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Petals of activism: Elucidating notions of feminism in the works of Helen Nzete

Adewumi Kehinde Christopher^{1*}

Abstract: The ongoing patriarchal hegemony in African societies and other parts of the world has fostered diverse feminist reactions both verbally and visually. This paper considers the works of Helen Nzete, a contemporary female artist who employs her mixed-media creations in confronting the patriarchal strongholds of her society, Nigeria. Helen's second solo exhibition titled "V is for ..." tells a story of the female existence without rights in African societies. Thus, she aligns her thoughts and agitations with several other female artists such as Zanele Muholi, and the Guerrilla Girls in protesting against the socio-political imbalance that exists in their societies. To properly understand the form, content and context of Helen's V is for ..., this paper employs the visual semiotic theory as a tool to deconstruct the symbolic paradigms of the artist's works. The paper establishes that Helen's works were created as a form of feminist activism against unfair structures in society which promote the commodification, objectification and dehumanization of the female. Her works (re)present the woman as a figure of beauty, influence and power.



Adewumi Kehinde Christopher

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Adewumi Kehinde Christopher is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Durban University of Technology, South Africa. He holds a PhD and an M. A. in Art History from Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria in Nigeria. He is the Curator-in-Chief and Co-founder of NowExpressions, a Curatorial Collective. Adewumi's current research focus explores the intersections between art, health and society. Adewumi enjoys hiking and stories.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This paper explores the works of contemporary Nigerian artist Helen Nzete, who utilizes mixed-media creations to confront patriarchal norms in her society. Her second solo exhibition, titled *V is for...* depicts the struggles and lack of rights experienced by women in African societies. Through her works, Helen joins the chorus of voices protesting the socio-political imbalances prevalent in their respective societies. This paper focuses on examining Helen's feminist advocacies as expressed through her exhibited collection *V is for...* The collection transcends mere artistic expression; it serves as a powerful advocate for social, political, and cultural balance while promoting gender equality and fair treatment. Its impact on society is profound, challenging existing norms and striving for a more inclusive and equitable world. Through her works, Helen aims to foster a society where individual peculiarities are not only acknowledged but also respected, ultimately contributing to a more harmonious and just social fabric.

Subjects: Feminist Art History; Women Artists; Contemporary Art; Visual Culture; Visual Arts

Keywords: art and feminism; Helen Nzete; art for activism; feminist art and the vulva; contemporary female artists

1. Introduction

The British Broadcasting Corporation (2023) recently published a documentary titled *The Sworn Virgins of Albania: The End of an Ancient Tradition* on its YouTube channel. In the rural areas of northern Albania, a woman can choose to become a sworn virgin by taking an oath of celibacy in front of her community. This allows her to assume a male gender identity and take on roles and responsibilities that are typically reserved for men, such as inheriting property or participating in public life (Dickerson, 2019; Young, 1998). The practice of sworn virginhood is often seen as a way for women to gain greater autonomy and agency in a patriarchal society, but it also carries a subtext of conformity and collaboration in the limitations and constraints that women face in expressing their gender identity and pursuing their aspirations (Young & Twigg, 2009). The sworn virgins of Albania are a unique example of patriarchal systems of subjugation and discrimination against the female gender.

One of the main aims of the feminist movement is to challenge and change the patriarchal systems and structures that perpetuate gender inequality, violence and discrimination against women such as the experience of the Albanian women. Feminism seeks to empower women to take control of their lives and make choices that are free from societal expectations and constraints (Millner & Moore, 2022). Art and Feminism in Africa have been closely intertwined for many decades, with female artists using their creative works to interrogate and challenge gender stereotypes and promote women's rights. Individuals such as South African photographer Zanele Muholi, Kenyan artist Wangechi Mutu and Nigerian artist Nike Davies-Okundaye, are some of the female artists who have, through their arts, challenged "glocal" patriarchal systems of marginalisation against women.

This paper considers the works of Helen Nzete, a contemporary female artist who employs her mixed-media creations in confronting the patriarchal strongholds of her society, Nigeria. Helen's second solo exhibition titled *V is for ...* tells a story of the female existence without rights in African societies. Thus, she aligns her thoughts and agitations with several other female artists such as Zanele Muholi, the Guerrilla Girls and Nike Davies-Okundaye, in protesting against the socio-political imbalance that exists in their societies. The focus of this paper is to periscope the feminist advocacies by Helen in her exhibited body of works collectively titled *V is for ...*.

In the concluding chapter of their book – *Contemporary Art and Feminism*, Millner and Moore (2022, p. 244) acknowledged that due to the efforts of feminists in asserting a conscious reflection on the implications of politics on personal lives and vice versa, feminism "has now become an aesthetic norm in global exhibitions of contemporary art with artists creating 'diurnal' projects responding to local problems, working with local art co-ops, unexpected sites, walks and mapping to engage memory and place." In their particular resistance of and response to local structures of gendered marginalisation within the Nigerian space and the public exploration and depiction of the private and unexpected, this author finds Helen's works a specific illustration of the feminist efforts to which Millner and Moore refer.

Thus, the paper is aimed at achieving two agendas. First, this author aims at situating Helen's works within the indigenous strides of activism against patriarchal structures of exclusion and marginalisation in Nigeria. Second, the paper aims at locating Helen's works within the collective global efforts of women in confronting institutionalised perpetuations of gender-based discriminations and biases. Helen Nzete is a Nigerian artist whose art is inspired by her personal experiences

as a woman in Nigeria. She is known for her mixed media creations in which she blends her love for colours with her sculpture training at Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Nigeria. Featuring everyday items such as beads, coins, and newspapers in her works, Helen interrogates cultural, political, religious and social knots and structures in her community. Since the start of her artistic career, over a decade ago, Helen has staged two solo exhibitions of her works and a plethora of group shows in Nigeria and abroad.

2. The qualitative method

The arguments in this paper are premised on the works exhibited during Helen's second solo exhibition at the Matrix Gallery in Abuja, Nigeria themed *V is for ...*. The exhibition which was held from NaN Invalid Date NaN to NaN Invalid Date had seventeen works on display—seven mixed media pieces and ten watercolour paintings. Having sought the consent of the exhibiting artist and her curator, this author adopted a participant observation approach in collecting the primary data for this study (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002; Kawulich, 2005). Thus, images of the seventeen works on display were collected.

More primary data was collected through two interview sessions conducted with the artist. The first was held a month before the exhibition on the 24th of May, 2022, while the second was conducted after the exhibition, precisely on the 17th of April, 2023. The line of inquiry during the interviews was centred around her creative aim and the ultimate goal for creating the *V is for ...* collection. To analyse the collected qualitative data, the paper aligns with the visual semiotic theory as its analytical tool.

In broad terms, semiotics is concerned with how meaning is made and how textual or visual language, signs and symbols are used to represent reality and tell stories (Aiello, 2020; Dunleavy, 2020). Visual semiotics theory, therefore, refers to the ways in which visual images such as photographs, paintings, and advertisements, communicate meanings (Aiello, 2020; Jappy, 2013). Fundamentally, the semiotic theory explains that all signs, including visual images, are composed of two parts: a signifier and a signified. The signifier is the physical form of the sign, such as an image or a word, while the signified is the meaning that is conveyed by the sign (Jappy, 2013). In the case of visual images, the signifier is the image itself, while the signified is the message or idea that the image communicates (Dunleavy, 2020). For instance, the use of certain colours or the structural composition of an image, such as the arrangement of objects or the angle at which it is photographed, can convey different meanings (Aiello, 2020; Almalech, 2017; Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2002). Visual symbolism such as the use of an object or animal to represent an idea is also a common way in which visual images communicate meanings (Maksymiuk et al., 2021; Ottalagano, 2023).

The foregoing gleans credence from Barthes' explanations of the process of meaning-making via visual semiotics. Barthes explains that through the two levels of denotation and connotation, images and visual codes can be deciphered and visual meanings created. The denotation level accounts for the literal immediate meaning of an image. On the other hand, the connotation level creates an open-ended platform for creating possible symbolic and (or) ideological meanings (Aiello, 2020).

This author sees Barthes' proposition of denotation and connotation in meaning-making as an appropriate analytical approach towards unravelling meanings in Helen's collection, given the semiotic tendencies of her collection. Therefore, as Barthes propounded, these two analytical levels were adopted in interrogating Helen's *V is for ...* collection. The first, which is the denotation level, was used to describe the works, vis a vis the different elements that make up the artist's composition. The second layer of analysis aimed at unravelling the symbolic connotations of the different elements that make up the compositions individually, relatively and contextually.

3. The allegorical and historical leanings of Helen's petals

In the anatomical structure of a mature flower, petals are modified flowers that surround the flower's reproductive parts (Ronse De Craene, 2007). The function of the petals around the flower's

reproductive area transcends mere decoration. Studies have shown that petals are quite integral to the success of flowers' reproductive process (Corbett et al., 2011; Guzmán et al., 2011; Kudoh & Whigham, 1998). In the arts (Braun & Wilkinson, 2001; Kitzinger, 1994) and human physiology (Yii & Niranjana, 1996), petals, especially that of the lotus and rose, have always been linked to the female vulva. It is this symbolic linkage that Helen has explored in her allegorical depiction of petals in her *V is for ...* collection.

At first, the beautiful and colourful presentation of the petals draws one towards Helen's pieces. On a closer look, however, one then starts a journey towards a gradual or abrupt realisation of their symbolism. Ciphered in the foliated appeal of the petals are different formal iterations of the vulva. Interestingly, as illustrated in Plate I, not just the vulva is illustrated in Helen's symbolic petals. In a mimicry and appropriation of the anatomical structures of a flower, Helen presents alongside the vulva, the vagina, and the clitoris. The artist's exploration and public presentation of these rather private entities of women's femininity is an allegorical assertion of the sexuality, fertility and power of the feminine body. It is a reminder that women are sexual beings and that their sexuality is something to be celebrated, not ashamed of. It is also a reminder that women are capable of creating life and that this is a powerful and beautiful thing.

Plate I: Detail of *Ley Lines and Energies*, Helen Nzete, 2019, Mixed Media, 60 × 90 cm.



Viewed in context, Helen's powerful and symbolic exploration of the vulva and the vagina as a protest against structures of marginalisation aligns with a history of explicit depictions in feminist arts and a long history of feminists' struggles. Historically, in an effort to reclaim and strip the feminine body of its history of patriarchal stifling and objectification, various feminist artists globally have created similarly bold works, overtly exploring and displaying the female body, especially the vulva and the vagina, in their confrontations of concepts such as the male gaze, as well as the negative connotations historically imposed on the female and her sexuality. A few examples come to mind in this instance.

The graffiti of Panmela Castro (b.1981), a Brazilian artist, is an example of such works. Castro has painted on different walls around the world creating different formalities of the female body and depictions of the female pudenda as a protest (Madan, 2023). In particular, the vagina was boldly displayed in her 2017 piece titled *Femme Maison*. The mural was later erased in response to a concern raised by a man that the piece, which presents a vagina sandwiched between two half-faced female portraits, is an emblem of “shame and disgust” to women (Giulia, 2019). This, perhaps, illustrates some of the structures of sexism and patriarchal censorship that feminists have historically protested against. Castro creates her pieces as confrontations and activism against political structures of patriarchy, sexism and the objectification of the female body.

From the Stonewall uprising (Campbell, 2022; Gilbert, 2011) to the 1970 march of gay rights activists (Hall, 2010) and the agitations of the Women’s Liberation Movement (Evans, 2015), America was a politically charged society in the 1960s and 1970s. In their participation in this trend of social and political activism, American sculptor Hannah Wilke (1940 – 1993) and American Painter Louise Fishman (1939 – 2021) explored women’s genitals in their works (Ardener, 1987; Thompson, 2006). Wilke particularly braved the risk of attracting extreme social consequences by exhibiting her explicit terracottas in which the vulva is both the signifier and the signified.

Women who create these bold explicit pieces have always had to risk something in their artistic journeys and feminine struggles. Dianne Victor is a South African artist who took a huge risk in submitting her *Eight Marys* for the 2004 exhibition *Personal Affects: Power and Poetics in Contemporary South African Art*, which was held in New York. Exploring the exhibition theme —“Performative Identities”, Victor created a series of charcoal drawings on paper, reconstructing the religious stereotype of the Mary mother of God. In her construction of the historically and globally revered figure, Victor overtly appropriated her own nudity in (re)interpreting the roles that have been imposed on females in Christianity. With the progression of each panel, Victor illustrates a woman’s stages of identity and development as well as the different tendencies and perhaps the (true) nature of Mary or herself or every woman (Von Veh, 2006). In her bold interpretation of a mythical Mary who is free from traditional religious expectations, Victor confronts notions of virginity, sexuality, chastity, religiosity and propriety as it is expected of and assumed for the Christian Mary.

Feminist advocates in the liberal arts have also explored the politics of the depiction and show of vulvas and vaginas as a means of shaping the socially and culturally imposed narratives on female sexuality. In a bid to confront and restructure the culturally sponsored and inherited narrative of the vagina’s ugliness Frueh (2003), in her poetic autobiographical notes, raised questions about another’s view and perception of her pudenda. In the process, she gave a detailed and unashamed description of her vagina, celebrating its form and function against the probable negative or stereotypical perception and judgement from the other:

A couple of years ago, right before an endometrial biopsy, ... the female gynecologist stared suddenly at my cunt. Was it shrunken and dry like an old woman’s supposedly is? Was it too colourful—more purple than pink? Its inside unusually rugose, both characteristics said to be indicative of a woman who enjoys sex and has had a lot of it? Was mucky mucus or dried cum decorating my orifice or lips? Were the latter, which are big, too conspicuous for the viewers’ taste because I had trimmed off most of my pubic hair? Was my cunt looking vicious-greedy-mouthed, surely full of teeth-or victimizable-not quite ideally little or pretty enough, but so exposed as to make its substance, flesh, inescapable? Or was my cunt vaguely voluptuous, another possible effect of exposure as well as of lush lips? Was I the embodiment of synthesized sentiments about vaginas and vulvas, all playing both with and against one another to create a horrific sight? (p. 144).

Overt embrace and expression of one’s femininity such as done in Frueh’s account have historically been the centre of social and cultural rebuke, the consequence of which sometimes go as far as social ostracization. About such “obscene” and “shameful” public display of unchastened

tendencies in the America of the 1960s, Hannah Wilkes (as cited in Ardener, 1987, p. 126) recalls that “you were put down if you were doing female genitalia”. Japanese “vagina artist” Megumi Igarashi also known as Rokudenashiko or “Good-for-nothing kid” was dealt a similar treatment in Japan for her use of her vulva in her works. She was arrested in July 2014, in Tokyo on the suspicion that she may be distributing obscene materials (McLelland, 2018). Similarly, Russian feminist artist, Yulia Tsvetkova has also been prosecuted for her series titled *A Woman is not a Doll*. She was accused of “creating and distributing pornographic materials’ under Article 242 of Russia’s Criminal Code” (Naylor, 2021, Para. 2). The questions to ask here are: who determines what is obscene and what is not? And for what or whom was the Japanese obscenity law or the Russian pornography law created?

Displaying the underparts of the female body is not just done in the arts, but it originates in different cultures in Africa and Europe (Ardener, 1987). Ardener’s (1987) seminal article titled *A Note on Gender Iconography: The Vagina* particularly details his encounter with some traditional Cameroonian cultural groups where this act was quite dominant. He writes of the Bankweri women who, in a feminine community action, form a coalition in defence of any of their members who has suffered an insult from a man, whether her husband or otherwise. Such insults include accusations that a woman’s underpart smells or the revealing of a woman’s secrets without her consent. In the defence of the woman, the Bankweri women would converge around the offender, singing obscene and vulgar lyrics and staging a vulgar show of overtness, in demand of “immediate recantation and a recompense of a pig, plus something extra for the woman who has been directly insulted” (p. 115).

The women of Balong, a neighbouring cultural group to the Bankweri, also engaged in similar mass and overt protests against patriarchal structures of feminine degradation and in defence of the collective dignity and pride of women in their community. Ardener (1987) informs that a man’s insult to a woman’s pudenda is seen as an insult to women in general and they do not take it charitably. Similar to the Bankweri women, the Balong women strip themselves naked to demand a restoration of their dignity if an erring man refuses to compensate the women for his offence. A similar feminist tradition is practised among the Kom of Cameroon. In their case, they include a mix of excreta and urine in their protest weapons. The Pokot women of Kenya sometimes shame the offender by putting their naked vulvas in his face (Ardener, 1987).

One begins to wonder why women and feminist artists, including Helen, as presented herein, choose to publicly show the female reproductive parts as a protest against stigmatizations and structures of degradation of women’s sexuality. In answering this query, this author aligns with Ardener’s (1987) explanation. About this explicit approach to protest, Ardener (1987) suggests that:

... instead of conforming to the requirement of propriety which required their “underparts” to be hidden, they deliberately drew attention to them. They thereby shamed the offender according to his own logic, but at the same time, transformed the discourse, reversing his negative to their positive values. They proclaimed their pride and made their hidden secrets a dominant and public emblem. They reclaimed the honour of their gender (pp. 11–118).

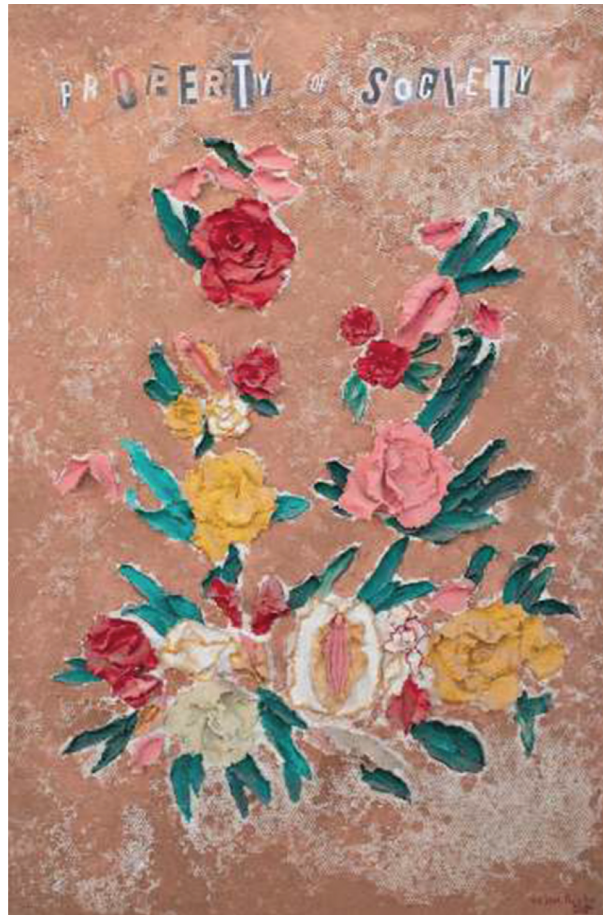
What is quite instructive in Ardener’s submission is that although he writes with particular reference to the community activism of the traditional Bakweri, Balong and Kom women of Cameroon in the 1950s, his allusions are still quite relevant even to the contemporary feminist arts and artists. It is also instructive to note that although the players or in this case, activists have changed, the strategy of overt display of female underparts as protest remains the same.

The next section analyses two works from Helen’s collection. As earlier stated, the visual semiotic theory has been used as an interrogative tool to analyse these works.

4. Helen Nzete: Challenging skewed patriarchal structures of feminine discrimination

The mixed media piece titled *Property of Society* (See [Plate II](#)), immediately calls attention to its staggered heading which reads “PROPERTY OF SOCIETY”. This literally suggests that the bouquet of colourful flowers presented underneath the clearly proprietorial heading and against a muddy and unevenly toned backdrop is owned by society. Viewed in context, however, Helen’s allegorical intentions begin to unfold. Implicit in the bouquet are flowers, some petals of which carry covert formal allusions to the female genitalia. Connotatively, Helen adopted the bouquet of flowers to metaphorically represent women. This calls for some questioning: Which belongs to the society; the female underpart or the female or both? To whom does the term “society” refer in this context? Are women part of society or mere possessions of society?

Plate II: *Property of Society*, Helen Nzete, 2019, Mixed Media, 60 × 90 cm.



The Nigerian society is fundamentally patriarchal (Ekhtator, 2015) and patrilocal (Diala, 2018). In navigating the complexity of her identity as a female in a drastically patriarchal Nigeria (in its politics and culture), Helen questions the questionable patriarchal notion of women as property and commodities in her community through this work. Historically, women in Nigeria and Africa as a whole have been subjected to various forms of subjugation and skewed gender stereotypes and expectations. As a result of the erroneous view of women as property in Nigeria, practices such as early marriages and child betrothal are considered normal in some quarters. Women have no opinions about whom or when to marry; women’s right to divorce is stifled and harmful traditional practices are still perpetrated against widows (Ezeilo, 2006), which sometimes include the inheritance of a widow alongside other properties of the deceased by a male relative (Ajayi et al., 2019). More prevalent in the Northern region of Nigeria is the social, cultural, religious and political

discrimination and nonchalance towards the education of the girl child (Ezeilo, 2006; Kanu, 2019; Nmadu et al., 2010).

By virtue of her laws and culture, it can be argued that the Nigerian state regards women as property. This is evident in the customary laws of several communities in Nigeria, which regard women as properties; therefore, they are disenfranchised from owning properties themselves (Ekhtator, 2015). Thus, in such communities, women can only access or own properties through male relatives (Udoh et al., 2020). This illustrates the mortars of discrimination that have been historically concreted into the very foundations of many African societies; characteristically evident in their laws, cultures, politics, and social nuances. Variants of these structures of discrimination are also practised in other parts of the world. Afghanistan is a good example here (Hozyainova, 2014; Kandiyoti, 2005; Shah, 2005).

Detailing such acts of disenfranchisement and discrimination against women in her Nigerian society, in her 2013 TEDx talk titled *We Should All Be Feminists*, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie laments that a woman cannot walk into most “reputable” bars and clubs in Lagos without being accompanied by a man. If she goes into a hotel alone, she is automatically termed as a sex worker. If she walks into a restaurant with a man, the waiter greets the man and ignores the woman. Adichie questioned the social practice of marriage and parenting in their expectations and language. Of the language, Adichie (2013, 15:30) observes that “the language of marriage is often a language of ownership rather than the language of partnership”. As such, marriage becomes a ceremonial transfer of ownership of the woman from her “father(s)” to her husband. A fundamental component in such ceremonies, however, are the commercial exchanges in the form of “bride price”, often paid by the new owner to the old, who still retains some “rights of ownership” in case the “new owner” is not “satisfied” with the “performance” of “what” (or whom) he “paid for”. So girls are taught to aspire to marriage as the apex of social achievements. For this “ultimate” aspiration, “we teach girls to shrink themselves, to make themselves smaller ... We say to girls ‘You should aim to be successful but not too successful otherwise you threaten the man.’” (Adichie, 2013, 12:55). We groom girls for marriage—like shiny little pebbles polished for the desire of men. In turn, we teach boys to “work hard” to acquire the financial capability to “afford” a wife—a property.

Within the framework of her painting *Property of Society*, Helen calls to question these traditions of owning and commodification of the female, which strips her of her individuality, agency, identity and independence as a bona fide member of and contributor to society. N. Helen passionately explains that:

This piece is about the general concept of women being influenced by society to act, dress, speak, and appear a certain way that generally undermines, devalues and disregards most of her abilities and rights ... Through my works, I seek to make everyone who is unseen, unsafe, misunderstood, forsaken and just powerless feel the opposite ... I want everyone to be equal regardless of gender, religion, race, or tribe, and to know that they matter no matter how small they seem (Personal Communication, May 24, 2022).

Helen also clearly clarifies that the flowers in *Property of Society* represent the fragility of women—the “delicacy of her femininity” she described (Personal Communication, 24 May 2022). In this sense, women are seen as delicate property to be “owned”, “cherished”, and “protected”. Helen’s displeasure with the suspiciously patronising notion of feminine fragility is quite evident in her exhibition. With the allegory of the petals, she explored this idea in most of her works. Interestingly, there are two mixed-media works in the collection, in which the visual symbolism of the petals is not present. However, these two works were created as part of her series titled *Fragile*.

At the centre of *Fragile II* (See [Plate III](#)) are two legs that seem to have emerged from a “wall” – the canvas surface. Let us pause for a moment to focus on the supposed wall before coming back to interrogate these stifled and strangulated legs. The wall seems to have been chromatically and unequally divided in two by the artist. The upper part of the wall, which is the smaller of the two, is painted white and the legs emerged from this part. On the other hand, the lower part of the wall presents a muddle of colours in contrast to the peace and serenity of the upper part. However, streaks of white paint have flowed from the top into the lower space of the canvas.

Now back to the wrapped legs. The legs which emerged from the upper part of the wall are helplessly tied to the lower part of the wall using strips of canvas with the word FRAGILE boldly imprinted on them in blood-red. Painfully restricted by the strips, the feeble legs appear bleeding and suppressed and stained as an implication of their extension and existence in the apparently confused lower part of the canvas. Interpretatively, the legs seemed to have emerged from a place of purity and peace. Unfortunately, they have stepped into a cruel and unforgiving world of pain, restriction, suppression, inequality, and subjugation; all masked under the pretence of care and protection.

Plate III: *Fragile II*, Helen Nzete, 2019, Mixed Media, 60 × 90 cm.



Helen’s *Fragile* series emanates from a place of pain and experience. Viewed in context, the artist questions society’s assumption of weakness for the female gender often condescendingly referred to as the “weaker sex”. The question is: who determines who is fragile or weaker? Helen’s

mixed media composition includes two distinctly symbolic iterations of the word “fragile”. The first ends with an exclamation mark as in “FRAGILE!” while the other ends with a question mark as in “FRAGILE?”. From our basic use of the English language, an exclamation mark is a punctuation used to express surprise or a strong emotion about a thing. If that is so, then the first iteration of the word fragile would be by someone who is emphatically postulating the idea that women are fragile, whether such postulation is from a place of knowing, conviction and genuine concern or not. From a feminist standpoint, this emphasis on the fragility of the female gender connotes Helen’s symbolic recognition of patriarchal laws and traditions that are formulated to protect the assumed fragility of the woman.

The second iteration of the word—FRAGILE? directly confronts and questions men’s blanket assumption of fragility and weakness for all females. One can imagine Helen or any other woman echoing to herself or chanting questions such as “fragile? Are we really fragile? Why do you think we are fragile?”. Unfortunately, the problem with gender, as diagnosed by Adichie (2013, 19:11) is that “it prescribes how we should be, rather than recognizing how we are”. Gender disregards and replaces individuality with skewed generalizations. Thus, all women are termed “weak” and all men are seen as “strong” and expected to display these imposed narratives to the dismissal of their individuality. Hence, in society’s chauvinistic enthusiasm for protecting all women for their “weakness”, and placing all men on the exalted platform of “strength”, great disservice and injustice are done to both genders.

Recounting her experience of the prejudice of gendered assumptions during her primary school days, Adichie (2013, 5:15) concludes: “But I was female and he was male and so he became the class monitor.” Similar to Adichie’s story on the prejudice of her primary school teacher in choosing a boy as the class monitor over her who had had the highest score in the deciding test, Helen also suffered a similar prejudice at the hands of her lecturers during her university days. In her words:

At the end of 200 level when it was time to specialize, I chose sculpture ... instead of sticking to painting ... for me, school was not about the grades but about gaining exposure and experiences in subjects I was unfamiliar with, but I got rejected and was told by the lecturer in charge at the time that I would not be able to cope because I was a girl. Those words lit like fire in my heart. “Because I am a girl?” What has being a girl got to do with following your heart and passion? This did not sit well with me ... it also made me feel small that because of my gender, I would not be given the chance to either pass or fail and try again. I kept applying to ... specialise in sculpture till I was granted and honestly, I believe I was only granted my request because this lecturer was preparing to say “I told you so” (N. Helen, Personal Communication, April 17, 2022).

Fragile II calls attention to the faceless and helpless female in society, whose dignity, sense of self and freedom have been suppressed and eroded by chauvinists and misogynists in her society. Adichie (2013, 10:28) says “I am angry. Gender, as it functions today, is a grave injustice. We should all be angry”. Anger is quite a valid emotional consequence of the Nigerian, African and global gender situation. It is evident that the same anger has spurred Helen into the creation of her pieces. Unfortunately, this anger would only persist unless there is a “glocal” paradigm shift in the skewed structures which are seen as social, cultural, political and religious “norms”.

5. Conclusions

It is almost impossible to draw a straight line to trace the trajectory and development of feminism from its point of emanation to the present. Even its origins are contested as a result of its political volatility and the temporal difference in the various uprising of consciousness amongst feminists (and aspiring feminists) in different parts of the world. But what is possible and within reach, as Helen has allegorically presented in her works, are the overt and covert nuances of discrimination and marginalisation women face daily in their various communities and lived experiences, such that has forced several generations of Albanian women to give up their femininity and swear to a life of virginity, just to merit some semblance of social and cultural relevance.

Within the context of the feminism theory, this paper recognizes Helen's works as strides of creative activism against unfair Afro-patriarchal structures which promote the commodification, objectification and dehumanization of the female in her society. Artistic activism such as this, according to Perovich and Araújo (2018, p. 4), "may help us make progress on difficult problems that resist our educational efforts by combining art (affect) with activism (effect)". Helen Nzete, in her most recent solo exhibition – *V is for ...*, stands in alliance with fellow Nigerian feminist artists and activists such as Peju Alatise and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, to be the voice of the voiceless in their communities and make progress in the collective struggle towards gender equality and social egalitarianism. As female artists globally assert their rights through art, they also use art to explore, negotiate and perhaps, come to terms with their experience and (un)folding identities as females.

Helen's *V is for ...* collection goes beyond being a mere artistic endeavour; it serves as a powerful advocate for social, political, and cultural balance while promoting equality and fair treatment across gender lines. The impact of these works on the larger society is profound, as they challenge existing norms and strive for a more inclusive and equitable world. Through her works, Helen endeavours to foster a society where individual peculiarities are not only acknowledged but also respected.

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