8) where the cynical voice (which could be male or female) accuses feminists:

Look at them  
Driving down the streets  
In big cars bought with stolen money  
Getting big waves from hungry street kids  
And honorary bows from cheated workers  
Preaching the gospel of women's liberation  
But in the dusk of day  
They drive down the same streets  
Looking for young men to warm their beds  
And they call themselves feminists

The fight for gender equality has been a century-long fight and it seems that despite women fighting for their rights to be recognised, their actions as feminists are still policed. The line “And they call themselves feminists” which appears at the end of each stanza aims to reinforce this sentiment.

A response to this cynical comment is the poem “Yes, We Call Ourselves Feminists,” which provides feminists with the opportunity to reclaim the power that society has attempted to wield against them by attributing a sole definition of what a feminist should be like. In this poem, the writer begins every stanza with the statement “Yes, we call ourselves feminists” in order to contest the stereotyping of feminists and to fight back against society's mislabelling of feminists. For example, the third stanza (p. 73) states:

Yes, we call ourselves feminists  
Even when sexism is the prism through which  
Our character is judged

The repetition of the statement “Yes, we call ourselves feminists” in every stanza strengthens the speaker's position: feminists will not be silenced by society's stereotyping.

The poem “My Feminism Is Mine” reinforces the resistance of feminists against society’s stereotyping by reclaiming the definition of feminism. It can be assumed that the speaker has discovered feminism and is finally free of the chains of patriarchy. The poet uses an apt metaphor to describe patriarchy as slavery, whereby the master controls the slave, just as society controls the narrative about gender. The line “[t]he art of my escape from slavery” (p. 79) continues the metaphor by comparing a slave’s escape to freedom from his/her master to the freedom a woman feels when she develops the ability to see through society’s and patriarchy’s fraudulent words, becoming empowered and flying away from the clutches of society and patriarchy which can no longer clip her wings. This is evident in the penultimate stanza (p. 79) which states:

My feminism is mine:  
It is my art,  
The art of my escape from slavery,  
The slavery of the mind,  
A mind tied to the chains  
Of servitude.

This poem is the last poem in this collection and it provides a fitting summary of the poet’s feminist ideology.

Another significant feminist poem in this collection is “I Am a Woman,” which presents a female speaker who is proud of her roots and of her gender. She describes the ways in which she is a woman by beginning each stanza with “I am a woman of ...” which extends into an elaboration of what makes her the proud woman that she is: the earth, Africa, the world, the night, and the forest. Repetition is the tool the speaker employs to reinforce her convictions of being a powerful woman. The last stanza (p. 36) ends the poem with the conviction that the speaker is everything a man is, and more:

I am a woman  
And tho’ I be not man  
I am every bit he is; and more  
For in me is vested the best in the world.

This is a poem that reminds women of the need to continue to resist denigrating speech and ideologies about their gender by reminding themselves how valuable they are as women.

Society is a Janus figure as it despises feminists who freely explore their sexuality, as indicated by the poem “And They Call Themselves Feminists,” but fails to condemn men who do the same. Society ridicules sexually liberal women but praises sexually liberal men. This irony is poignantly captured in the poem “Who’s the Prostitute?” wherein female prostitutes who sell their bodies to make a living are stigmatised as “loose,” whereas the men who have sex with them are vindicated by their friends. The

poem's intent is to show how these two types of people are not all that different, and that prostitutes should not be considered as inferior because of their profession whereas men are praised for the same act of paying for sex.

Before recent times, the feminist movement was seen solely as a white women's movement, with white women being in the centre of it. Gradually, the fight for recognition was taken up by marginalised women of different races, abilities and religions, who had fought for women's rights just like the white women. Now, feminism can often be described as intersectional feminism. Part three of the poem "The Train Trilogy" subtitled "III—The Bridal Train" can be read as a metaphor for this fight for recognition. Its usage of three women fighting to be included in their friend's bridal party, which is made up of elite women, whereas they are from the townships, mimics the fight for recognition and inclusion that marginalised non-white women have fought for in the history of feminism. The speaker states (p. 68):

We were determined to stage a coup  
And enforce our rights to friendship

These words capture the strength and fortitude of black, Indian and coloured women in South Africa's feminist struggle.

There is no doubt that Naomi Nkealah is a champion of feminism and through her anthology she rips apart the curtain veiling society's abhorrent acts of sexism and stereotyping which maintain a gendered status quo. Through her feminist poems, she encourages and empowers every young woman who will read this book to continuously fight for her rights until she and other women are given a seat at the table, or sit at a table of their own. After reading this book, my intention to fight for women's rights and to bring awareness to young girls about society's wrongdoings has been invigorated.