

Being Human in a Time of Catastrophe: African Feminism, Feminist Humaneness, and the Poetry of Joyce Ash

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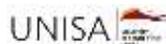
Abstract

This article explores what it means to be human in a time of health catastrophe, and introduces the concept of feminist humaneness. Feminist humaneness is an offshoot of African feminism and is about women practicalising their feminism by expressing kindness, care, compassion, empathy and consideration for other women in times of sickness, disease, pandemics and other health catastrophes. The article establishes connections between being feminist and being humane using the poetry of Cameroonian writer Joyce Ash. Ash's poetry constructs feminist humaneness as a socially responsive and practical feminism that fosters human relationships.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel bestudeer wat menswees in 'n tyd van gesondheidskatastrofe behels, en stel die konsep van feministiese menslikheid bekend. Feministiese menslikheid is 'n vertakking van Afrika-feminisme en handel oor vroue se praktikaliserings van hul feminisme deur welwillendheid, sorg, medelye, empatie en bedagsaamheid teenoor ander vroue in tye van siekte, pandemies, en ander gesondheidskatastrofes te toon. Die artikel gebruik die poësie van die Kameroense skrywer Joyce Ash deur 'n verband daar te stel tussen feministiese wees en menslik wees. Ash se poësie konstrueer feministiese menslikheid as 'n maatskaplik responsiewe en praktiese feminisme wat menslike verhoudings koester.

Keywords: African feminism; feminist humaneness; pandemics; women's poetry



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Introduction

If there is one important lesson the Covid-19 pandemic has taught us, it is to never take human kindness and compassion for granted. The SARS-COV-2 virus, which hit the world at large in February 2020, but had started its annihilating mission much earlier in late 2019, made human interaction a death warrant. Consistent with how contagions change everything because we all become susceptible to its effect (Giordano 2020), the virus changed our normal to a new normal of avoiding human contact like a plague. The catastrophic effects of the pandemic were felt in all avenues of life—politically, economically, socially, and mentally. Before Covid-19, the world had experienced many health catastrophes, prominent among them being the 1713 smallpox pandemic, the 1918 Spanish influenza pandemic, the 2007 Zika epidemic and the 2013 Ebola epidemic (Kucharski 2020; Phillips 2012). The year 1981 saw the first outbreak of HIV/AIDS, which is today “a catastrophe in slow motion” (Phillips 2012, 111). Diseases like malaria, cancer, diabetes and heart disease have been killing humans for eons (Kucharski 2020). Although not contagious like Covid-19, they nevertheless demand of us the expression of human kindness and compassion towards their victims because, after all, these diseases, like Covid-19, do not care about “our age, gender, nationality [and] personal preferences” (Giordano 2020, 7–8). Because none of us is immune to disease, we need to show empathy, care and consideration for the affected. This is the quality of humaneness, a fundamental characteristic of being human. How then can we express humaneness in a time of disease and other health catastrophes?

African women’s literature is instructive in this regard as it offers us insights into what it means to be humane towards a sick person and what it means to express that humaneness. A critical examination of this literature allows us to unpack ideas on how humaneness is expressed by women in times of disease and health crises, and how those expressions in turn contribute to human flourishing despite the depressing situation. This literature therefore constitutes a site for eliciting theoretical ideas on being human in a time of catastrophe. Pumla Dineo Gqola (2011, 7) has noted the importance of seeing creative writing by African women as sources of theory: “African feminist literary scholars warn against reading creative sites as locations of raw material to be mined for meaning. Instead, we insist on the need to recognize that creative sites are places where theory is produced, not simply applied.” In her seminal article on negotiation, Obioma Nnaemeka (2003, 377) speaks about “a third space where the immediacy of lived experience gives birth to theory,” suggesting that African women’s lived experiences—whether expressed through art or non-artistic medium—create sites for theory making. Based on these insights from Gqola and Nnaemeka, one can argue that a new theory emerging from African women’s poetic writing is “silent” pandemics and/or contagions that have been quietly impacting women’s lives negatively, and how African women have been dealing with these kinds of pandemics. This theory creates interconnections between pandemics and African feminism expressed in women’s poetry.

Contemporary African women's poetry creates new possibilities for understanding African feminism as a theory of humaneness and not just the confrontational politics it has often been associated with. In this article, I look at the ways in which the poetry of Cameroonian writer Joyce Ash engenders ideas of being human and expressing humaneness in the face of crises such as terminal illness, maternal mortality and fractures caused by accidents. Each one of these is a human catastrophe in its own right. When Covid-19 happened, we already had other crises and emergencies—some acknowledged as such and others not so (Kucharski 2020). These different crises compel us to see catastrophe as both personal and collective. Ash's poetry demonstrates the ways in which gender is implicated in our expression of humaneness during catastrophes, and conveys profound feminist ideologies in terms of how women respond to crises. We glean from her poems intricate connections between being human and being feminist, and this article argues that Ash's poetry collection, *Beautiful Fire* (2018), constructs not only an ideology of feminist humaneness but also a theory of African feminism as a humane project. Before discussing Ash's poetry, it is important to map out the contours of humaneness as conceptualised in African feminism.

African Feminism as a Feminism of Humaneness

African feminism is often seen as aggressive and confrontational, hard and lacking any form of tenderness. This has a lot to do with the way some scholars have defined, explained or conceptualised it (see Ahikire 2014; Mikell 1995; Shamase 2017). Words like “struggle,” “fight,” “battle” and “challenge” have been used to explain African feminism, making it predominantly a politics of confrontation and aggression. Speaking about feminism and womanism in an African context, Maxwell Shamase (2017, 9211) offers the following definition of feminism: “feminism is a struggle to end sexist oppression. ... The movement also confronts sex oppression in domains such as reproduction, production, sexuality and socialization.” The two words “struggle” and “confronts” convey an image of feminism as a politics of aggression and nothing else. Such has been the dominant qualification of feminism since the early days of African feminist theorisation.

American scholar Gwendolyn Mikell (1995, 419), in a lengthy article on what she perceived as the development of African feminism in the 1990s, noted that “an internally driven and aggressively democratic politics appears to be characteristic of the African feminism which is emerging across the continent.” This move towards aggressive democratic politics meant progress in her view. Josephine Ahikire (2014, 8) has commented critically on the work of Mikell, stating that her “perspective on feminism in Africa is not only conservative, but does a disservice to the women's movements, and to the generations of women that have been dedicated to pursuing more audacious and radical agendas, especially in the fraught arenas of sexuality, culture and religion.” However, in her own conceptualisation of African feminism, Ahikire lays emphasis on African feminism as a movement that challenges negative aspects of African societies without also hinting at its project to preserve what is already valuable within our

cultures. While her conceptualisation of African feminism is more engaging than that of Mikell, it is still limited to resistance politics. How about conceptualising African feminism as a movement that equally aims to enhance the positive values of African societies?

One of the earliest African theorists of African feminism is Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi and in her discussion of the characteristics of the feminist novel in African and African American literatures, she states: “the feminist novel is a form of protest literature directed to both men and women. Protesting against sexism and the patriarchal power structure, it is unapologetically propagandist or strident or both” (Ogunyemi 1985, 64). Here, it is the idea of protest that stands out as a dominant characteristic of the feminist novel. Ogunyemi saw in feminism a politics of antagonism which she did not agree with and therefore went on to propose an alternative theory of gender in Africa: womanism. In her book *Africa Wo/Man Palava* (1996), published 11 years after her initial article on womanism, she challenges the “adversarial feminism” that was being promoted by Western feminist scholars such as Katherine Frank and reintroduces womanism, this time theorising it as a “mother-centered ideology with its focus on caring—familial, communal, national, and international” (Ogunyemi 1996, 114). Ogunyemi’s womanism highlights the role African feminism plays in harnessing what is good in African societies.

Scholars such as Nnaemeka (2003) and Ezeigbo (2012) have theorised their feminisms foregrounding the values of give-and-take, negotiation and compromise in African cultures. Catherine Acholonu (1995, 111), the author of the African gender theory known as motherism, states that “the weapon of Motherism is love, tolerance, service, and mutual cooperation of the sexes, not antagonism, aggression, militancy or violent confrontation, as has been the case with radical feminism.” In this way, she sets motherism apart from not only Western radical feminism but also radical African feminism that only seeks to enforce a hostile politics. For Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie (1994, 230), African feminism is about “humanizing society.” These different feminists can be said to promote an African version of feminism that is humane.

Humaneness is a positive African value that engenders social cohesion and cements human relationships—friendships, family bonds, marriages. It is definitively a quality of showing kindness, care, consideration, affection and understanding for another human being who is undergoing a difficult situation in life, or experiencing a personal crisis. Transpose humaneness into African feminism and it becomes *feminist humaneness*, a concept I am using to capture women’s capacity to care, nurture and heal others in times of crisis. African feminism is fundamentally a feminism of humaneness because it encourages women’s cultivation of feelings and actions that are geared towards improving human relations: “in its most humane sense, feminism goes beyond a search for [women’s] public acceptance and recognition; it is a conscious process of self-renewal in thought, feeling and action” (Nkealah 2006, 135). This implies that feminist humaneness is not an automatic quality that women possess just because they

are women; it is consciously cultivated and the effort put into nurturing it comes from a commonsensical acknowledgement of its necessity for the maintenance of healthy human relationships, especially when catastrophes threaten to break those relationships, as is the case with Covid-19.

Feminist humaneness is distinct from the concept of feminist humanism. Feminist humanism lays emphasis on women working for the greater good of society, not for themselves as a group (Acholonu 1995; Steady 2011). Although motherism endorses the quality of humaneness, its conceptualisation makes it an advocate of feminist humanism as Acholonu (1995, 111) notes that “the African Motherist must embrace the whole gamut of the human struggle.” Although women’s struggles are included in this human struggle, feminist humanism lacks a specific agenda for women. Acholonu argues that “the motherist female writer is not a feminist writer. She does not confine her vision to women related issues, she does not limit her topic to women’s experience and women liberation. ... The ultimate motherist is a UNIVERSALIST, a *humanist* and an *environmentalist*” (1995, 114; italics in the original). Acholonu therefore conceptualises feminist humanism as the defining ethos of motherism.

Filomina Chioma Steady (2011) also sees African feminism as a feminism of humanism. In her study of the characteristics of female leadership in West Africa, she notes that female leadership is characterised by the metaphor of “mothering the nation” and “advances a narrative of humanizing the state” (Steady 2011, 11). She further states: “My research seems to confirm the socio-centric ethos in African feminism, in which the advancement and well-being of society is central rather than the advancement of groups ... or the advancement of individuals” (Steady 2011, 11). Thus, feminist humanism is a widespread concept in African feminist scholarship. However, the advancement of society as a priority over the advancement of women is what constitutes the central idea in feminist humanism. By contrast, feminist humaneness locates women’s caregiving capacity as central to the advancement of women’s individual and collective relationships.

Feminist humaneness is a concept that derives its meaning and value in the context of disease, sickness, contagions, epidemics and pandemics—any kind of health catastrophe. It is a feminist response to a situation in which a person’s physical life is under threat as a result of some kind of ailment, whether contagious or non-contagious. In this case, feminist humaneness sets itself apart from what Chielozona Eze (2016) has conceptualised as feminist empathy. Eze (2016, 30) defines feminist empathy as “the ability to feel oneself enter into, or imagine, the experience of a woman in pain caused by society’s construction of femininity. It is realized when we switch perspectives with a woman suffering oppression or privation because of her gender.” Thus, feminist empathy is about men and women, but especially men, feeling the pain of women experiencing unjust treatment or dehumanisation of some kind.

While feminist empathy is motivated by the recognition that “*every body*” has human rights—the rights to dignity and fair treatment (Eze 2016, 22), feminist humaneness is motivated by the recognition that every person has a personal obligation to preserve, or cherish, or nurture human life. Secondly, feminist empathy applies to all situations of gross human injustice, requiring all of us to put ourselves in the place of the unjustly treated or oppressed and feel their pain. However, some situations in life cannot be attributed to social injustice; they simply happen because as human beings we are vulnerable to different forces that nature makes available to us—the air we breathe, the water we drink, the food we eat. They also happen because we are prone to make mistakes, or make bad choices, as fallible beings. In these two instances, blame cannot easily be attributed to a person—self or other. Life just happens. Even where a health catastrophe can be said to be the result of another human being’s actions, or one’s own actions, it will not be reasonable to focus on the cause of the problem as that may inhibit feelings of sympathy rather than stimulate them. It is important to keep judgement aside and rather focus on the care needed by the person at this point. That is what feminist humaneness means: expressing care and kind consideration to ailing people irrespective of the cause of the ailment.

The third distinction between feminist empathy and feminist humaneness is that feminist empathy is conceptualised as a quality that men must cultivate and express towards women so as to foster the human rights of women which have been trampled on by patriarchy. By contrast, feminist humaneness is here conceptualised as a quality that women must display especially towards women and children when they are suffering from a health crisis, recognising two things: (1) illness and disease escalate women and children’s vulnerability; and (2) their suffering is often underpinned by patriarchal manoeuvres. In spite of these differences, feminist empathy and feminist humaneness share a common trait in that both emphasise the emotional connect in enhancing the relationship between individuals and both involve empathy.

We must agree that in a global pandemic such as Covid-19, we need a feminist concept that has practical value. Feminist humaneness is practical in its fostering of a care-giving ethos that should inform how medical staff, family members and friends treat a person infected with the virus. Since the majority of nurses in hospitals are women, it is especially necessary that we understand feminist humaneness and its role in harnessing human relationships in a time of crisis. With the increasing use of technology in healthcare and a general decline in personal values globally, there is an “urgent need to make healthcare more humane (e.g. compassionate, ethical and communicative) and responsive to human needs” (Jayasinghe, Tenzin, and Tenzin 2020, 35). In the United States of America, creative writing has been used in medical science programmes to foster humaneness among medical students (Hatem and Ferrara 2001). This points to the importance of this value in our responses to the health experiences of people we know, and also highlights the centrality of creative writing in enabling us to understand what it actually means to express humaneness in a time of health crisis. In the next

section, I analyse selected poems from *Beautiful Fire* by Joyce Ash to highlight further conceptualisations of feminist humaneness using the medium of poetry.

Feminist Humaneness in the Poetry of Joyce Ash

Joyce Ash is a Cameroonian-born poet, dramatist and social commentator whose work places her at the forefront of Cameroonian women's literature, particularly Anglophone Cameroonian women's literature. One of the hallmarks of Anglophone Cameroonian literature is the domination of male writers in literary production and publishing. Writers such as Bole Butake, Emmanuel Fru Doh, Bate Besong, Victor Epie'Ngome, Linus Asong, Bongasu Kishani, Bernard Fonlon, Alobwed'Epie, John Nkemngong Nkengasong, John Ngong Kum, Babila Mutia and Francis Nyamnjoh have been iconised in scholarship as the drivers of Anglophone Cameroonian literature, whereas women's writing has been largely ignored in scholarship.

In the book *Perspectives on Written Cameroon Literature in English* (2013), Shadrach Ambanasom has 25 chapters in which he comments on various works by Anglophone Cameroonian writers, but only one chapter is dedicated to the work of a female writer (Margaret Afuh). This points to the marginalisation of women's literature within the Anglophone Cameroonian literary hegemony. Yet, Anglophone Cameroonian women's literature is thriving. The works of writers such as Anne Tanyi-Tang, Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi (who answers the pen name Makuchi in her fictional writing), Margaret Afuh and Imbolo Mbue continue to engender feminist representations of everyday life in Cameroon and the Cameroonian diaspora, as well as bring to critical attention the unique experiences of women as they negotiate patriarchy, neo-colonialism, the Anglophone/Francophone conflict, racism, sexism, economic depression and gender violence across space and time.

Joyce Ash (the pen name for Joyce Ashuntantang), who has been producing dramatic and poetic works as early as the 1990s, is one of the female writers who has risen to global fame. A professor of African literature, Ash writes incisively about the multivariate experiences of women in Cameroon, in Africa and in the African diaspora. She has poems in over a dozen poetry anthologies published internationally, with some translated into Turkish, Greek, Romanian, Bangla, Spanish, Arabic and Hebrew. Her debut poetry collection, *A Basket of Flaming Ashes*, was published in 2010, followed by a second collection, *Beautiful Fire*, published in 2018. Fire is a prominent image in the titles of Ash's works, and it can be seen as an apt metaphor for a body of work that is comforting but at the same time can invoke discomfort through its very frank representations of women's sexual and erotic experiences.

Beautiful Fire (2018) is a collection of 65 poems rendered in beautiful, poignant language expressing a multiplicity of emotions that characterise human relationships: love, desire, fear, anxiety, joy and, most significantly for this article, humaneness. As stated in the introduction, this analysis of selected poems from *Beautiful Fire* focuses on feminist ideologies embedded in women's humane responses to health catastrophes,

and makes connections between being human and being feminist. There is no better poem to start with than the second poem in this collection titled “Incantation.” The speaker in this poem expresses care for and solidarity with a long-standing friend who suffers from cancer and has undergone chemotherapy.

Incantation

I sit by her side on a snowy day far from our girly days
When the sun’s rays bathed our bodies
And our breasts were just body parts.
Her bald hair doesn’t scream “chemo”.

She looks like a glamour star,
A cross between O’Connor and Alek Wek.
Pain has purified her body.
Her stories are incantations.

Like her head, her memory is clean;
She tells of that night of seduction
Under cheap lights in a dusty student room.
Her breasts now mangled, were juicy mangoes then.

His hands found them, squeezing them jointly into his mouth.
Beneath him, she danced to “Nyuwe”,
Directing him to the seat of her soul,
But he ate her body and spat out the rest.

That’s when the cancer began.
The next morning she tore the picture of cupid
Above her six-spring Vono bed.
No more prayers to foreign gods!

Today pain cuts her breathing
And she talks between gasps.
Tomorrow I will come with a notebook.
Pain knows how to tell

A

True

Story.

(Ash 2018, 2)

Cancer is truly a health catastrophe as there is no known cure for it at this point; the best chemotherapy does is to put it in remission, and even this is not a guarantee. However, unlike Covid-19, which inhibits close physical contact with a patient owing to its contagious nature, cancer allows the extension of humaneness to its victim through a physical presence that is comforting. In stanza 1 of “Incantation,” the speaker reminisces about her “girly days” with her friend, showing that this is a time-honoured relationship

which she truly values. That her friend now suffers from a terminal illness does not break that bond. Instead, she treats her friend with humaneness by continuing to recognise her subjectivity in spite of the woman's deteriorating physical condition, for to her, "her bald hair doesn't scream 'chemo.'" This act of dignifying her friend is also evident in the line "she looks like a glamour star," a simile that effectively configures her friend into a hero for surviving cancer. Although "pain cuts her breathing / and she talks between gasps," the friend is still holding on to life and that is the proof of her strength in the face of calamity.

In this poem, feminist humaneness produces female bonding as the speaker treasures her friend in spite of the unpleasant situation. Gqola (2011), quoted earlier, has noted that African women's poetry supports sisterhood and memorialises the lives of women. We see evidence of sisterhood in this poem as the speaker expresses fond memories of her friend's romantic life, recollecting stories shared with her during this time of pain. The sisterhood is particularly strong at this time because the speaker shows care, affection and love for her sick friend, does not judge her past life or mistakes but rather sympathises with her experiences as a woman in a world in which men use women's bodies for self-gratification and discard them afterwards. As the speaker puts it, the man her friend had a relationship with "ate her body and spat out the rest." The result? "That's when the cancer began." The speaker's friend had cancer after the break-up with this man, and thus the cancer represents a social pandemic in our societies: male abuse of women, which shows an insidious lack of humaneness. For Paolo Giordano (2020, 6), epidemics are not just health catastrophes, but "the contagion is an infection of our relations," and we see in this poem how disease comes to represent a breakdown of male-female relationships.

Although Veronica Austen (2014) argues that compassion is tied to pity, what we see in this poem is not the speaker's pity for her friend but rather an understanding of her friend's disillusionment with love and with men as "she tore the picture of cupid / above her six-spring Vono bed" and stops offering prayers to "foreign gods." We see a bond of African sisterhood marked by solidarity among women and genuine friendship based on women's understanding of each other's needs, especially in times of crisis. This sisterhood is epitomised by the concept of *Chinjira* in Southern Malawi, which is a friendship of commitment and obligation between women who are not kin relations (Oyewunmi 2003). Oyewunmi (2003, 18) explains it as follows:

It is a special friendship that involves social, ritual, and economic obligations, and this relationship is especially called forth at times of crisis in a woman's life. At such times, the *anjira* (friend) is obligated to provide emotional, material, and ritual support—whatever the occasion demands.

This is the kind of friendship we see in "Incantation" between the speaker and her cancer-surviving friend, a relationship cemented by a sense of obligation and support. It is feminist humaneness in a time of crisis, which is why to the speaker "her [friend's] stories are incantations." Incantations are carefully selected words uttered on an

occasion considered special and understood only by the persons involved. It is a highly symbolic performance of a ritual that has personal meaning for both the performer and her audience. That the sick woman's stories to her friend have become incantations means they share a ritual of spending time together, during which time her friend's stories are narrated in a language she understands. The speaker's humaneness is her very sacrifice of time to be with her friend at this difficult time and to listen to her stories. But the speaker does more than just listen to what she understands as "a true story," because she says "tomorrow I will come with a notebook," which suggests a decisive act to record these stories.

Feminist humaneness in this poem is therefore about caring for women enough to preserve the memory of them. It is about creating a female archive of experiences so that the lives they have lived are not erased by the menace called death. This is what Jessica Murray (2017, 16) calls "stitching a female corporeal archive" as this poem records a woman's bodily expression of pleasure and pain. By capturing in poetic form the speaker's friendship with her childhood "sister," which endures through her friend's confrontation with a health catastrophe, Ash (2018) participates in an African feminist project of creating an archive of women's life histories. Implicitly, her poem is an invitation to African feminist writers to create memorialistic records of women's experiences now—in this time of the Covid-19 pandemic, for the benefit of future generations.

In the previous section of this article, I presented feminist humaneness as the tender side of African feminism and the poem "Incantation" has borne witness to that. However, because feminist humaneness is not blind empathy for women—it is deeply motivated by the need to respond to a crisis—and since women do not live in a world of social justice, it is expected that expressions of feminist humaneness may take on tough characteristics as women face different kinds of health catastrophes. Such is what we see in the poem "Speaking Up," which is a eulogy for Monique Koumate, a 31-year-old Cameroonian woman whose fatal experience made news headlines globally in March 2016. Koumate, pregnant with twins and in labour, was rushed to Laquintinie Hospital in Douala by her family on the morning of 13 March 2016, but upon getting there the hospital staff refused to attend to her because the family had not brought enough money to pay the full hospital fee before any care could be accorded the dying woman. The hospital refuted this claim in the media, saying Koumate was already dead when she was brought in. Either way, the hospital staff denied Koumate medical attention. In desperation to save Koumate's babies, her sister pulled out a blade and sliced Koumate's belly open in front of the whole crowd assembled. Unfortunately, the babies were dead by the time this ham-fisted operation was completed. This incident sparked outrage among women in Douala who came out in their numbers in a march the next day protesting against the dysfunctional health system in Cameroon which valued money more than human life. The poem "Speaking Up" is Ash's immediate response to this tragic incident in Cameroonian women's contemporary experience of capitalist inhumaneness.

Speaking Up

For Koumate Monique, 31

Three days now and you will not leave me.
Your blood spills on the streets of my mind,
Dripping slowly inside my humane chambers.

What world kills a woman many times over?
Your pregnant body lying in public shames our eyes.
Your children inside gasping for air demand action.
My tears frozen in shock hang stiff, so stiff;
What world kills a woman many times over?

A woman hunched over you ignites my soul.
A true Amazon of our times determined to save lives.
Her courage mocks my visible silence!
What world kills a woman many times over?

They say the dead can hear and see.
Do you see me hunched over your story?
Vowing your life will splinter into many stars?
My silence will not kill you again!
(Ash 2018, 19)

To say Koumate's experience was a catastrophe is an understatement as three human lives were wasted in one instance because of sheer lack of humaneness by doctors in a hospital. It was pointed out earlier how humaneness is important for medical staff, as identifying with a patient is "the precursor for empathy, a learnable skill that is essential for physicians" (Hatem and Ferrara 2001, 20). Instead, what we see here is a gross "decline in empathy among all categories of health staff" (Jayasinghe, Tenzin, and Tenzin 2020, 35) involved in Koumate's case. The action of Koumate's sister, as shocking as it was, translates into an act of humaneness, for Ash describes the sister as "a true Amazon of our times determined to save lives." As someone who has experienced the pain of losing a sister (as shall be shown in the next poem), Ash empathises with the actions of Koumate's sister. In the context of this poem, therefore, feminist humaneness may necessitate an unimaginable act as an attempt to save the lives of children—children who hold the promise of a more humane society. Applying pandemic theory by Giordano (2020) and Kucharski (2020) here, I argue also that the metaphorical herd immunity to maternal mortality can only be provided by a more humane society.

The poem "Speaking Up" awakens us to the waste of human life that characterises health systems in most of West Africa. It is not just any life that is wasted, though; it is particularly the lives of women and children, the vulnerable in society, that are wasted, because health systems built on patriarchal and capitalist ideologies of self-gain

construct these lives as worthless and replaceable. “What world kills a woman many times over?” is the palpating refrain in Ash’s poem by which she indicts our cruel world—a world devoid of humaneness. Before Covid-19 came to kill women, patriarchy and capitalism had killed them many times over. The title of this poem itself suggests that feminist humaneness may involve a strong public condemnation of inhumane health systems that endanger the lives of women and children. Women demonstrate that they care for women as a group by speaking up against forms of gender oppression that threaten their very survival as human beings. Nnaemeka (2015, 11) argues that “our work assumes great significance when it arcs towards social justice and societal transformation.” Ash may not have participated in that protest march of 14 March 2016 in front of Laquintinie Hospital in Douala, but she definitely used her artistic weapon—her poetry and her voice—to condemn a very shameful incident of human rights abuse. As she says in the poem, “my silence will not kill you again!” This poem is therefore Ash’s memorialisation of Koumate’s life which her words have made to “splinter into many stars.” Effectively, writing poetry in memory of women’s lives is not just a display of feminist humaneness but also a demonstration of African feminism at a practical level.

As alluded to earlier, feminist humaneness in Ash’s poetry involves the extension of care towards children who are equally vulnerable in society, especially where their gender also conspires against them. Like “Speaking Up,” the poem “When I Was Ten” is a deeply emotional poem that conveys Ash’s personal response to the death of her sister at the age of 13, when she was only 10 years old. Such a catastrophe has the potential of permanently negating a child’s outlook on life. Yet, out of this experience, Ash draws an important lesson for women: girls are deserving of care and their gender is not a defect.

When I Was Ten

For Emilia Bechem Ashuntantang

When I was ten I could not have known
 It was our last stand as a full family
 That six kids would become five.
 How was I to know that her life
 Would end at 13 ...
 The day she broke that limb
 I carried her like a knapsack
 Throwing her down when my
 Feeble limbs tired out.
 Our father frustrated, blurted
 “Serves you right”
 As her leg hung in the air
 Above her hospital bed.
 It was the fourth limb to break.
 Our father too did not know

Her life would end at 13
With no more lessons to learn.
When the news of her death came
Women in muffled tones
Said they had known:
No ordinary child could
Leave such footprints in our mud:
Beating old men in storytelling contests;
Coming first in class year in, year out.
Her gender too was a sign:
No girl child was so strong
Like a boy,
Hanging on tiny branches
Like a boy
Playing all sports
Like a boy,
Winning every fight
Like a boy.
But I could not have known
I was only ten.
Now each year
I measure my feet
In her sun-dried
Footprints!
(Ash 2018, 71–72)

As readers, we feel for the pre-teenage Ash who has to carry her older sister “like a knapsack,” a simile that paints this as a daunting task for a little girl. We are not surprised when she throws Bechem’s body to the ground, “when [her] / feeble limbs tired out.” Our feminist consciousness finds it unacceptable that in this society no one cares enough that Bechem is hurt and needs immediate medical attention, except her own little sister. However, what is more striking about this poem is the way in which it shows how patriarchal ideology internalised by women stands as a barrier to feminist humaneness. Walter DeKeseredy (2021, 623) explains patriarchy as both structural and ideological:

Structurally, the patriarchy is a hierarchical organization of social institutions and social relationships that allows men to maintain positions of power, privilege, and leadership in society. As an ideology, the patriarchy rationalizes itself. This means that it provides ways of creating acceptance of subordination not only by those who benefit from such actions but also by those who are placed in such subordinate positions by society.

From this definition, we deduce that women too are patriarchal when they accept their subordinated positions on the basis of their gender. This suggests that patriarchy is contagious and a social pandemic; it is just as crippling physically and psychologically as Covid-19.

When news of Bechem's death arrives, the women in her community use it to justify their long-held belief that Bechem was an abnormal child, "beating old men in storytelling contests; / coming first in class year in, year out." These women do not expect a girl to accomplish such great things, which in their minds can only be achieved by men and boys. Bechem is condemned by these patriarchal women for what they see as a transgression of gender norms; she is cast in the light of an *ogbanje*, a child with supernatural powers who traverses the human and spirit world. Her breaking a limb and dying as a result of that is seen as a sign of her abnormality, her non-human status, rather than simply what it is: the result of an accident. Thus, the women fail to express feminist humaneness at Bechem's passing, which indicates that feminist humaneness is a difficult quality to cultivate in a society where patriarchal ideologies outspread to dominate the thinking of women, in ways very similar to how contagions grow exponentially to defy containment (Giordano 2020).

The women are as inhumane as Bechem's father who tells Bechem "Serves you right," thus expressing a masculinist callousness that betrays his patriarchal ideology that girls should not be climbing trees like boys. Bechem defied all constraints placed on her gender by being "strong/ like a boy, / hanging on tiny branches / like a boy. / Playing all sports / like a boy, / winning every fight / like a boy." Her actions are constructed by Ash (2018) as a trespassing of gendered boundaries. The poem flags the masculinisation of girls who are achievers as a fundamental problem in hetero-patriarchal societies in Africa.

Renowned feminist writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie problematises this gendering of achievement in her TED Talk "We Should All be Feminist" when she states:

Each time I walk into a Nigerian restaurant with a man, the waiter greets the man and ignores me. The waiters are products of a society that has taught them that men are more important than women, and I know that they don't intend harm, but it is one thing to know something intellectually and quite another to feel it emotionally. Each time they ignore me, I feel invisible. I feel upset. I want to tell them that *I am just as human as the man, just as worthy of acknowledgement.* (Adichie 2014, 20; my emphasis)

Adichie's statement helps us to establish a link between the masculinisation of girls and the absence of feminist humaneness in Ash's poem. For Adichie, denying women's subjectivity, or ignoring it, is a mechanism that patriarchal men use to both rob women of their humanity and usurp the credit for their achievement. Robbing women of their humanity is not just an act of injustice but also one of inhumaneness, because in failing to acknowledge a woman's embodied presence a man withholds from her kind consideration as a human being worthy of dignified treatment. Thus, constructing girls' achievements as a usurpation of boys' prerogatives, as the women and men in Bechem's society do, reveals a deep lack of humaneness towards girls. In comparison to the boys she outperforms, Bechem epitomises the girl who has taken what belongs to boys. What society saw was a girl who challenged boys, not one who possessed intrinsic qualities to be an empowered girl. In the end, Bechem's death can be attributed to society's patent

lack of human compassion as much as it is attributed to the accident that broke her limb. Her death is symbolic of the psychosocial disempowerment of girls through the gendering of roles. The poem “When I Was Ten” is instructive as it projects the view that feminist humaneness can be lifesaving, while the absence of it can be deadly.

Conclusion

The world has seen many catastrophes at individual, regional, national and global levels. The Covid-19 pandemic came and taught us that there are things we should never take for granted. Human kindness, compassion, care and consideration are fundamental qualities to display in a time of crisis. Feminist humaneness arises out of gender consciousness of the inequalities existing between women and men, and recognises that women have an obligation to care for women and children as vulnerable persons easily subjected to oppression in this patriarchal world.

This article has argued that there is a necessary connection between being feminist and being human, that our feminism can only be practical if it is accompanied by humane gestures in times of catastrophe. The analysis of Joyce Ash’s poetry has illustrated that feminist humaneness enhances the development of African sisterhood and necessitates public denunciation of patriarchal and capitalist health systems that continue to waste women and children’s lives, while also showing that the withholding of that humaneness can be deadly. Pandemics come and go, and Covid-19 too will go eventually, but “silent” pandemics like personal health crises, maternal mortality, accidents and patriarchy tend to persist. It remains for each one of us to do an honest self-introspection and consider ways in which we can express humaneness in every situation of catastrophe.

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