

Men Writing Women: A Software Reverse Engineering Perspective

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Abstract

Men who set out to “speak” for women must deal with an insider-outsider dialectic that interrogates their motive and impacts their understanding of the female subject. In African literary studies, conversations about men’s feminist thought and practice have revolved around gender positionality, often leading to the conclusion that men cannot be feminists but can play auxiliary roles as pro-feminists. Through a close reading of David Mungoshi’s *The Fading Sun* (2009), the article explores the possibilities and limits of “man feminism” within a Zimbabwean context. In the process, it calls for an alternative, non-essentialist grammar for discussing man feminism. Situated within the theoretical framework of Africana Womanism, the article contends that privileging gender positionality in evaluating the feasibility of “man feminism” not only homogenises men’s ideological positions concerning feminism but also obstructs crucial insights into men’s feminist engagements. Although alive to underlying concerns about “man feminisms,” the article further argues that recognising and embracing men’s input can unlock new solidarities and opportunities for nuance in the African feminist discourse. These claims are advanced in a methodologically innovative way by adapting the computer science concept of software reverse engineering as a conceptual metaphor.

Keywords: man feminism; Africana Womanism; feminist standpoint; reverse engineering; David Mungoshi

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Introduction: Perspectives On Men's Involvement in Feminism

Worldwide, men's participation in feminist and gender issues has triggered mixed responses, with several scholars dismissing "man feminism" as unfeasible.¹ There is an enduring scepticism around men's ability to overcome the flaws of masculine socialisation and their motivation to speak for women (Crowe 2011, 49; Holmgren and Hearn 2009, 414). This distrust aligns with the feminist standpoint theory, which asserts that knowledge is inherently situated and that being a woman is a prerequisite for being a feminist (Harding 2013; Hartsock 1997).² This coincides with Heath's contention that men's relationship to feminism is inherently "impossible" as "women's discourse is secured as feminist by the fact of their being women" (1987, 10). Heath believes that men have no intrinsic motivation to support feminism and, therefore, views men's participation in feminism as an attempt to reground male hegemony, "a male affair, an argument round women that masks again its male stakes" (Heath 1987, 5). Thus, for Heath, male feminism is an ontological impossibility that creates various epistemological problems and potentially leads to epistemic injustice. The idea that all men have access to institutional privilege, which Connell (1995, 79–82) refers to as the "patriarchal dividend," has contributed to the widely held view of man feminism as an oxymoron and an ontological impossibility (Holmgren and Hearn 2009; Kahane 1998).

The epistemological questions above cast their shadow in the African feminist discourse. Some scholars maintain that men cannot be feminists but can play auxiliary roles as "pro-feminists" (Adu-Poku 2001; Ampofo and Arnfred 2009; Chiweshe 2018; Ratele and Botha 2013). Another school of thought believes that "true feminism" stems from "an actual experience of oppression" (Steady 1981, 36), which precisely disqualifies man feminism. This radical feminist consciousness is informed by how some women experience masculinity as "the drive for domination, the drive for power, for conquest" (Kimmel 2009, 193–194). In her article, "African Feminisms," Lewis contends that African men who "define themselves as feminist" complicate the African feminist struggle that seeks to "contest legacies of imperial and male dominance" (2001, 7). According to Lewis (2010), men's involvement in African feminist struggles can further entrench masculinism, especially considering how male dominance is increasingly becoming complex due to globalisation and information explosion, with some African governments formulating token gender equity policies touted as pro-feminist gestures. Bungaro (2005) and Tamale (2020) recognise men's potential to

1 I prefer "man feminism" to the more familiar term "male feminism" because the former emphasises the human aspect, as opposed to biological sex, of men who participate in feminism.

2 Although the feminist standpoint theory has evolved, with some scholars suggesting that "situated imagination" can also be relied upon where "situated knowledge" is unattainable, the theory has invariably been invoked to underline the unfeasibility of male feminism.

enrich African feminist discourse but highlight inherent dangers that come with the participation of men.

Liberal feminist approaches in Africa have emphasised the importance of men's input in the struggle for gender equality, aligning with the view that everyone can participate in and benefit from feminism (Adichie 2013; hooks 2000). These feminisms, predicated on the complementarity of African gender roles, include: African Womanism, family-centred feminism associated with Clenora Hudson-Weems; Motherism, which emphasises the liberating role of African motherhood while advocating for male-female complementarity and attributed to Catherine Acholonu; Nego-feminism, which is associated with Obioma Nnaemeka and advocates for negotiation and compromise, as opposed to confrontation in resolving gender inequality; and Social Transformation Including Women of Africa (STIWANISM), which is associated with Molar Ogundipe-Leslie and advances a transformative gender-inclusive feminist agenda. However, even these African liberal feminist approaches are underwritten by an enduring distrust of men's involvement (Lewis 2010).

Critical studies of men and masculinities have also significantly shaped African gender and feminist studies, especially by unravelling new insights about men's behaviours in relation to women. African scholars such as Ouzgane and Morrell (2005) and Chitando et al. (2024) not only underscore hierarchies and complexities within African masculinities but also highlight the fluidity of gender borders and deconstruct the essentialist notion that all men have access to the patriarchal dividend. These groundbreaking insights reveal that men's behaviours and ideological positions cannot be essentialised as anti-feminist, which partly informs this article's call for the mutual inclusivity of the feminist work of men and women.

Research Objectives and Methodology

The present study is situated within the ongoing debate about men's relationship to feminism. The overarching aim is to reanimate and reinforce the view that men can be feminists, by adapting software reverse engineering (explained in the theoretical framework and derivations section) as an analytic lens. With this novel approach, the article problematises the privileging of gender positionality in African feminist discourse and argues that such a discursive tropism essentialises men by homogenising their ideological positions concerning women and feminism. Thus, by problematising the canonised feminist standpoint perspective in African feminist discourse, the article calls for a new grammar with which to talk about men's feminist engagements. The specific objectives of the present study are to:

- innovatively demonstrate the feasibility of man feminism in an African context, with a focus on literary imagination;

- propose an alternative, non-essentialist grammar for discussing man feminism; and
- highlight ambivalences in man feminism.

The study also seeks to have continental and global significance, firstly, by inspiring more men to become involved in gender equality initiatives and, secondly, by inspiring similar studies elsewhere that will promote broader cross-cultural conversations and intellectual synergies.

In pursuit of its objectives, the study employs a qualitative content analysis approach to read Mungoshi's *The Fading Sun*. According to Krippendorff (2018), this methodology is best suited for the humanities and social sciences, where scholars are interested in the contextual meanings of texts and various modes of signification. In this article, I engage critical content analysis to systematically examine how Mungoshi's novel harnesses meaning, intentionality, and politico-aesthetic means to advance African feminist goals and, in the process, demonstrate that men can attain a progressive feminist standpoint. While relying on perspectives from African feminism, I specifically draw on Africana Womanism to frame my analysis of Mungoshi's feminist consciousness in *The Fading Sun*. I further use the computer science process of software reverse engineering to conceptualise the benefits, potential dangers, and ways of optimising African man feminism. This methodological choice is explored in detail in the section.

The existing critical scholarship on men's feminist engagements in Zimbabwe has largely focused on Chenjerai Hove's works, and no studies known to the author at the time of writing have focused on *The Fading Sun*. My choice of a less-known author deliberately disrupts the trend towards canon formation and hopes to animate existing scholarship on man feminism by ushering in a new voice into the Zimbabwean man feminist discourse. Although I primarily focus on Mungoshi's novel, I place it in conversation with other male-authored literary texts such as Chenjerai Hove's *Ancestors* (1996) and Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) to allow a nuanced exploration of the dynamics of man feminist practice.

In what follows, I begin with a theoretical grounding section. The next section will highlight the ambivalences of man feminism through brief analyses of selected male-authored literary texts from Africa. This establishes the background for a more comprehensive reading of David Mungoshi's *The Fading Sun* in the last section, where I demonstrate the feasibility and benefits of man feminism.

Theoretical Framework and Derivations

This article draws on Africana Womanism, a theory introduced by Clenora Hudson-Weems in 1987 to describe an exclusively Black feminist sensibility. As an extension of the concept of "Womanism" associated with Alice Walker and Chikwenye Okonjo

Ogunyemi, the theory was born out of the need to design a liberation praxis that specifically addresses the needs of Black women while taking note of environmental specificities that shape such needs. Premised on the realisation that white feminisms cannot adequately address the challenges of Black women, Womanism recognises the importance of self-naming, the place-boundness of African women's sensibilities, and the need for Black women to collaborate with men and other justice seekers in resolving family and community problems (Hudson-Weems 2003, 2023). Thus, as an operational framework, Womanism differs from feminism in its mission, objectives, and approaches. Hudson-Weems accuses feminism of promoting gender polarisation by projecting men as irreducibly anti-women, which is out of sync with Womanism's family-centred approach. She further contends that there is an inherent complementarity between the gender roles of Black men and women and, therefore, a timeless need for cooperation between the two genders to transcend the transhistorical marginalisation and traumas inflicted on Black people worldwide.

Africana Womanism's emphasis on intergender collaboration makes it a useful framework for conceptualising African men's feminist engagements, as represented by Mungoshi's *The Fading Sun*. The theory also underscores Black women's intrinsic value and nation-building initiatives, drawing on how the literary works of Black women such as Toni Morrison and Zora Neal Hurston demonstrate the strengths of Black womanhood (Hudson-Weems 2019). This speaks through the way Mungoshi and many other African writers, such as Solomon Plaatje, Thando Mgqolozana, Chenjerai Hove, Taban Lo Liyong, and Nuruddin Farah, use literary means to undo prejudicial labels that diminish women's worth. In her recent book, *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* (2023), Hudson-Weems reaffirms the pertinence of her theory to Black women's freedom and empowerment and updates the theory to Africana-Melanated Womanism to emphasise the place of empathy in the ongoing struggle for gender equality. This resonates with Eze's (2016) concept of "feminist empathy" which emphasises the place of compassion in African men's relationship with women, which Mungoshi's *The Fading Sun* mediates.

While the study is situated within the broad framework of Africana Womanism, it largely derives its conceptual inspiration from the computer science concept of software reverse engineering, which entails analysing the architecture and functionality of an existing software system to improve it or create a new program (Eilam 2005, 4). The first step in software reverse engineering is "code analysis," where a code is a system of symbols used by programmers to represent information in brief and secretive ways. Code analysis enables programmers to understand and improve existing programs (Müller et al. 2000). There are two approaches to code analysis. The first is offline analysis, which involves manually analysing a program code, sometimes requiring guesswork due to missing or implicit data. The second is live analysis, which entails observing the code "on a live system" where much data is provided (Eilam 2005, 110). Offline code analysis can be likened to how men can try to understand women's experiences and sensibilities by reading existing feminist literature and using their

situated imagination, which can result in biases and mistruths. Live code analysis, which is more effective and reliable, can metaphorically relate to interactive approaches to understanding and appreciating women's sensibilities and lived experiences. These include engaging women in open dialogues, active listening, empathy, supporting women-led initiatives, self-reflection, seeking mentorship, and non-judgemental reading of women's narratives, which, as I demonstrate in a later section, enabled David Mungoshi to produce his feminist novel, *The Fading Sun*. The metaphor of live code analysis can also illuminate how men can identify and critique masculinity and institutional privilege, allowing them to unlearn the biases of masculine socialisation, forge networks with other feminists, and transcend the stigma that may come with playing a man feminist role (Aragon 2006; Madlala 1995).

Reverse engineering also involves "constant program understanding," which refers to the continuous process of analysing and monitoring a software program to ensure its continued functionality, capacity for integration with other software systems, and susceptibility to attack by malicious software. It is a quality control and security mechanism that not only helps software developers to share knowledge but also enables them to identify vulnerabilities in software applications and develop counterware such as antiviruses and antihacking software packages (Eilam 2005, 5; Müller et al. 2000, 49). However, rogue software developers can use the same process of reverse engineering to create malicious software or gain unauthorised access to computer programs or private data. I adapt the latter scenario to conceptualise how individual men or male-dominated governments can maliciously infiltrate, appropriate, and attenuate the feminist project under the guise of advancing feminist goals, as Lewis (2010) contends. The idea of counterware helps to make sense of the gatekeeping and quality control measures adopted by African women feminists, including subjecting men's feminist engagements to scrutiny and placing bottlenecks in the publication of feminist research.³

I acknowledge the potential for conceptual glitches in applying a data-driven and fact-based reverse engineering framework to the subjective, non-empirical topic of man feminism. However, far from being mechanical, the approach uses software reverse engineering only as an extended metaphor to address the various tensions confronting the notion of man feminism. By adapting software reverse engineering to explore the possibilities and limits of man feminism, I evade the limitations of the usual feminist standpoint approach that emphasises gender positionality and problematically overlooks exceptions in men's behaviour towards women and feminism. This allows me to make

3 As a gatekeeping measure against men's appropriation of feminist research, the question of gender positionality underwrites publication politics in several feminist journals, including *Feminist Africa*, *Feminist Legal Studies*, *Feminist Theory*, *Signs*, *Feminist Review*, *Frontiers*, *Gender and Society*, *Meridians*, and *Journal of Gender Studies*. These journals were specifically established to promote feminist research, especially by African women. Some journals, such as *Feminist Africa*, ensure that each submitted manuscript is reviewed by at least one African woman feminist as a quality control measure. See Tamale, S. 2020. *Decolonization and Afro Feminism*, pp. 55–56.

a compelling case for the practicability of man feminism in an African context. Reverse engineering emphasises the improvement of what already exists, making it an effective metaphor for exploring how recognising men's voices can improve feminist and gender equity discourses by challenging the essentialist underpinnings of feminist standpoint theory. Therefore, this unique and experimental analytic paradigm allows an innovative exploration of the aboutness and whyness of man feminist thought and practice, potentially expanding the debate space on the place of men in African feminism.

Man Feminism as Malicious Software

Hélène Cixous's (1975) famous statement, "Woman must write woman and man man," encapsulates the anxieties around man feminism. These anxieties derive from the transhistorical underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women in male-authored narratives, as well as from the exclusion of women from sites of nation narration and knowledge production.⁴ In some cases, male-authored literary texts that are often read as feminist texts display anti-feminist tendencies, which can be explained through the metaphor of malicious software or malware. Malicious software is "any program that works against the interests of the system's user or owner" (Eilam 2005, 273). It comes in various forms, including: "Trojan horses," which disguise themselves as useful programs; "backdoors," which spy on or take control of the victim's computer; "sticky software," which comes as unsolicited programs and prevent users from uninstalling them; and "Information-Stealing" or "kleptographic worms," which steal data from the victim (Eilam 2005, 273–278). Arguably, those who distrust man feminism regard it in the same way software developers and computer users view malicious software. Although the harm caused by man feminism may not be as deliberate as the one caused by computer viruses, the analogy helps to conceptualise the subtle harm that men can cause, either wittingly or unwittingly, to the feminist struggle. Therefore, although it might be enlightening to represent such harm through the imagery of malicious software, it should be noted that the artists whose works are cited below do not overtly identify as feminists. The analogy I draw between man feminism and malicious software is limited to their shared properties, especially the complexity and subtlety of their potential harm.

When Chinua Achebe's fifth novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, was published in 1987, it was celebrated for its radical departure from the sexist portrayals that characterise his earlier novels, such as *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *Arrow of God* (1964), and *A Man of the People* (1966). According to Alkali, Talif, and Jan, *Anthills of the Savannah* "was a welcome relief to the feminist world" (2015, 594). Although Achebe does not identify

4 Women are invariably objectified in most of the male-authored African literary texts written before the 1980s, including Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* (1962), and Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* (1966). A similar trend is also visible in numerous postcolonial literary texts, including Shona novels such as Charles Mungoshi's *Kunyarara Hakusi Kutaura* (1983) and Ignatius Mabasa's *Mapenzi* (1999), which portray women in a negative light as morally decadent.

himself as a feminist, to a considerable extent, the novel lives up to the overarching goal of feminism to eradicate culturally constructed inequalities between men and women and reposition women as active participants in sites of knowledge production (Lewis 2001; Tamale 2020). The novel is a site of symbolic enablement for women, who are represented by Beatrice Okoh, a morally strong, level-headed and exceptionally intelligent woman, with a first-class Honours in English degree from Queen Mary College, University of London. She poses as a voice of reason in the disorderly world of Kangan. Through Beatrice, the novel demonstrates that women can transcend restrictions imposed on them by their gender, by consolidating subjectivities and venturing into male-dominated socio-political spaces. Although this is one of the major goals of the African feminist project, the novel still contains anti-feminist elements. Women are excluded from sites where significant national decisions are made, such as the cabinet. Their experiences and perspectives are missing in the political upheaval foregrounded in the novel, while other female characters, such as Ikem's girlfriend, remain simplistic archetypes. The case of *Anthills of the Savannah* highlights ambivalence in the representation of women by African male writers.

A similar scenario is evoked by Chenjerai Hove, a Zimbabwean writer who has earned a reputation for symbolically empowering women through his writing, especially *Bones* (1988) and *Ancestors* (1996). The two novels openly critique patriarchy, give narrative space to women, and foreground women characters who consolidate subjectivities from the margins, which are tenets of feminist writing. As a result, many scholars have read the novels as feminist works, including Hove (2014) and Mangena (2013). However, as Mangena (2013) notes, in *Ancestors*, Chenjerai Hove ironically displaces the female figure and reinforces her alterity by leaving the stories of two disadvantaged girls, Miriro and Tariro, to be told by a man. When Tariro's mother is banished for challenging her daughter's forced marriage, she becomes destitute in a way that suggests that it is not wise for women to challenge male authority (Mangena 2013). These textual examples hint at the ambivalent and precarious relationship between African men and feminism.

Another interesting instance is that of African writers such as Camara Laye, David Diop, and Leopold Sedar Senghor who deploy the literary front to critique patriarchy and advance feminist agendas. These authors have consistently used the "Mother Africa" image to exalt the African female figure by recognising her beauty, strength, dignity, and value (Begum 2016). However, as Begum argues, the elevation of the woman figure as "Mother Africa" in the works of these male writers comes across "only as an idea, a concept, for it is far removed from the reality of women's daily existence" (2016, 16). This amounts to a narrative dishonesty that betrays a patronising attitude, what Boehmer (2009) describes as the symbolic representation of the nation as a mother figure, merely as a token gesture meant to mask masculine privilege and patriarchal nationalism. Again, such ambivalences, evoking the subtlety of computer viruses, shed light on the problematic insider-outsider dialectic that often underwrites men's literary representation of women.

The scenarios above highlight some of the limitations of man feminism as mediated by the literary front. The metaphor of malicious software can also shed light on the subtle patterns of gendered domination that run as undercurrents in what has come to be called “state feminism,” which is the feminism practised by states through formulating gender equity policies. According to Lewis (2010), male dominance is increasingly becoming complex due to globalisation, information explosion, and the conspiratorial role of elite women in government who set feminist agendas and formulate token gender equity policies that do not address the needs of ordinary women. Such patterns of gendered domination, subtly vicious like Trojan horses, reveal how male-dominated African governments perpetuate masculinism under the guise of state feminism. Similarly, the often-unsolicited participation of men in feminist agendas evokes the behaviour of backdoor viruses and sticky software that install themselves and resist being uninstalled. Therefore, what Tamale (2020) views as the distrust of man feminism, especially by women feminists in the academy, is a gatekeeping measure that can be understood through the metaphor of counterware or system security analysis in software reverse engineering.

However, in highlighting these ambivalences in men’s feminist engagements, I intend to demonstrate that man feminism, like all discourses, is a work in progress. Susan Gubar’s (1994) concept of “feminist misogyny” reveals that even women-authored feminist texts sometimes display glaring contradictions, implying that gender biases and misrepresentations are not exclusive to any one gender. Gubar observes that women’s feminist writing is often plagued by the inherent influence of male-authored narratives and epistemes, which results in women feminists sometimes becoming overly reactionary and failing to transcend the hegemonic tendencies of patriarchal discourses, a scenario that Chando (2023, 8) describes as “vengeful narration.” Therefore, the ambivalences in man feminism call for both men and women feminists to be constantly vigilant, which endorses Hudson-Weems’s (2023) call for inter-gender collaboration in the struggle for gender equity. In software reverse engineering, this constant vigilance is likened to “constant program understanding,” which is the practice of continually monitoring existing software applications to identify vulnerabilities and developing counterware (Müller et al. 2000, 49–50).

Live Code Analysis: Unwriting the Patriarchal Script in David Mungoshi’s *The Fading Sun*

In *The Fading Sun*, the Zimbabwean writer David Mungoshi demonstrates the feasibility of man feminism. Despite the dearth of critical attention on the novel, it is a significant addition to a growing arsenal of male-authored African literary texts that challenge gendered oppression and advocate for women’s empowerment. These texts include Sol Plaatje’s *Mhudi* (1930), Taban Lo Liyong’s *The Colour of Hope* (2010), André Brink’s *Imaginations of Sand* (1996), and Sabata-mpho Mokae’s *Ga Ke Modisa* (I Am Not His Keeper) (2012). What makes Mungoshi particularly interesting in this study is his open claim to the status of a feminist, evident in the following interview excerpt

where he explains how he manages to transcend the biases that often underwrite men's literary representation of women:

I am a happy and well-adjusted male, and I took up the challenge to speak for women after I had discussed this with Yvonne Vera. I asked her if she thought a man could adequately and convincingly portray a woman and capture all the nuances that are naturally associated with her. Yvonne's reply was both evocative and informing. She said: The imagination is the freest space in the world. Anything and everything is possible. A lady friend and colleague challenged me to write the kind of novel that *The Fading Sun* became. She said there were many women in my life: my wife, my daughters, my mother, my sisters, my aunts and female students and colleagues. Armed with this encouragement I then researched into breast cancer. I even read a book on surgical nursing. The idea was to authenticate the universe I was creating. One of the greatest compliments I have ever received was from two lady readers, one of whom had had a radical mastectomy. When they discovered who I was they expressed a lot of wonder and amazement having until then been labouring under the impression that I was a woman using a man's name and that I was a medical doctor. Being neither a woman nor a medical doctor I was, of course, naturally very elated. If you sit quietly among women and avoid being intrusive you will hear them talk openly about their lives and experiences (Chando 2018, 1–2).

Here, Mungoshi emphasises how he actively acquired a progressive feminist standpoint through interactive approaches such as open dialogue with an expert feminist woman (Yvonne Vera), active listening, practising self-reflection, and painstaking research into the gynaecological challenge of breast cancer (which the female protagonist suffers from in *The Fading Sun*). According to Mungoshi, these approaches, evoking the reverse engineering process of live code analysis, helped him acquire substantial knowledge and appreciation of women's sensibilities and lived experiences, which enabled him to navigate the insider-outsider dialectic in portraying feminist issues in *The Fading Sun*.

Mungoshi's story resonates with the narratives of many other man feminist scholars from Southern Africa, including Protas Madlala (1995) and the South African intellectual, writer, journalist, and politician Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje, whose feminist consciousness was shaped by his active interaction with women who constituted his social environment, including his grandmother (Hooper 1992). These stories underscore the capacity of men to change in step with the situational contexts in which they interact with women and due to their preparedness to unlearn the faults of masculine socialisation. This reinforces Kimmel's argument that "masculinity [is] a constantly changing collection of meanings that we construct through our relationships with ourselves, with each other, and with our world" (2009, 182). Therefore, as Madlala contends, "for one to be a male feminist, one does not need to belong to a class, religion or society. It has to do with the person and how they were raised" (1995, 98). As Hudson-Weems (2023) would say, the involvement of Black men such as Mungoshi in

the feminist struggle is enshrined in African cosmology where men and women are equals.

The Fading Sun foregrounds the experiences of its female protagonist, Mary, as she goes through the phases of girlhood, motherhood, and grandmotherhood. Told by an omniscient third-person narrator, the story begins in the present, with Mary taking stock of the losses she has incurred as Cyril Maya's wife. Cyril is an American-educated man who has secured a good job and a luxurious residence in the Marimba Park suburb of Harare. Mary is also a university graduate and serves as a secondary school head. As a mark of her progress, she is the first woman to own a car in her village. Although she leads an affluent suburban life, Mary is disgruntled by her weakening health and the loss of love in her marital life, as Cyril now devotes his attention to luxuries such as imported lagers, aromatic cigars, business luncheons, and partying with youths. Mary is also concerned that Cyril has usurped her place as the mother of the house, hence she renames him Moth, an abbreviation for "man of the house." Having had caesarean delivery for all three of her children, Mary has several health challenges that include breast cancer, arthritis, and loss of an ovary. Adding to Mary's problems is the fact that two of her children, Darius and Mary the Third, leave home to join the liberation war. Although the children return home safely after the war, their prolonged absence has taken a toll on Mary's emotional health. However, she dies a happy mother, having psychologically prepared herself for that eventuality. Through flashbacks, the reader can see how Mary's glorious past sharply contrasts with her gloomy present.

Mungoshi significantly broadens the horizons of African feminist literature by broaching underrepresented themes such as women's reproductive health and maternal desire. Mary's problems and feminist thinking are intricately related to the materiality of her body as a mother. Her health problems, which have negatively affected her sexuality, are gynaecological challenges linked to reproductive disorders. Thus, through Mary's traumatic experiences, Mungoshi shows how the maternal body's procreative capacity can be a liability. This resonates with concerns about the detrimental effect of the reproductive function on the maternal body in global maternal and feminist scholarship (Roth-Johnson 2010, 352). For example, the maternal scholar Shulamith Firestone suggests that the reproductive function needs to be delinked from the female gender as a way of "levelling the playing field between women and men" (cited in Roth-Johnson 2010, 352). Among other intervention strategies, Firestone proposes the use of technologies that make it possible for fertilisation and gestation to take place outside the female body, including the possibility of reproduction inside the male body (androgenesis). Therefore, through his depiction of maternal reproductive health, Mungoshi shows his conversance with topical concerns in maternal scholarship.

Mary stands for maternal struggles that lie outside the scope of most Zimbabwean women, especially those in the rural peasantry. With her high level of education, dignified job, and above-average material wealth, it can be said that she lives out the dream of Vera's heroines in *Butterfly Burning*, set in the colonial era when it was hard

for women to penetrate the formal job market. However, although Mary “had broken free of the chains of desperate dependence and had become her own person,” she is unhappy due to the “dearth of romance” (14, 12) in her marital life, which she sees as a violation of her conjugal rights. She is conscious of the subtle, institutionalised forms of abuse that are naturalised in the smooth running of the cultural machine. While issues of maternal desire and sexuality are often occluded in the day-to-day search for a livelihood among poor African women (Chando 2022), Mary reveals that they directly affect the lives of mothers and that it is through addressing them that women may ultimately find the mothering role fulfilling. Thus, considering the endemic economic hardship that affects the majority of married women in post-colonial Zimbabwe, Mary’s concerns might seem elitist and superficial. However, through foregrounding these concerns, Mungoshi shows his awareness of the hierarchical nature of human needs and how, unfortunately, women’s self-actualisation needs are often overlooked as individuals and communities pursue bread-and-butter issues. Therefore, Mary plays a vanguard role in agitating for recognition and redress of national concerns that might seem elitist and not urgent.

By foregrounding the voice and experiences of a maternal character, the novel not only deconstructs male-defined understandings of motherhood as a site of silence and disempowerment but also radically challenges early radical feminist thinking that was “anti-motherhood” (Kinser 2010, 396). This anti-motherhood surfaces in some of the works of established African feminist writers, including Buchi Emecheta, Neshani Andreas, Tsitsi Dangarembga, and Yvonne Vera. For example, Dangarembga’s works are daughter-centric, tending to locate agency and hope of women’s emancipation in young women characters such as Tambudzai and Nyasha, while Yvonne Vera “has no faith in the revolutionary potential of mothers; hence, she depicts maternal precarity through the experiences of young women who are non-mothers” (Chando 2022, 94). In *The Fading Sun*, Mungoshi challenges the conflation of motherhood with helplessness by portraying motherhood as a site for the reclamation of women’s voices and agency. Therefore, unlike Vera’s heroines who shun the institutions of marriage and motherhood in *Butterfly Burning* (1998), Mary chooses to fight gendered oppression from within.

Despite their personal nature, Mary’s concerns represent a collective sensibility among Zimbabwean women. Her rhetorical question, “Will it be my harvest or a collective one?” (72), dovetails with how scholars such as Adrienne Rich and Alice Walker have adopted a personal perspective to narrate the experiences and sensibilities of larger groups of women. This invokes the 1970s slogan, “The personal is political,” linked to Alice Walker’s writings and the second wave of feminism, which implies that individual women’s perspectives and experiences speak to broader feminist struggles. To that end, Mungoshi invokes the feminist concepts of “motherline” and “matriarchive” to reflect how individual micronarratives derive from and feed into larger narratives. The term “motherline” was coined by the Anglo-American Jungian psychologist, Naomi Lowinsky (1992), to name intergenerational links that allow young women to situate themselves in a feminist struggle. The “matriarchive” refers to a repository of cultural

wisdom and feminine sensibilities intergenerationally transmitted along matrilineal lines (Phalafala 2020). Mungoshi's novel mediates these feminist concepts through how three generations of women are ideologically linked through Mary, her mother, and her daughter, all of whom share the name "Mary."

Mary is depicted as a mother-cum-feminist, through whom Mungoshi brings different feminist ideologies into critical conversation. In a few instances, she displays behaviours associated with radical feminism, an aggressive form of feminist consciousness associated with the First-wave feminism of the 1960s. This is evident in her acerbic distaste for what she sees as Cyril's excesses, including spending much of his time playing golf, drinking expensive whisky, and partying with young people. She describes him in reductive terms as "poor, stupid Moth," "the proverbial swine," "the child inside man" and one "who has gone soft in the head" and who, therefore, cannot understand "the things that really mattered" (11–12). These descriptions contrast sharply with her view of herself as "the fabled biblical pearl" (12). This reductive portrayal of male characters is one of the defining features of literary works that espouse radical feminist consciousness, such as Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) and *She No Longer Weeps* (1987). Nevertheless, one immediately notes that Mary's bitterness largely derives from what she sees as Cyril's failure to live up to his traditional gender roles, as attested by how he has conceitedly asserted himself as "the-man-of-the-house":

Mary had always felt that Man-of-the-house rather fancied himself as some kind of latter-day patriarch. He called himself the Lord and the Master of the homestead. Lord and master indeed! What grand illusions the man harboured! (48)

The overtones of bitterness and mockery in Mary's words above underscore her Africana Womanist ideology which demands, among other things, that men and women respect each other's social spaces, and seeks to advance women without compromising their traditional gender roles as mothers and wives (Hudson-Weems 2003, 2023).

Mary's espousal of Africana Womanism manifests in her obsession with her "culture and her history," accompanied by an aversion to modern life as epitomised by Cyril's "new-fangled ideas on strategic thinking," "the power of correct social circles," and "business luncheons and fundraising dinners" (6,7). In this regard, Cyril is portrayed as a foil to Mary's late father, Mudhara Bodzo, who stands for tradition and the *Unhu* (a Shona variant of the term *Ubuntu*, the African humanist philosophy) ethics of love, mutual respect and interdependence. We are told that Mudhara Bodzo "was always singing the praises of the people, the natural grace and under-valued beauty of the women, their resilience and enduring strength" (31). Mudhara Bodzo's recognition of women's intrinsic value beckons the present generation of Black men to retrace their steps to indigenous ethics and epistemologies, on which Africana Womanism draws.

One of the defining principles of Africana Womanism is the need for complementarity and open dialogue between African men and women so that solutions to problems can

be sought both within the family context and the context of African culture (Hudson-Weems 2003). Accordingly, in *The Fading Sun*, Mary believes in the power of negotiation in resolving her differences with her husband, evident in the narrated monologue below:

Moth my boy I'm coming for you. You are still my boy you know and I love you still. Old boys and old girls must still cherish each other you know. The wrinkles around my eyes are not there in my heart. In my heart there is a sweet lyric that bears your name. Damn it Moth! I'm still a lovely African woman, so take me. (18, italics in original)

Mary inherited the art of negotiation from her late mother who had told her, “Make the man think and believe he is winning. Achieve that and there is nothing he won’t do for you” (65). According to Mary’s mother, men can be compelled to cooperate without women being confrontational. The power of non-confrontation in managing family relationships is also a salient premise of other liberal African feminisms, including Nego-feminism, Womanism, and Stiwanism. Therefore, by invoking these feminisms, Mungoshi positions himself within contemporary conversations within the African feminist discourse.

However, Mungoshi’s invocation of Africana Womanism is not without its cons. Despite the novel’s redemptive portrayal of African maternity, Mary’s overarching concern with maintaining patriarchally defined gender roles comes at a time when the topical issue in feminist and gender discourses is how to dissolve gender borders. It is also problematic that the ideal of male-female complementarity that informs Africana Womanism and other African liberal feminisms is largely built on the notion of pre-colonial African egalitarianism that is romanticised in some critical works such as *African Womanhood in Zimbabwean Literature* (2006), co-edited by Mguni, Furusa, and Magosvongwe. Counter arguments suggest that the social organisation of pre-colonial Africa promoted the inferiorisation of women, which colonisation only reinforced (Tamale, 2020). Considering this view and Mary’s uncritical obsession with history and patriarchal tradition in *The Fading Sun*, it can be said that Mungoshi is calling for a reappraisal of African feminisms rooted in indigenous epistemologies, as part of what Lewis (2001) views as an ongoing search for an exclusively African feminist paradigm. In the language of software reverse engineering, Mungoshi uses literary means to highlight the need for continuous program understanding and regular code analysis to ensure the compliance of a program with current needs and emerging discursive trends.

Considering how Mungoshi’s novel buttresses his claim to feminist status, I propose that the interactive approaches that he adopted in an attempt to attain a feminist standpoint—active listening, open dialogue with expert feminist women, empathy, self-reflection, and non-judgemental reading of women’s works, et cetera—provide a useful and transposable template for a new grammar with which to talk about and evaluate man feminism.

Conclusion

This study has deployed the metaphor of software reverse engineering to explore the feasibility, benefits, and potential risks of man feminism in an African context. It has contested the canonisation of gender positionality in evaluating men's feminist thought and practice and argued that this discursive tendency problematically overlooks the heterogeneity and fluidity of men's ideological positions regarding women and feminism. The extended metaphor of reverse engineering provided a novel approach to exploring the place of African men in the continent's feminist and gender equity politics. The article highlighted the dangers of man feminism, conceptualised as malicious software, intending to highlight areas for improvement in man feminism, considering that it is a discourse in the making. The metaphor of live code analysis proved useful in conceptualising how men can attain a progressive feminist viewpoint through interactive approaches such as active listening, self-reflection, empathy, and engaging women in open dialogues. These approaches can be harnessed into an alternative grammar for discussing man feminism.

The study demonstrated that a progressive male feminist viewpoint is achievable. However, it was out of the scope of the study to gauge the extent to which such an achievement will be realised as beneficial to the broader African feminist movement. Beyond the intellectual fascination and pragmatic benefits of integrating Africana Womanism with a high-tech scientific framework to explore the subjective and controversial topic of man feminism, the transdisciplinary approach has symbolically called for intergender synergies in pursuing gender equality and women empowerment. This innovative methodological choice has proved useful in demonstrating how the active involvement of men in the African feminist movement can help redefine masculinity to incorporate the values of mutual respect and compassion, build intergender alliances towards instituting gender justice, and make feminism a human rights issue rather than a women's issue. Thus, the study has provided a context-specific illustration of how feminism requires everyone's participation. However, both the approach and the argument would benefit from further research on practical strategies men can adopt to support gender equity politics.

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Notes on Contributor

Aaron Chando has a PhD in English Studies from the University of the Witwatersrand. His research interests are in African literature, with a particular focus on precarity and spaces of exclusion in the Global South. His published work explores the political function of vulnerability in various sites of displacement and recognises African creative artists as social thinkers and cultural innovators, reaffirming the African literary imagination and cultural production as major sites where critical social issues are addressed and reimagined. At the time of writing, he was a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Sol Plaatje University and a LUCAS-LAHRI Visiting Fellow at the University of Leeds.

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