



Gendered Power, Workplace Harrassment and Female Resistance: A Stiwanist's Reading of Effiong Ekpenyong's *A Pathfinder*

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ABSTRACT

The struggle for women's inclusion in African social, economic and institutional structures remains an important concern in African literary discourse. Although women's participation in education and workplace has increased, patriarchal structures continue to shape women's experiences within workplaces and other institutions. With focus on Effiong Ekpenyong's *A Pathfinder*, this paper explores how patriarchal abuse within professional environments acts as a micro-level reflection of macro-level political exclusion. The existing scholarship on this literary oeuvre has paid attention particularly to self-translation, linguistic competence and the relationship between it and its French version (*Un trouveur de chemin*) published by the author in 2006. However, the gendered structures of power within the workplace, the representation of sexual/workplace harassment and women's responses to such structures have not received sustained critical attention particularly through the theoretical framework of Stiwanism, an African Feminist perspective that foregrounds women's agency, economic empowerment, participation in social transformation and resistance to structures that constrain women's development. This article therefore investigates gendered power, institutional sexual harassment and female resistance, and the broader socio-political struggle for female inclusion in national development. When female characters face workplace harassment and subsequent forced resignation, it represents a calculated attempt by patriarchal systems to strip women of economic autonomy. By reading these dynamics through Stiwanism, this study argues that resisting workplace exploitation and demanding for the transformation of institutional structures that permit gendered intimidation and exclusion are foundational prerequisites for women's active participation in national development.

Keywords: Stiwanism, Gendered Power, Workplace Sexual Harassment, Female Resistance, Pathfinder.

INTRODUCTION

Literary criticism of African fiction has traditionally centered on macro-political structures, post-independence state corruption, and broad cultural traditions. However, contemporary African literature published in the twenty-first century reveals that patriarchal oppression is equally entrenched in institutional, corporate, and white-collar professional spaces. Offices and civil service departments frequently operate as miniature panopticons where male authority figures weaponize structural hierarchies against women. When male bosses engage in sexual harassment, demand for sexual compliance, and the subsequent victimization or forced resignation of women who resist, it is not merely an interpersonal moral failing; it is a systemic tool of economic disenfranchisement. Male sexual harassment becomes a mechanism of economic disenfranchisement when a woman who is sexually harassed in the workplace is forced to resign thereby losing her opportunity to earn an income, develop her career and achieve financial independence. By severing a woman's livelihood or forcing her out of the professional sphere, patriarchal systems successfully block her ascent into leadership, policy-making, and governance. When women enter into professional spaces and public life, sometimes they encounter structures of male authority that restrict their freedom. Inclusion of women cannot then be measured by their physical presence in institutions but in the conditions under which they function in these institutions. Utilizing Molar Ogunipe-Leslie's framework of Stiwanism, this paper examines how workplace sexual harassment and forced resignation depicted in Effiong Ekpenyong's *A Pathfinder* serves as catalysts for a revolutionary consciousness, fueling the urgent demand for gender-inclusive governance and body autonomy.



in work spaces. The novel's preoccupation on education, employment, social advancement and personal development creates a context within which gender relations can be examined. Inemesit, the female professional character who encounters male sexual pressure provides an important literary representation of the intersection between gender, work and power.

Against this background, the study investigates four interconnected questions: How does *The Pathfinder* represent gendered power relations in the workplace? How does workplace sexual harassment function as a mechanism of patriarchal control? What forms of resistance does the female professional employ, and what are the consequences of her resistance? Finally, to what extent can her experience and resistance be interpreted through the principles of Stiwanism? Accordingly, the study aims to examine gendered workplace power, analyze sexual harassment as a form of patriarchal domination, investigate female resistance and its economic consequences, and interpret the representation of female agency, dignity and economic autonomy from a Stiwanist perspective. The study argues that Ekpenyong's novel exposes the intersection of patriarchal authority and women's economic vulnerability while representing female resistance as an assertion of dignity and professional autonomy.

Theoretical Framework

Stiwanism which is gotten from the acronym STIWA – Social Transformation Including Women In Africa and the Politics of Institutional Resistance formulated by Molara Ogundipe-Leslie in *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women & Critical Transformations* (1994), provides an ideal methodological instrument for dissecting the dual battles African women face: fighting external gender oppression while striving for holistic national development. In her words, “Stiwa means Social Transformation including Women of Africa”. She goes on to say “I wanted to stress the fact that what we want in Africa is not warring with the men, the reversal of role, or doing to the men whatever women think that men have been doing for centuries, but it is trying to build a harmonious society, The transformation of African society is the responsibility of both men and women and it is also in their interest” (Ogundipe Leslie 242). In its core tenets, Stiwanism insists that the liberation of women is inextricably bound to the socio-economic and political liberation of the entire society. It advocates for women inclusion and not isolation. Unlike Western feminisms that frequently isolate gender struggle from economic survival Ogundipe advocates for the inclusion of women in the social transformation of the world. This position statement corroborates Matthew & Sarkhel's opinion that whereas “Womanism examines the intersectionality of race, gender and class and the specific challenges of African women, ...Stiwanism moves from personal gender battles to the common involvement of women in social change” (4629).

Stiwanism also promotes agency, self-definition and dignity of the African woman. The framework champions social recognition, human dignity, bodily autonomy and the right to freely act and live with joy and responsibility. This Stiwanist's tenet foregrounds female resistance as a significant strategy through which women challenge patriarchal authority in workplace. Stiwanism, which is an off shoot of African feminism is often linked with other variants like Womanism, Motherism and Nego-feminism and is concerned with the structures that oppress women and how they combat these forces. I will briefly unpack these variants because they share a common concern with the liberation and advancement of African women yet they differ significantly in their conceptual emphases and strategies.

Womanism The Negro-American model of Womanism was created and defined by the African American author and poet Alice Walker in her collection of essays, *In Search of our Mothers' Garden* (1983). It emerged as a response to the limitations of mainstream feminist movement, which was more concerned with the experiences of white, middle-class women while largely sidelining the intersecting realities of race, class and gender experienced by black women. According to Walker, Womanism is an alternative and an expansion of feminism. It is a movement or a theory that is concerned with the survival of the black race. A Womanist according to Walker is someone who is preoccupied with the survival of both sexes, one who encourage their coexistence in spite of their cultural specificities.

For The Afro-American Clenora Hudson Weems, *Africana Womanism*- her own brand of womanism, is an ideology designed for all African women. For her, feminism is a creation of the white women meant to meet



their own needs. This shows the need for a total break from western feminism. An African womanist must be capable of self-definition, she must be strong, respected, known, compatible with men, adaptable, ambitious, a mother and a nurturer.

Chikwenye Ogunyemi's brand of Womanism is articulated in her article *African Wo/Man palava...* where she modifies the traditional position of feminism. In her Womanism, confrontation and aggression should give place to compromise. The rapport that should exist between men and women are summarized in four C's « Conciliation, Collaboration, Consensus and Complementarity »(38).

Motherism on the other hand extols the roles of African women as mothers and nurturers. It seeks to empower African women while maintaining the importance of family and communal relationships. Motherism puts forward the principle of man-woman complementarity which guarantees the wholeness of human existence in a balanced ecosystem. In her work, *Motherism : The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism*, Catherine Acholonu sees the concept of motherism as an African alternative or an option to feminism and motherhood. Acholonu rejects the paradigms of western feminism because they encourage the African women to abandon their traditional roles in the family.

Nego-feminism is another strand of African feminism attributed to Obioma Nnaemeka. Nego-féminisme is a feminism of negotiation. Nego-féminisme means « 'no ego' féminisme ». just like the other variants of African feminism, it reinforces the principle of complementarity, compromise and inclusion. It discourages women from having a face-off with the men but proposes strategic negotiation to achieve concrete improvements in their lives.

Summary of the Novel

In *A pathfinder*, we read the story of a young man named Uwem from Ikot Ibom nation who aspired to further his education to the highest level but his father's negative view of education threatened to end his schooling after the primary level. Fortunately, providence stepped in, bringing a positive turn of events that allowed him to continue. Uwem emerges as a trailblazer and an exemplary figure for children within his family and community who were denied the opportunity to pursue higher education because of the misleading teachings of their church. The church's prediction that the end of the world was imminent led many to perceive formal education as unnecessary and futile. Uwem's determination to pursue his studies therefore represents a challenge to this restrictive belief system and establishes him as a model for educational aspiration.

Alongside Uwem's narrative, Ekpenyong introduces a number of educated female characters who are portrayed as industrious and resilient. Inem, in particular stands out as a young, efficient and conscientious professional whose moral uprightness and tenacity in the workplace invite a critical examination. Her experiences, especially her encounter with workplace challenges and gendered power relations, provide an important point of departure for a Stiwanist reading of the novel. Through Inem, the text foregrounds questions of female agency, dignity, professional integrity and women's capacity to resist oppressive structures.

A Stiwanist Reading of the Novel

In the past, the roles and functions of a woman in a patriarchal society were limited to that of a housewife. She was to play biological roles of a mother and a nurturer. The public space was reserved only for men. In contemporary times, the status of women has changed considerably. All over the world, women are agitating for inclusion in the social, political and economic development of the nation.

In patriarchal societies, women did not have equal rights with the men especially in the area of voting, education and work. To correct this anomaly, Mary Wollstonecraft, a liberal feminist in her work *A vindication of The Rights of Women*, agitated for the participation of women in the civil and political workforce of the State (319-320).

In contemporary African societies, the relationship between gender and work has undergone significant changes. This explains why women increasingly occupy sensitive positions in education, banking,



administration, business, politics, medicine, law, media and other professional sectors yet entering into workplace alongside their male counterpart does not automatically translate into gender equality. Gendered power has to do with the distribution and exercise of authority according to socially constructed ideas about masculinity and femininity.

Power becomes gendered when men and women cannot exercise authority at the same level. In a workplace this may occur when a male superior assumes that his position gives him entitlement to a woman's attention, her body, her private life, her emotional compliance, her sexual compliance and her obedience beyond professional requirements. It is pertinent to note that sexual harassment may not only depend on sexual desire but on power. This explains why a female professional may feel unable to refuse a superior because of the dire consequences such refusals may bring.

When a woman enters the workplace, it is most often seen as an evidence of social progress. She may possess the educational qualifications, professional competence and economic independence while still being subjected to sexual harassments or discrimination by the male superiors.

The workplace episode In Effiong Ekpenyong's *A Pathfinder*, provides an important representation of gendered power. The Ikot Ibom Solar Energy Company is not merely an economic institution; it is also a social institution where power is distributed. When a male boss uses his authority to pressure a female subordinate, the problem is simultaneously gendered and institutional. One of the most significant aspects of harassment in the workplace is the transformation of the female body into an object of institutional attention. The woman may be evaluated not solely according to her competence, qualification, productivity and experience but also according to her appearance, attractiveness, sexuality and her perceived availability. This reduces the female employee from a subject to an object. This is exactly what Ekpenyong attempts to portray when he asserts that "To the boss, securing Inem as his personal secretary was one of the best things that can happen to him. After all, he was also the most superior officer of the company, wielding both administrative and social powers over others" (42). A Stiwanist reading resists this reduction but insists that a woman must be recognized as a complete subject whose professional identity cannot be juxtaposed side by side with her sexuality.

The disposition of the male superior in the novel should be examined so as to show how the gendered power works. The author shows how on a particular day after work, Inem's boss lured her to an unlikely location where he could safely devour her sexually. Ekpenyong takes exception to this misdemeanor and condemns the male superior's overtures whom he depicts as a sex maniac whose sexual desires can be satisfied just anywhere and this time in the bush. "Let's lie down here"(42) is what Inem hears from the boss who seems to have successfully led his prey into a safe space, safe enough for him to sexually assault her.

Inem's experience is significant because the harassment is located within a professional institution, where the relationship between the employer and employee is already characterized by unequal power the male superior's position gives him authority over Inem's professional life.

The workplace is a space for women's professional participation, but patriarchal authority transforms it into an environment of sexual coercion and exclusion. In the narrative, the manager forces Inem to work until late in the evening, only to summon her to his office and with the lights switched off his next lines were "Remove your dress"(45). A workplace should ordinarily be governed by language relating to duties, competence and professional responsibilities. When the superior introduces sexualized words into his communication with a female professional, he changes the meaning of the workplace relationship.

Patriarchy is understood as a social arrangement in which positions of authority and control are held by men. Within the workplace, patriarchy can take institutional forms where the male superior officer may have the power to employ or sack, promote or dismiss, reward or punish and determine working conditions amongst others. In the novel under consideration, the female professional person is not depicted as one who has no voice nor power. Yet the power exercised by her male superior creates a conflict between professional stability and growth and her personal dignity.



Inem's boss embodies the figure of the sexually predatory male superior, recalling Mr. Chadas in Jean Pliya's *La secrétaire particulière* whose illicit relationship with Nathalie allows her to retain her position despite professional incompetence. This parallel exposes how sexuality can become entangled with workplace power relations, particularly in contexts where women's employment is vulnerable to exploitation and unequal gender dynamics.

Virginie, on the other hand is just like Inem, who is ready to fight all sorts of sexual harassments by the boss while performing her assigned duties in the workplace. She gives the boss a show down when the latter attempts to seduce her by a touch. Her reactions are captured in this manner "Bas les pattes, monsieur, je ne suis pas celle que vous croyez" (54) "Keep your hands off, I am not who you think I am"(54).

In certain professional spaces across Africa, male superiors frequently perceive female subordinates not as intellectual partners or administrative equals, but as objects subject to managerial coercion. When female characters reject unwanted sexual advances or quid-pro-quo demands from their male bosses, they face immediate professional retaliation—denial of promotion, character assassination, psychological intimidation, and engineered dismissals. This systemic abuse is well echoed again by Pliya where Virginie's resistance to her boss sexual harassment is met with a threat of sack from job. Mr Chadas threatens to make her submit to his overtures or she will be fired "Pour qui vous- prenez? Je vous dresserai, ou bien vous partirez d'ici"(54) "Whom do you think you are ? I will whip you into shape or you'll leave this place" (54).

At the beginning of her professional experience, Inem represents the African woman entering the modern professional sphere. Her employment signifies education, professional competence, economic participation, independence and social mobility. This corresponds strongly with the Stiwanist concern for women's participation in social and economic transformation. The sexual harassment attempts to reduce her identity from professional subject to a sexual object. She refuses to exchange her professional dignity for continued employment under the conditions of sexual harassment hence her resignation. From a Stiwanist perspective, this is interpreted as female agency.

The treatment of Inemesit's resignation in the novel provides a significant point of entry into a Stiwanist interpretation of workplace gender relations. Inemesit does not disclose her experience of sexual harassment to the company, while the company's authorities, upon receiving her resignation letter, do not inquire into the reasons for her departure. This double silence is significant because it renders the gendered circumstances of her resignation institutionally invisible. Inemesit's decision to leave may nevertheless be read as an act of individual agency: rather than submit to sexual pressure in order to retain her employment, she withdraws from the institution. Yet, from a Stiwanist perspective, individual resistance cannot substitute for institutional transformation. Her resignation removes one woman from the oppressive environment but does not necessarily alter the conditions that produced her departure. More significantly, the company's failure to ask why a professional woman is resigning reveals the limitations of merely incorporating women into existing institutions without developing structures capable of protecting their dignity, addressing gender-based harassment and sustaining their meaningful participation. Ekpenyong therefore constructs a paradox of inclusion: Inemesit is formally included in the professional institution, yet the conditions of her participation become untenable. Her eventual withdrawal exposes the gap between women's formal access to professional spaces and their substantive inclusion within them. The silence surrounding her resignation consequently becomes a narrative representation of the need for the institutional transformation advocated by Stiwanism.

Female employee must learn to say "no" to an abusive male boss no matter what the latter does in attempt to satisfy his whims and caprices. The courage displayed in resisting workplace exploitation is commended by Onyemelukwe a renowned scholar, writer and critic in the domain of Nigerian Literature of French Expression because in her views, "showing contempt to the African woman or treating her like an object is a way of denying her the freedom to exercise a fundamental right- the right to the dignity of her person"(34). Inem would not be treated like a sex objects and boldly takes her stand to drive this message home "my body isn't for such abuse and I'll have none of that from any man no matter how well placed"(45).

At the end of the episode, Inem decides to work away since her manager was not ready to throw in the towel.



In her efforts to keep her pride, honour and dignity, she walked away from the company without looking back. The trauma of forced resignation is a violent economic and psychological dislocation. However, as demonstrated in *A Pathfinder*, these trials ignite a critical awakening. Rather than breaking the female psyche, the experience of being hounded out of an office due to moral integrity acts as a catalyst for political agency.

Workplace harassment thrives on systems of patronage where male superiors demand compliance in exchange for career advancement. By walking away through forced resignation—or fighting back through collective organizing—female characters expose the bankruptcy of merit-less male leadership.

In the novel under consideration, the female professional's resignation following sexual harassment constitutes both an act of resistance and an indictment of a patriarchal workplace system. From a Stiwanist perspective, her refusal to exchange her dignity for economic security demonstrates female agency, while the economic consequences of her departure expose the structural vulnerability of African women whose participation in the workforce is sometimes conditioned by unequal gender relations. This episode therefore reveals the limitations of individual resistance when institutions have not undergone transformation. Stiwanism does not demand the withdrawal of women from oppressive spaces but the transformation of those spaces so that women can participate in them with dignity, security and equal power.

In *A Pathfinder*, Inem's experience of workplace sexual harassment can be read beyond the immediate context of an individual woman's encounter with patriarchal power. Her professional exclusion acquires broader significance because the workplace functions as a microcosm of the social and economic structures through which women participate in national development. Inem's resignation consequently represents more than the loss of an individual job. It signifies the withdrawal of educated and economically productive female human capital from an institution in which her skills and professional aspirations could have contributed to organizational and social development. The narrative thereby moves from personal oppression to the wider implications of women's exclusion from productive institutions. This movement is particularly compatible with Stiwanism's emphasis on social transformation including women. Inem's case demonstrates the inadequacy of merely granting women formal access to professional institutions. Meaningful inclusion requires conditions that allow women to remain develop their careers and contribute without being subjected to sexual coercion or institutional vulnerability. The company's failure to inquire into the reasons for Inem's resignation is significant in this regard. Her departure is treated as an administrative matter rather than as a possible indication of gendered institutional failure. Consequently, the structures that produced her withdrawal remain unexamined. The economic dimension of Inem's experience is equally important. Employment provides women with income, professional identity, social mobility and opportunities to develop institutional experience. When patriarchal practices force a woman out of employment, therefore, the consequences extend beyond the immediate loss of a salary. Her professional experience, future advancement and potential contribution to institutional leadership are also interrupted. At the level of the larger society, the exclusion of women from productive spaces represents a reduction in the pool of human resources available for social transformation. Ekpenyong's representation therefore establishes a movement from individual oppression to national development. Inem's experience illustrates how sexual harassment can become a mechanism of economic exclusion, while economic exclusion can in turn restrict women's opportunities for broader social and political participation. Professional institutions are important sites in which women acquire experience, networks, economic independence and leadership capacities that can facilitate participation in wider decision-making structures. The novel does not suggest that professional employment automatically guarantees political participation; rather, it exposes how barriers to women's sustained participation in professional life can constrain one important avenue of social empowerment. In this sense, Inem should not be read merely as a victim requiring protection. She is a professional woman whose agency, aspirations and labour constitute potential resources for institutional and national development. Her decision to resign demonstrates personal agency, but the economic cost of that decision exposes the structural limitations within which her agency operates. The Stiwanist significance of the episode therefore lies in this paradox: Inem is capable of resisting patriarchal domination, yet the institution provides insufficient conditions for her continued participation. Her individual resistance reveals the necessity of a broader institutional transformation in which women are not simply admitted into workplaces but are enabled to participate, lead and contribute meaningfully to the economic, social and political transformation of society.



Aspects of Female Agency in the novel

Inem's experience of workplace sexual harassment does not reduce her to a passive victim of patriarchal power. Although she is subjected to the authority of a male superior and placed in a situation that threatens her professional and economic security, her subsequent response demonstrates significant female agency. Her refusal to submit to sexual pressure and her decision to resign constitute forms of resistance through which she asserts control over her dignity, bodily autonomy and professional identity. Her agency, however, is constrained by the material conditions of her existence. Resignation protects her from continued harassment but simultaneously threatens the economic aspirations that initially motivated her participation in professional life. This contradiction is central to a Stiwanist reading of the novel. Inem's struggle demonstrates that women's inclusion in the workplace cannot be reduced to their physical presence within professional institutions; meaningful inclusion requires conditions that permit women to participate without sexual coercion, institutional vulnerability or economic punishment for resisting patriarchal practices. Her decision-making therefore operates simultaneously as an expression of empowerment and evidence of structural constraint. By representing Inem as a woman who makes choices under oppressive circumstances, Ekpenyong constructs female agency as neither absolute freedom nor complete victimhood. Rather, it is a negotiated capacity to act within restrictive structures. Her experience consequently supports the Stiwanist emphasis on women's agency, economic participation and the transformation of institutions that prevent women from contributing fully to African social development.

CONCLUSION

A Stiwanist reading of Effiong Ekpenyong's *A Pathfinder*, demonstrates that the struggle for women's inclusion in governance cannot be separated from the daily battles women fight in offices, boardrooms, and administrative corridors. Through the analytical prism of Stiwanism, workplace sexual harassment and forced resignation are revealed not as isolated private grievances, but as public political weapons designed to obstruct national development. Ultimately, sustainable development and inclusive governance will only be achieved when institutions are purged of patriarchal impunity, ensuring that women can contribute maximally—unhindered, respected, and fully integrated into the corridors of power.

The analysis demonstrates that workplace harassment is fundamentally a question of power. Where professional authority is involved, sexual harassment may become a mechanism which institutional power is exercised. This is why the Stiwanist model is apt for this work. The Social transformation Including Women In Africa that Ogundipe is calling for cannot be achieved when women are victimized, marginalized or excluded.

The representation in the corpus can be read as exposing the contradiction between women's increasing participation in professional life and the persistence of patriarchal practices within institutions. A Stiwanist analysis of the novel shows that transformation must include women not only as workers but also as decision-makers, managers, institutional leaders and participants in governance where women will be moved just like in the famous work of Bell Hooks from the Margin to the Centre. The author advocates for a transformed workplace in which authority is separated from sexual entitlement, professional advancement is separated from gendered coercion and women participate fully in determining the institutions within which they work.

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