

SELF-EMPOWERMENT STRATEGIES REFLECTED BY THE MAIN CHARACTER IN GEBEYEHU AYELE'S *ESCAPE* (2011)

Kidist Belete^{1✉}, Olga Yazbec²

Addis Ababa University, P.O. Box: 1176, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia^{1,2}

Article Info

Article History:
Submitted July 2025
Accepted September 2025
Published October 2025

Keywords:

self-empowerment, Snail movement, gender equality, African women, feminism, negotiation, resilience

Abstract

African women developed indigenous feminist theories because they believed that Western Feminism could not answer the needs of African women. The reasons are cultural differences and differences in African women's experiences compared to those of Western women. This study analyzes female self-empowerment in the young adult novel *Escape* (2011) by Gebeyehu Ayele. The novel is written for Ethiopian young adults, but it also appeals to adults. An analysis of the young adult female protagonist is conducted using parameters drawn from snail-sense feminist theory. The article uses textual analysis. The researchers apply the strategies of Snail Sense Feminism, i.e., good education, dialogue with patriarchy, and self-actualization, among others, to extract selected passages from the novel to explore how the female protagonist empowers herself and navigates patriarchy with patience and resilience, paving the way for her freedom from the grip of patriarchal oppression. The female character experiences patriarchal oppression within her household. Through resilience, self-determination, patience, tact, her ability to navigate patriarchy, and support from sisterhood, she succeeds in liberating herself from the yoke of patriarchy.

INTRODUCTION

African Feminism first rose in the 1970s. It was organized by African women, who could not identify with Western feminism due to cultural differences and divergent experiences between the two groups. One factor for its development is “the landmark UN decade for women 1975-85 Nairobi conference for women”. The other factor is “the growth of women’s studies in universities.” This period was marked by “a focus on reclaiming and re-appropriating the values and principles of historical and traditional Africa” (Salami, 2025).

The second rise of African Feminism took place in 2000 and continues into the present Internet and technology era. The feminist thinkers of this period focused on reclaiming “feminist identity”. Their task was “to demystify the ways that conservative patriarchal values have crept into the feminist movement” (Salami, 2025).

All African indigenous theories were developed by Nigerian African feminist scholars. African Womanism is one of the Afrocentric feminist theories that originated in Africa. It was influenced by the African American author Clenora Hudson-Weems. Okonjo-Ogunyemi established an indigenized version of African womanism in 1985. African Womanism intends to bring “to the forefront the role of African mothers as leaders in the struggle to regain, reconstruct and create a cultural integrity”. It aims to establish “reciprocity, balance, harmony, justice, truth, righteousness and order” in African society (Dove, 1998).

Stiwanism is an African feminist theory grounded in indigenous culture. It aims to develop a feminist theory grounded in the experiences of African women. It was established by Molaria Ogundipe Leslie in 1994. According to her, “‘Stiwa’ is an acronym for ‘social transformation including women in Africa’” (Allan, 1995). Stiwanism strives for the equality of African women, but it also recognizes that African men have also suffered just like African women. According to Ogundipe, there should be a shift from Western-based feminism. She advocated for “a new social order based on gender, class, and racial equality” (Allan, 1995). In Stiwanism, one cannot foresee the development of the African continent without its women. Its founder urges African women to stand alongside their men in the social, economic, and political spheres.

Postcolonial Motherism is another African feminist theory developed by Catherine Acholonu in 1995. It posits that “African women are the spiritual base of every family, community, and nation” (Godono, 2005). The family is also considered the context in which the woman blossoms. Furthermore, the term “motherist” applies to both men and women. Nego-Feminism is another African feminist theory that challenges the oppression of African women through negotiation, cooperation, and conciliation. It is known as “no-ego feminism.”

According to its founder, Obioma Nnaemeka, it is a “no-ego” and “negotiation” form of feminism. She notes that “African cultures” use “the principles of negotiation, give-and-take, compromise and balance” (Onabolu, 2019).

Snail-Sense Feminism is one of the indigenous African feminist theories developed by Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo in 2012, following its presentation as a prototype nine years earlier in Berlin, Germany. Unlike other African feminist theories, it draws on the concept of individualism from Western feminism. Its theorist is a versatile author. She has written several children’s, young adult, and adult novels. This theory is applied to the analysis of the selected book in the present article.

African female writers resist patriarchal oppression of women through the characters they portray in their literary texts. For example, in the novel *Efuru* (1966), Nigerian writer Flora Nwapa portrays a strong female character, Efuru, who is capable of agential acts and achieves business success. The Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo wrote a novel titled *Anowa* (2003). In this novel, Aidoo advocates gender equality. In 1988, Dangarembga wrote *Nervous Conditions*. This novel portrays a strong female character, Tembu, who demonstrates that she is as capable as her brother in school, despite her father’s belief that girls do not need an education. *The Rain Came* and *The Empty Basket* were written by the Kenyan writer Grace Ogot, and are about courageous women who exercise agency. The Senegalese writer, Mariama Ba, published *So Long a Letter* in 1979. In this novel, a male character resists patriarchy by refusing to marry a second wife. Here is a male character who champions women’s rights (Culture Custodian Editorial Team, 2022).

African Feminism is concerned with “gender struggles, colonial history, race relations and economic hardship” (Zhang, 2025). It differs from Western Feminism in that it emphasizes solidarity, mutual bonds, and cooperation, whereas Western Feminism advocates individualism (Zhang, 2025). This, however, does not mean that Western Feminism does not influence African Feminism. For example, Snail-Sense Feminism asserts that the African woman must first become independent to be able to help other African women. African feminism advocates for a peaceful resolution of gender conflicts through dialogue and cooperation.

The strategies employed by the female character in Gebeyehu Ayele’s young adult novel, *Escape* (2011), are analyzed based on theoretical paradigms drawn from Snail-Sense Feminism, which advocates non-confrontational strategies to alleviate the problem of female subjugation in patriarchy. African women should not use aggressive means to obtain equal rights. Snail-Sense Feminism also aims to empower African women, enabling them to become self-assertive and self-actualized.

Gebeyehu Ayele wrote *Escape* for the very first Burt Award competition for African Literature (Ethiopia) in 2011 and won second place. It was published by CODE (Canadian Organization for Development through Education), Ethiopia. The Canadian philanthropist William Burt, who visited Ethiopia, found that high school students needed young adult novels to help them develop their reading skills and English language proficiency. He has made a significant contribution in this respect. The Burt Awards intend to promote the writing and distribution of high-quality, culturally relevant young adult novels in English.

It can be seen that young adult fiction is a newly emerged literary genre and is not widely read in Ethiopia. The review of related literature reveals that research on the 2011 young adult novels published by CODE Ethiopia is scarce. As for Gebeyehu Ayele's *Escape*, there is a gap that the present article tries to fill in. This English young adult novel, unique in its original country, has not been analyzed in relation to any African feminist theory previously. Gebeyehu Ayele is not a feminist writer, though *Escape* lends itself to such an analysis. The researchers selected this novel because they are interested in understanding his perceptions of women and feminist issues as reflected in it. In this novel, the story takes place in the rural part of Ethiopia, in a village called 'Mehal Amba'. It is the story of a young adult, whose father has agreed to give her hand in marriage to a middle-aged farmer and trader who offers him a dowry of 5,000 Ethiopian Birr, claiming it is a loan. The female protagonist of this young adult novel has already fallen in love with the boy next door, named Dagne.

Rotimi Olatunji (2019), in her thesis, examines how the strategies of Snail-Sense Feminism are used in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's selected literary works. This study is similar to the present research, although the chosen data differ. Rotimi's article also addresses adult and children's literature. Like the present article, it also focuses on feminist issues. Tagay Fetene (2020) applied Marxist Feminism as a theoretical framework to examine the economic, educational, ideological, and class representation of female characters in two young adult Ethiopian novels: Rahel Ambaye's *The Price of the Pass* and Eyob Getahun's *Behind the Invisible Bars*. Like the present research, Fetene makes a feminist analysis of the selected Ethiopian young adult novels. He also makes a comparative analysis of the novels. However, he applied Marxist theory, which is a different perspective.

Yibrie and Wassie (2020) conducted a thematic analysis of the following young adult novels published by CODE Ethiopia: *Breaking the Chain*, *Behind the Invisible Bars*, and *The Young Crusader*. This research differs from the present study in that it focuses on a snail-sense feminist analysis of a selected African young adult novel. The other research on Ethiopian

young adult novels published by CODE Ethiopia was written by Assefa (2016). This research differs from the present study in that it focuses on narratology.

Stamper's (2012) article is related to the present study because it is a feminist study and also focuses on young adult literature. Stamper's article is interesting because she raises the issue of female characters as role models. For her, the subject of character stereotype is more significant than stories being read for enjoyment.

Ruthie Liza Lapinig and Gemarrie E. Baquiller (2020) wrote a research article that argues African women have faced many challenges. Despite this, however, "they have become the epitome of resilience." This article shares similarities with the present study in that it also examines female characters in fiction. However, the texts are not pieces of young adult literature. Furthermore, the researchers did not apply Snail-Sense Feminism.

Mesfin Wodajo Woldemariam (2024) employed a feminist approach in analyzing Gebeyehu Ayele's *Escape* (2011). He applied Socialist Feminism to the analysis of *Escape* and found that the female protagonist, Mulu, is a resolute girl, whereas her mother is submissive to her husband. Mesfin Wodajo's research is not concerned with female self-empowerment. He also applied a different theory.

The above review reveals that a snail-sense feminist analysis of the young adult novel "*Escape*" has not been conducted. The researchers hope to gain new insights into the selected novel by analyzing it through the lens of Snail-Sense Feminism. Psychologists have studied and written about young adults. However, there are aspects of young adults that psychologists cannot reveal, but creative writers can. Literary texts have the power to probe deeper into the minds and feelings of young adult characters and reveal their motivations. Presently, female empowerment is a crucial issue in literature and other fields of study. According to Snail-Sense Feminism, African women can empower themselves through resilience, endurance, and self-determination. Snail-Sense Feminism, as stated earlier, is an indigenous African Feminist theory. The researchers selected Snail-Sense Feminism as a framework for an in-depth exploration of the female character's experiences in the context of her lived environment.

The researchers intend to critically explore the female protagonist's ability to apply the strategies of Snail Sense Feminism in her efforts to negotiate with patriarchy and cope with gender inequality. This research aims to explore how the female protagonist navigates patriarchy through the strategies of Snail-Sense Feminism and how she empowers herself to cope with patriarchal oppression and liberate herself from its constraints. Female self-empowerment is a path to freedom.

This study is significant because it applies an African indigenous feminist theory to the selected young adult novel. African literary texts are rooted in the culture from which they spring. Therefore, analyzing African literary texts through indigenous African feminist theories can yield new insights. Indigenous African feminist theories focus on the marginalized section of society in patriarchy. The marginalized individuals are African women who possess indigenous knowledge and are eager to collaborate with men to create an equitable social system. Solutions to gender-related problems can be found not through revenge but through cooperation between men and women. This study is also significant because it focuses on women's self-empowerment, a crucial issue in feminist studies today.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The following are the strategies/parameters Ezeigbo, founder of Snail-Sense Feminism, proposes for women's self-empowerment.

Dialogue

The first strategy is effective dialogue/ negotiation. Adimora-Ezeigbo's plans for practically attaining emancipation include the role of women as negotiators with their male counterparts (Olatunji, 2019). In this form of mitigation, which provides non-violence first, stands "... placation at the heart of womanist struggles because in the snail-sense womanist model, the snail 'goes steadily forward. It doesn't confront objects but negotiates its way past any obstacles'" (Olatunji, 2019). This strategy promotes a peaceful way of coping with gender inequality. It emphasizes that women should be patient and efficient in their dealings with patriarchy as they negotiate/ dialogue "... challenging conditions littered with harsh objects in the manner a snail crawls over the very harsh conditions or rough terrains..." (Ezenwa-Ohaeto, 2019). Women have been considered inferior to men in a patriarchal society. Hence, it requires patience and negotiation on the part of women to see the end of women's oppression.

Good Education

The second strategy is to acquire a good education. Though not directly related to snails' traits, good education in Snail-Sense Feminism is "... added as a strategy because a woman who has all the snail's attributes of wisdom, resilience, patience, sensitivity, and doggedness is at a great disadvantage..." if not educated (Akanmode, 2015). Skills necessary for a livelihood are acquired through education and training. According to Ezeigbo, cited in Akanmode (2015), good education is the key to opening the door of opportunities for Nigerian women. When a woman is educated, her family, in particular, and the country as a whole are educated and

empowered. For instance, in politics, well-educated women are more likely to vote, seek political positions, and be elected than illiterate women, who often lack the confidence to engage in politics. Education opens the social and political spheres to women.

Furthermore, Ezeigbo (in Olatunji, 2019) believes that education is ‘realistic, practical and functional.’ The writers of this article find it quite interesting that African women can work against patriarchy using the colonisers’ tool, education, to improve their life conditions by successfully achieving economic independence. Education empowers women with the skills to achieve financial freedom.

Individualism/Self-Actualization

The third strategy is individualism (self-actualization). Achieving individual success and development is essential in Snail-Sense Feminism. A crucial aspect of the Snail-Sense Feminism theory is its principle of individuation. Although the snail is found within its own community, it mostly behaves as an individual, primarily through its self-preservation instincts. It does not move in a group. Thus, Adimora-Ezeigbo posits that “the woman should not just accommodate others ... but should ensure that she achieves recognition for herself because self-preservation and self-actualization are crucial to a woman’s success in life” In Adimora-Ezeigbo’s configuration, the pursuit of individual success and development, vital to survival, has a ripple effect on the community (Olatunji, 2019).

The African woman must first emancipate herself. However, it does not mean that Snail Sense Feminism refutes the concept of sisterhood. Interestingly, Snail Sense Feminism once again shares an essential aspect of Western feminism with its principle of individuation, revealing its inclusiveness. The proposal in this snail-sense strategy is that even though patriarchy keeps on perpetuating itself as usual, African women who hope to change its structure should begin to work on themselves before joining forces with others to crumble it gradually. Women should develop self-assertion and independence before they can effectively support and empower other women.

The issue of women’s resilience has been included here because it is a salient feature of African women, as noted by Ezeigbo. Resilience is necessary for achieving self-actualization or independence. It is worth knowing what distinguishes resilient women from other women. Becca (2022), discusses the characteristics of resilient women as those who always find a way around any obstacle, do not give up easily, not afraid of failure, command respect, strong and have self-determination, self-confidence and optimistic, are enthusiastic about what she is

doing and are always learning, selfless, supportive to others and good listeners, organized and resourceful.

Unigwe's novel *The Middle Daughter* (2023) highlights the importance of resilience in the female protagonist's journey toward self-actualization. In this novel, the female protagonist, Nani, exemplifies a resilient woman who achieves self-actualization. She endured the obstacles she faced in her marriage. She experienced physical violence by her abusive husband. When he left her later on, she did not give in to discouragement. She realized that she alone could change her destiny. She overcame the obstacles with tenacity. Through education, she acquired the skills for self-actualization. Nani's father understands that his daughters need a good education to become independent. Nani also gets financial support from her sister. She could therefore engage in financial business. Sisterly bond facilitated her economic independence. This novel illustrates that women need resilience and self-determination to achieve personal success. They should become independent to be able to help other women resist patriarchal subjugation.

In her theory, Ezeigbo also recognizes that "a conducive environment" is essential for the African woman's emancipation from the grip of patriarchal oppression. Ezeigbo, in Alkali and Olorunshola (2016), maintains that her model is indigenous. African women of the past adopted the snail's behavior to survive in their communities. Ezeigbo emphasizes that the features African women share with the snail should not be regarded as a weakness. Like the snail, African women avoid confrontation with patriarchy. Ezeigbo's Snail-Sense Feminism emphasizes patience and gentleness. Furthermore, resilience and adaptability enable African women to navigate patriarchal structures. Ezeigbo (in Oluigbo, 2010) uses the snail as a metaphor to illustrate how African women can negotiate patriarchy. The snail can endure difficult situations.

Like Western Feminism, Snail-Sense Feminism stresses individualism/self-actualization. The snail walks alone, even though it belongs to a group. Similarly, according to Ezeigbo, the African woman must empower herself before she can empower others. She needs to be equipped with indigenous knowledge since cultural awareness is essential. She should also be educated for self-empowerment, as it is a significant aspect of Snail-Sense Feminism, which highlights cooperation, compromise, diplomacy, negotiation, individualism, and female empowerment through education (Ezeigbo, cited in Sackeyfio & Diala-Ogamba, 2017).

Sisterhood and Women's Solidarity

Patriarchy has always subjugated women throughout the world and tried to instill the notion of their incapacity to stand alone and the impossibility of creating a bond amongst themselves. Accordingly, Hooks (2000) states that Male supremacist ideology encourages women to believe that they are valueless and obtain value only by relating to or bonding with men. Women are taught that their relationships with one another diminish rather than enrich their experience. They are taught that women are “natural” enemies, that solidarity will never exist between them because they cannot, should not, and do not bond with one another. They have learned these lessons well. To refute the aforementioned argument, Hooks asserts that women must unlearn it if they are to build a sustained feminist movement. Women must learn to live and work in solidarity. Women must learn the true meaning and value of Sisterhood (Hooks, 2000).

Sisterhood is a concept that enhances mutual support among women. Patricia Hill Collins defines sisterhood as a collective effort by women to support one another in the face of oppression and to work toward creating a more just and equitable society. Okpokwasili states that sisterhood needs to be inclusive and intersectional, recognizing and addressing the unique experiences and challenges faced by different groups of women. Also, she reinforces this by declaring that by working together in solidarity and recognizing the diversity of women’s experiences, we can build a more just and equitable society for all (Okpokwasili, 2023). In the African context, one way through which women can be empowered is through sisterhood. It fosters a bond that empowers African women to navigate the challenges they face in patriarchal societies.

Economic Freedom

Since Snail-Sense Feminism advocates for women’s freedom from patriarchy, it also considers women’s economic freedom to be important. According to UN Women (2024), economic empowerment enables women to benefit equally from their work. Another benefit of financial empowerment is increased voice, agency, and meaningful participation in economic decision-making in private spheres and at home. The article also states that when more women participate in the workforce, a country experiences economic development.

METHOD

This article undertakes a textual analysis of the selected novel. The data used in this article are qualitative in nature. The primary data consists of a young adult novel entitled *Escape*, written by Gebeyehu Ayele, an African writer. It is not remote from the Ethiopian readers’

schema. The selected novel, published in the 21st century, also addresses the needs and interests of young adults. Purposive sampling was used to choose the story. The secondary data sources included books, online articles, and theses, which were used to write the review of related literature and prepare the theoretical framework for analysis.

The researchers employed close reading of *Escape* to gain a deeper understanding of the novel and to select relevant passages. Then, they applied the paradigms they developed from Snail-Sense Feminism to the analysis of the selected text. The study aimed to demonstrate how the female character employs the strategies of Snail-Sense Feminism to negotiate with patriarchy and overcome gender-related problems within the patriarchal system. The textual analysis was also supported by evidence from the novel, enhancing its validity.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of Gebeyehu Ayele's *Escape* (2011)

The Female Protagonist's Formal and Informal Education

The concept of informal education has been incorporated because the novel demonstrates that the female protagonist also learns a great deal through her interactions with other community members. This helps broaden her life experience and enables her to become a strong, self-reliant person. According to Snail-Sense Feminism, one way women can self-actualize is through education. In the novel, Mulu's uncle Dres insists that Mulu should never quit school because he is aware of its advantages, and this can be observed when he says to his niece:

‘... Women can be free and independent only when they are educated. It is only education that can help our people escape from poverty, backwardness and harmful traditional practices. Stand up for this cause and educate yourself by any means so that you can be a good fighter for the cause...’ (Ayele, 2011, p. 66).

The above quotation can show that Mulu's uncle is progressive and appreciates the value of education. He is aware that education equips women with skills that can help them to become independent. As discussed in the theoretical framework, a woman would be at a significant disadvantage, regardless of her intelligence, if she is not educated. Dres insists on making sure that his niece knows it and does whatever she can to benefit from it. He shares his belief with her that it is only an educated woman who would dare to play a role in dismantling traditional patriarchal roles/beliefs. The researchers are quite in agreement on the significant advantages of education. Education is one of the snail-sense feminist strategies. It equips women with the necessary skills to become independent. It also empowers them to become economically

independent. The protagonist Mulu is determined not to quit her education. This is because she knows that education opens up avenues for independence.

Dagne is worried that her father's attitude will drive Mulu to quit school out of despair. But she shows her determination not to do so. The following quotation shows this:

'What makes you think I will quit school and marry? Didn't we discuss our wishes and plans? Didn't we decide to continue our education and do what we can towards abolishing backward beliefs and traditions? Why don't you trust me?' (Ayele, 2011, p. 51)

Mulu knows that education is the key to success and freedom from patriarchy. She is ready to pay the cost that freedom from patriarchal subjugation demands. Mulu yearns to join the university. She is also thankful to her father for sending her to school despite his meager income (Ayele, 2011, pp. 84-85). Although Mulu's parents sent their daughter to school, they believe that education beyond eighth grade is a waste of time for a girl. This reflects their traditional mindset. But she disagrees with both of them (Ayele, 2011, pp. 39-40). This example highlights Mulu's ability to consider others' intentions.

Mulu is also keen to broaden her knowledge through interaction with the community. The community is a source of indigenous knowledge. But her father strives to restrict her movements. Her uncle, Dres, suggests that she keep her contact with the health extension workers. Adolescents' involvement in community activities helps them grow by broadening their life experience. A joint study by UNICEF examines adolescents' engagement in community activities, a space that educates them about reality and life. It is also a space where adolescents learn problem-solving skills and are introduced to the problems in their community (UNICEF, 2020). Young adults' involvement in community activities is also manifested in the novel *Escape*. Mulu's participation in community activities has significantly contributed to her self-actualization process. Dres also encourages Mulu to pursue her education. He tells Mulu never to quit school, no matter what happens (Ayele, 2011, p. 65). Unlike his brother, he believes that education empowers women to pursue their goals.

Mulu supports the health extension workers. This is revealed in the following dialogue with her mother. She says the reason she supports them is "... because they aim to educate people to stop harmful traditional practices. This is a cause worth supporting" (Ayele, 2011, p. 32). Mulu is also pro-education and is aware of the benefits of education for society as a whole and for the self-actualization of women in particular. She realizes that education will help her become independent and equip her with the skills to contribute to society's welfare.

Mulu is determined to support community workers, whatever the cost. She tells her father that she doesn't care what happens to her as long as she supports this program. She desires to

see "... women—young and old emancipated from backward oppressive traditions ..." and "... to see poverty wiped out ..." (Ayele, 2011, p. 37). From this, it can be inferred that Mulu is determined to dismantle the patriarchal beliefs that only educated women would dare to challenge. Though Mulu should be admired for her determination, she should, however, navigate patriarchy wisely without being confrontational.

One circumstance in which Mulu's intellectual abilities are manifested is in her meeting with the health extension workers. She is about to finish her chores while her parents are out at church in the morning. The health extension workers say, "We are sorry for being unexpected guests. Though we will meet you later today, we come to consult with you about an urgent matter..." (Ayele, 2011, pp. 15-16). This can show that they look up to her.

In one meeting with the health extension workers, where everyone is at a loss for how to gain acceptance for the program, Mulu speaks up. She says:

'The Health Extension Program is accepted by the people altogether.' There are some people who have started implementing the program. This is the first group. The second group of people neither opposes nor supports the program. The third group consists of those who strongly oppose the program's implementation. I suggest that we consider these issues to seek solutions.' (Ayele, 2011, p. 25).

The above statement from Mulu demonstrates that she can put the problem into perspective and arrive at a solution. She then comes up with the solution by herself, stating:

'It is difficult for people with a traditional mindset to accept new ideas at once. I see this as the primary obstacle that prevents people from accepting the program. The other factor, as mentioned earlier, is the youthfulness of the extension workers. This is not normal in our society. Only elderly men assume such a role,' she concludes (Ayele, 2011, p. 27).

Readers may be impressed by Mulu's emphasis on educating the older generation about the crucial role of health extension workers within the community, which is essential to the program's success. This can be gathered from the following passage in the novel, where Mulu suggests that they all should convince '... the elders and respected persons as well as religious leaders to support the program. If they stand along with the extension workers, the program will be implemented smoothly and quickly....' (Ayele, 2011, p. 28). Finally, after she proposes the solution to the problem, everyone is happy and stands up, clapping. In this meeting, she was actually elected to support the program.

Mulu is aware of the significance of education for girls, even though most of the old generation in her community believes that girls should quit education after grade eight and get married. The following example from the novel supports this idea. She cautiously says: "A

woman is not only created to give birth to children..." and that there is more potential to a girl than what he says (Ayele, 2011, p. 71).

Intimacy in *Escape*

In the novel *Escape*, we witness the motivational power of Mulu's intimacy with the young adult character, Dagne. She also develops a sense of belonging through intimacy. It is worth noting that Mulu lacks her parents' support. Despite this, she does not lose hope. She is strong, determined, and resilient. Intimacy helps Mulu to build up self-esteem, which is essential for autonomy/self-actualization in young adults. By self-esteem, it is meant that Mulu feels good about herself. Intimacy also motivates her to think about the future.

In the various strands of feminism, critics acknowledge that women have been subjugated in the patriarchal system. Therefore, this predicament calls for a change in gender relations. In her snail-sense feminist theory, Ezeigbo proposes that gender inequality can be addressed through "a closer relationship between man and woman." The implication is that this relationship should be "based on love, respect, and mutual understanding." This, according to Ezeigbo, "can promote wholeness of society" (Udofia, 2012). It can be inferred that by "wholeness of society," Ezeigbo means a society in which women are equal to men, and they cooperate.

Young adults get involved in intimacy. It has a positive effect on their self-concept and self-esteem. In *Escape*, Mulu's intimacy with Dagne triggers antagonism with her father, who has a traditional mindset. Parents must be connected to their children. They must spend quality time with their children and advise them on matters related to their education and future. But according to modern standards, they should not interfere with their children's choice of marriage partner.

The way in which Dagne's love for Mulu is revealed is interesting. Dagne, while smiling, invites Mulu to have tea with him in the cafeteria, since they left school earlier that day (Ayele, 2011, p. 42). Mulu accepts his request by simply smiling back. This can show that they want to relax in the cafeteria and enjoy each other's company. Friends want to spend a nice time together.

As they reach the cafeteria, Dagne asks Mulu what she wants to eat. Mulu replies that they only come for tea; she cares for him, knowing that he does not have much money on him. Yet, Dagne insists that they can have some food since he can pay (Ayele, 2011, p. 42). When she asks him where he got the money, he tells her he sold a sack of onions he harvested in his backyard. He adds that there are three more sacks of onions left to sell. Here, it can be seen that

she is concerned about him, and he also frankly tells her everything he has. Upon hearing this, Mulu praises him, calling him a hard-working boy. It gives Dagne a good feeling. It can be inferred that their intimacy is characterized by mutual understanding and interdependence, which are criteria of intimacy.

Dagne opens a package and unpacks its contents as the two are in the cafeteria: a small bottle of lotion, a hair band, and two small earrings. He tells her they are all for her. She gazes in amazement. He then says that if he had more money, he would have bought her the best things that the world has to offer. After saying this, he kisses her lips softly. This action dramatizes intimacy. Love can be expressed through action. Dagne wants her to be happy, and he cares deeply for her.

Mulu notifies Dagne that her father's opposition to the health extension workers has decreased since a friend of his advised him. However, her parents still insist that she should drop out of school and get married. Quitting school will deprive her of her right to education, which is essential for her self-actualization and personal growth. Parents should not choose partners for their children. By interfering, Mulu's parents stand in the way of her happiness. This is an obstacle Mulu must overcome at all costs. Mulu and Dagne love each other very much. They also have a strong desire to plan their future life together.

Navigating Patriarchy through Dialogue/Negotiation

Mulu navigates patriarchy patiently and skillfully, overcoming the barriers to her freedom. In the past, in Ethiopian culture, many women and girls had no say in any matter whatsoever. However, in recent times, our society has undergone some changes, and they have begun to navigate effective dialogue with the menfolk they relate to or choose to interact with. In *Escape*, Mulu attempts to utilize effective dialogue to buy time until she can break free from the constraints of patriarchy. If it were not for careful negotiation, things would have shifted towards the success of the abductors who had planned to force Mulu to marry the middle-aged suitor against her will.

Mulu does not accept her father's proposal that she quit school and marry the suitor. She knows that without a good education, she cannot become independent. In addition, she does not want to marry someone she does not love. She is in a conflicting situation, but she has to know how to navigate her authoritarian father. In other words, she has to be wise like the snail here. As a daughter, she also has empathy for her parents, but she remains steadfast in her decision to move ahead with her plan. She is self-determined. She does not give up.

Even though the bond between Mulu and her daughter is strong, Mulu will not falter in her decision to stand with Dagne. He realizes that she will move ahead at whatever cost. But he also wants her to understand that the situation they are in is confusing and frustrating, and he adds that the pressure on her is much stronger than on him. They have planned a future together. There are obstacles they will have to overcome. It is difficult for African women to achieve self-actualization in the patriarchal world. Mulu gets frustrated and asks Dagne, “Why should women have to pass through such unpleasant circumstances?” (Ayele, 2011, p. 51). Dagne replies: “The cause of this problem is the backward culture we are in. That is why we should fight to dismantle this thinking. Only then can we escape to freedom and lead a better life.” (Ayele, 2011, pp. 51-52). From this, it can be inferred that Dagne supports the emancipation of women.

Dagne is worried about their precarious situation. So, he advises Mulu that if her parents raise the question of her marrying soon again, she should tell them she cannot answer until she completes grade eight. He wants her to navigate the patriarchy wisely. Despite being determined not to give up, Mulu is uncertain about what tomorrow will bring. But Dagne is optimistic. So, he reassures her that they will come up with something if the worst happens.

Mulu is apprehensive about what her father might decide about her, so she inquires: “Have you decided anything concerning me?” Her father looks puzzled. She continues: “Anything related to my future” (Ayele, 2011, p. 78). At the end, he replies that he does all things for her own good and leaves the room abruptly. There is a generational gap here. Her father thinks that he is right. He does not realize that his decision might tamper with her happiness. Dialogue with her authoritarian father does not help to mitigate the conflict.

Dagne plays the role of the wise counselor. So, he advises her to be tactful with her father. He wants her to avoid confrontation with her father. He knows that confrontation aggravates conflict and tells her to apologize to her father. Mulu obeys Dagne and does accordingly. This is how wisdom is manifested in her. She listens to her friend’s advice. She needs to be tactful to overcome the barriers that stand in the way of her future success and happiness. Tact and wisdom are weapons that African women use to navigate patriarchy.

On one occasion, Mulu’s father aggressively drags her away from Dagne’s embrace, as Mulu meets Dagne after the meeting of the health extension workers. Her father upholds the cultural norms. But these norms deny Mulu freedom of choice. Mulu demonstrates resilience by not giving up and maintaining hope. Even Dagne is shocked by her father’s behavior. Her father wants her to break her relationship with Dagne (Ayele, 2011, p. 113). This puts Mulu in a dilemma, which further intensifies the conflict in the story. Mulu must move slowly and

carefully like a snail. Confronting patriarchy will not solve their problem. Both Mulu and Dagne are aware of this. Hence, though they do not meet as often as they did, Dagne waits for Mulu at the place where they usually meet to go to school.

Navigating patriarchy is a challenging endeavor. The conflict intensifies in the story as a hired guard watches Mulu. Her father introduces the woman who hired the guard and tells Mulu to consider her a mother. Mulu discusses the matter with Dagne. This is an issue that requires serious consideration. She tells Dagne:

‘I feel anxious and fearful. Although the things my father does seem good on the surface, I suspect a sinister motive behind his actions. That worries me. The worst thing is, however, the approach of your departure to Debrebrehan.’ (Ayele, 2011, p. 128).

Mulu’s mother, a stereotypical character, is not an ally of her daughter. She tells Mulu to stop seeing Dagne. This upsets Mulu. She responds that Dagne cares for her more than her parents do and adds, “It is because of his care that I am safe.” You know what is happening to girls? This year alone, three girls were abducted, and two girls were brutally raped in the forest while going to school. ...?” (Ayele, 2011, pp. 133-134). This example shows that Mulu is not being tactful here.

The conflict is further aggravated in the story when someone warns Mulu that if she ever tries to meet Dagne, it will be the end of her. Here, it is clear that Mulu does not even have the freedom to see her lover. She realizes that Dagne’s safety is at stake. She tells Dagne to leave this place and escape to save her life (Ayele, 2011, p. 159). And as he is about to leave for Debrebrehan, Dagne says that if they had mobile phones, they would have been able to exchange words. Then, Mulu writes the mobile phone number of one of the health extension workers on a piece of paper and gives it to him.

This passage shows how Mulu acts wisely when the situation becomes tense, and she is overcome with fear of losing Dagne. She makes the right move to save Dagne from danger. Here is a threat that can impede her self-actualization and their happiness.

Mulu’s teacher, who negotiates with the guard hired to watch over Mulu, discovers every detail of the abduction plan and devises a way to save Mulu. Abduction is a tool that the patriarchy uses to subjugate women, especially in a traditional society.

The Female Protagonist’s Self-Actualization: Sisterhood

Self-actualization refers to autonomy or independence. Autonomy is a process that human beings undergo. It begins in adolescence, but it is a lifelong process. The female protagonist, Mulu, is an adolescent character. She exercises autonomy and demonstrates self-determination

in a patriarchal society, which deprives her of freedom to act and freedom of choice. As indicated in the theoretical framework, the African woman must first become independent before she can help other women. To self-actualize and become autonomous, she must be strong and possess self-determination. In his father's eyes, Mulu is an object he can marry to a partner he has chosen. She is deprived of her freedom of choice. But she does not simply sit down and cry over her fate. Mulu's uncle's support is significant in her self-actualization. Unlike her uncle, Dres, her parents are too self-centered and domineering towards their daughter. Dres is the adult to whom she can confide and discuss her problems.

Her uncle, Dres, is the person she can freely discuss educational matters with. After Mulu returns from school and the family have dinner, her uncle Dres, despite being told by his brother to go to his place next door, first asks her how she is doing at school and then moves onto asking her about the health extension workers by saying: "I heard that the health extension workers will be going around the village to discuss health and other related problems. Is that true?" (Ayele, 2011, p. 10).

Negating the ideas of her father, who claims the health extension workers are worthless, Dres then states: "The benefits that a person brings are not measured by his or her age, but by the knowledge he or she has" (Ayele, 2011, p. 11). He then tells his niece that she needs to support the health extension workers. Through her uncle, Mulu learns that young adults should participate in community work. This is one way through which young adults can develop autonomy.

Mulu becomes very sad when she realizes that her father has a negative attitude towards women. When she is having a conversation with Dres at his place, he inquires about what her father said about the female health extension workers. She replies that his attitude is rather negative. Dres advises her to "work patiently to convince him to accept the program. I say this because I realize that the challenge which comes from him will be extreme." (Ayele, 2011, pp. 21-22).

Dres is the only family member with whom Mulu can speak in confidence. As she talks about what worries her, Dres says, "Don't worry. The circumstances themselves will bring solutions to the problems" (Ayele, 2011, p. 22). She playfully asks her uncle, "Are you hiding away to stay clear of your brother?" He replies: "This is not new to me. What I don't like most is his backward attitude." (Ayele, 2011, p. 22). Dres further advises Mulu to take it easy and be on the watch. He then feels compelled to warn his niece. He says, "I can't tell you the reason because I am not clear about what I am sensing. But I feel an urge to warn you..." (Ayele, 2011, p. 22). Adult support is a source of encouragement for Mulu.

Mulu learns about the suitor who comes to ask for her hand in marriage through Dres, who tells her that the guest who will come to their house is a trader and a farmer (Ayele, 2011, p. 65). He further adds that this man does not live far from where they live and that he travels a lot. He further adds that:

‘Beneficial relationships are more honored than blood relationships. A problem arises when the relationship is between unequals - persons who are not economically on par. The amazing thing in this case is that the one who is looking for the relationship is not your father, the poor farmer, but the rich man’ (Ayele, 2011, p. 65).

Upon hearing this, Mulu becomes anxious. She knows that her father will definitely ask her to drop out of school. This would mean her future plans will be under threat. Her uncle notes, “whatever the case, ‘Don’t quit school.’” (Ayele, 2011, p. 65). Such advice can be a source of moral uplift for Mulu, who is determined to self-actualize. It is the only path to her freedom.

Mulu’s uncle represents community members who support female emancipation from patriarchal oppression. Snail-sense feminists recognize the crucial role that family and relatives can play in their daughters’ self-actualization. The researchers believe that Mulu is fortunate to have an uncle with a mother mindset, who supports women’s freedom. Mulu’s uncle is different from her father. It would be unrealistic if Gebeyehu Ayele had not shown that there are men in the traditional Ethiopian society who champion women’s rights and are sympathetic to women who are suppressed by patriarchal norms. Mulu has decided not to waver in her decision not to give up education and get married.

Mulu plans to pursue her education and do everything she can to abolish backward beliefs and traditions. She knows that the path to freedom and a better life lies in dismantling patriarchal beliefs. She desires that women, young and old, be emancipated from backward, oppressive traditions. She yearns for poverty to be wiped out in Ethiopia. Mulu’s freedom from patriarchal oppression could be realized through her self-determination. She is self-assertive, which is essential for women who aspire to independence.

The role of female solidarity in this success cannot be overlooked. Mulu goes to the female health extension workers’ office to speak to Dagne over the mobile phone of one of the workers, who has agreed to let her use it. Dagne is in Debrebrehan. Her cooperation is invaluable. Mulu’s female school teacher is the one who informs her that there is a plan to abduct her very soon. Hence, Mulu is in a dilemma, not knowing what comes next, and she cannot do anything about it. But, like the snail, she tries to do what she can so that things don’t get out of control and she doesn’t end up in trouble. The lady teacher, who has already informed

her about the abduction plan, informs Mulu again that she has been following every movement of the man who intends to marry her against her will and the woman who has been laying traps for Mulu to facilitate her abduction. Mulu becomes aware that an abduction is imminent and gets worried.

In this novel, sisterhood intervenes in providing financial assistance to Mulu, who has no other option but to leave ‘Mehal Amba’ as soon as possible. Mulu does not hesitate to embark on an unknown venture. This reveals her resilience and courage. So, Mulu’s female teacher gives Mulu fifteen Ethiopian Birr and a shawl so that Mulu can board a bus to Debreberhan to escape abduction.

Mulu gives recognition to the kind teacher, saying, “That teacher saved my life, Dagne...” and Dagne emphasizes her contribution to the success of their plan, stating, “She is a very kind woman. She can help us in many ways ...” (Ayele, 2011, p. 198). Mulu describes the security she finds within sisterhood as follows: “...A place of safety, comfort and love.” (Ayele, 2011, p. 198). Sisterhood paves the way for Mulu’s self-actualization. In this novel, escape symbolizes an outlet from oppression. It leads Mulu to the arena of freedom and happiness.

The travel to Debreberhan marks Mulu’s ability to take control of her life. That is to say, her independence. According to Snail-Sense Feminism, self-actualized women can take control of their lives. Mulu also yearns to be financially independent. She plans to earn a living, upgrade her education, and even help her father return the money he borrowed from the middle-aged suitor. Now that Mulu is free, she can marry the man of her choice. Self-actualization enables Mulu to become a decision-maker.

Self-actualization also opens the door to Mulu’s further education by allowing her to work during the day and attend her classes at night. Hence, she will not be confined to elementary education, but will strive for higher-level education and explore ways to lead a better life with Dagne. Mulu is also now on the verge of reaping the benefits of freedom from patriarchal oppression. For example, she will explore the possibilities the future holds for her and Dagne, even if there are uncertainties. Mulu is assertive and optimistic. She is not afraid of risks.

Life will not be easy for Mulu and Dagne, but they will overcome all the hurdles they face because they are now free to plan their lives together. They are pleased together as their lives gradually improve. Mulu is finally able to stand on her two feet. As the two young people are walking along the cobbled streets, while the wind blows from east to west, Mulu with a bright smile says ““Look at the long streets stretched before us,...”” and Dagne says that ““They are beautiful, straight and free!”” and he finally says ““It is good to see old thoughts replaced by new ones. Then, ossified beliefs will perish and the youth will become free.”” (Ayele, 2011, p.

200). This foreshadows the bright future that Mulu and Dagne will have, as long as they remain positive and strive to make the most of life. Mulu can think about plans because she has now self-actualized. According to snail-sense feminists, an African woman must be independent before she can help other women to self-actualize. Mulu is altruistic. She thinks about the well-being of others, of the community. However, to effectively help other women, she must first become financially independent. This is a significant project that Mulu and Dagne are planning to embark on. With time and hard work, they will become successful.

CONCLUSIONS

In the selected young adult novel *Escape*, the female protagonist overcomes adversity in a patriarchal culture and gains freedom. She could free herself from the obstacles of patriarchy through education, negotiation with patriarchy, and self-actualization. Resilience and self-determination also help her to self-actualize. Self-actualization is crucial for female independence.

The female protagonist in the selected novel is as clever as a snail. Hindrances put in place to impede her path to self-actualization and self-development are offset through her implementation of snail-sense strategies, including education, effective dialogue, and individualism, among others. These factors enhance her self-empowerment. The researchers found out that self-empowerment is key to women's freedom.

The female protagonist also benefits from women's solidarity and sisterhood. She achieves her goal and escapes abduction due to the financial assistance and support she receives from women's solidarity in her community, as already indicated. This partly ends her plight and paves the way for her self-empowerment and freedom.

The researchers hope this research will open avenues for further study of African and other young adult literature. It may, for example, induce other researchers to explore gender issues in other African novels. It can also initiate researchers to conduct studies on women's self-empowerment and self-actualization in various social spheres.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The researchers recommend that the study of young adult literature be incorporated into the university literature curriculum. Knowledge and information on young adult literature can also be disseminated by encouraging researchers to conduct more studies on the subject. Such research can lead to discoveries about the nature of young adults who are often not fully understood by adults. Besides, universities should also encourage research on women's studies.

Acknowledgements

The researchers are indebted to the Nobel Journal of Literature and Language Teaching for evaluating the article and providing appropriate feedback for improvement. We would also like to thank Addis Ababa University for sponsoring the author's PhD studies.

REFERENCES

- Akanmode, O. A. (2015). Snail-sense strategies for women emancipation in Promise Okekwe's Triology. *African Journal of Gender and Development*, 1(1), 17–28.
- Alkali, M., & Olorunshola, K. J. (2016). A new feminist reading of Lola Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. *Journal of the Literary Society of Nigeria*, 8(8), 169–183.
- Allan, T. J. (1995). Reviewed work: Re-creating ourselves: African women and critical transformations Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie. *Research in African Literatures*, 26(2), 197–199.
- Assefa, H. (2016). *Analysis of narrative voice and focalization in the novels The Young Crusader and The Letters*.
- Ayele, G. (2011). *Escape*. CODE Ethiopia.
- Becca, R. (2022). *27 characteristics of resilient women*. Basic by Becca. <https://basicsbybecca.com/blog/resilient-women>
- Culture Custodian Editorial Team. (2022). *7 female writers fighting against patriarchy across Africa with their words*. Culture Custodian. <https://culturecustodian.com/7-female-writers-fighting-against-patriarchy-across-africa-with-their-words/>
- Dove, N. (1998). African womanism: An Afrocentric theory. *Journal of Black Studies*, 28(5), 515–539. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002193479802800501>
- Ezenwa-Ohaeto, N. (2019). Reflections on Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's 'Snail-Sense Feminism': A humanist perspective. *PREORC Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 4(2), 1–11.
- Fetene, T. (2020). *The portrayal of female characters in selected young adult Ethiopian novels: A comparative analysis*. Addis Ababa University.
- Godono, E. (2005). *Postcolonial motherism: A brand new woman in the African novel*. African Postcolonial Literature in English in the Postcolonial Web. <https://www.postcolonialweb.org/africa/godona1.html>
- Hooks, B. (2000). *Feminism is for everybody: Passionate politics*. Pluto Press.
- Lapinig, R. L. R., & Baquiller, G. E. (2020). Surviving adversity: Resilience of African women in selected short stories. *PalArch's Journal of Archaeology of Egypt Egyptology*, 17(9), 1041–1055.
- Okpokwasili, O. A. (2023). Sisterhood: A feminist approach to African's Igwebuiké. *Pope John Paul II Journal of Philosophy and the Humanities*, 2(1), 168–189.
- Olatunji, R. A. (2019). *Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's snail-sense feminism: A subtle womanist agenda for Nigerian children's and adults' literature*. University of Nottingham.

- Onabolu, T. (2019). *The location of theory: On 'Nego-Feminism.'* Snado Magazine. <https://shado-mag.com/articles/opinion/the-location-of-theory-on-nego-feminism/>
- Sackeyfio, R. A., & Diala-Ogamba, B. (Eds.). (2017). *Emerging perspectives on Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo*. Lexington Books. <https://doi.org/10.5771/9781498559331>
- Salami, M. (2025). *A historical overview of African feminist strands*. House of African Feminisms. <https://houseofafricanfeminisms.org/A-Historical-Overview-of-African-Feminist-Strands>
- Stamper, J. S. (2012). *Female characters as role models in young adult literature*.
- Udofia, J. (2012). New “Feminisms”: Gender complementarity in Akachi Adimora–Ezeigbo’s fiction. *International Journal of Research in Arts and Social Sciences*, 4, 330–337.
- UN Women. (2024). *Facts and figures: Economic empowerment*. Knowledge Hub. <https://knowledge.unwomen.org/en/articles/facts-and-figures/facts-and-figures-economic-empowerment>
- UNICEF. (2020). *Meaningful adolescent participation in community engagement, behavioural and social change: Venezuelan migrant flow response in Colombia*.
- Unigwe, C. (2023). *The middle daughter*. Canongate Books.
- Woldemariam, M. W. (2024). A feminist reading of contemporary Ethiopian novel in English: Gebeyehu Ayele’s *Escape* (2011) in focus. *Ethiopian Journal of Language, Culture and Communication*, 6(2), 60–72.
- Yibrie, D., & Wassie, H. (2020). Socioeconomic problems in Ethiopian young adults as reflected in three selected young adult novels. *International Journal of Engineering Technologies and Management Research*, 7(10), 28–65. <https://doi.org/10.29121/ijetmr.v7.i10.2020.767>
- Zhang, B. (2025). *Negotiating liberation: African feminist theories and the art of non-confrontational resistance*. Geneva Graduate Institute. <https://www.graduateinstitute.ch/communications/news/negotiating-liberation-african-feminist-theories-and-art-non-confrontational>