

Commodification of the Female Body: A Feminist Reading of Ruth Chukwudebe's *Heavenly Modella*

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Abstract

The commodification of the female body remains a critical issue in feminist discourse, particularly within the fashion industry, where women's physical appearance is often reduced to a marketable commodity. This study offers a feminist reading of Ruth Chukwudebe's *Heavenly Modella*, a play that boldly critiques the objectification and exploitation of women's bodies in the pursuit of profit and social validation. Through the moral struggle of the protagonist, Thania, and her alliance with Praise, a talented but marginalized seamstress, the narrative reveals the tension between personal integrity and the patriarchal pressures of the fashion world. The study examines how the fashion industry enforces male-centered beauty ideals, coercing women into compromising their values, while simultaneously showcasing the power of female solidarity as a form of resistance. By analyzing key dialogues and interactions, this research demonstrates how *Heavenly Modella* not only exposes the harmful realities of body commodification but also offers a compelling vision for an ethical and empowering alternative. Using feminist theoretical frameworks - Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory and Bartky's concept of disciplinary body practices, the paper argues that the play reclaims female authority through resistance and creative collaboration. The study concludes that the commodification of the female body in fashion can and must be challenged, with dignity, faith, and self-respect emerging as powerful counter-narratives. This research contributes to ongoing feminist conversations on gender, power, and cultural transformation, advocating for a fashion industry that honors women's worth beyond their physical appearance.

Keywords: Feminism, Commodification, Fashion Industry, Male Gaze, Women's Empowerment.

Introduction

The commodification of the female body has long been a central concern in feminist discourse, particularly within industries that profit from the display and consumption of women's physical appearance. The fashion industry, in particular, has played a significant role in shaping cultural narratives that reduce women's worth to their aesthetic appeal, reinforcing patriarchal norms that objectify and exploit the female body. This phenomenon is not only a reflection of gender inequality but also a mechanism through which patriarchal structures sustain their dominance.

As Maryani and Anggia Ratmita (2023) explain, self-objectification arises when women internalize an objectifying view, seeing themselves through the perspective of those who supervise or control them, leading to self-surveillance to align with these perspectives. Ruth

Chukwudebe's *Heavenly Modella* offers a compelling critique of this reality, exposing the tension between women's autonomy and the oppressive structures of the fashion world. Through the moral and spiritual journey of the protagonist, Thania, the play explores the psychological, emotional, and economic pressures that compel women to conform to exploitative beauty standards while simultaneously highlighting the power of female solidarity as a form of resistance.

The fashion industry, as one of the most influential global markets, plays an important role in shaping societal perceptions of beauty and femininity (National Geographic, 2018; Entwistle, 2015). Within this space, women are often subjected to unrealistic beauty standards that prioritize bodily appearance and sexual appeal, leading to the perpetuation of gender-based oppression. The pressure to conform to these ideals results in a loss of agency, as women find themselves negotiating between societal expectations and personal values.

The objectification and commodification of the female body remain pervasive in the modern fashion industry, reinforcing harmful gender norms and limiting women's authority. Advertisements often commodify the female body, reducing women to objects that can be bought and sold, perpetuating unrealistic beauty standards and creating a culture where women feel alienated from their own bodies (Paudel, 2023). Despite increasing feminist activism and advocacy for body positivity, mainstream fashion continues to prioritize aesthetics over substance, often sidelining women who do not conform to conventional beauty ideals (Crepax, 2020). The consequences of this commodification extend beyond individual experiences, influencing societal attitudes toward women's roles, self-worth, and economic opportunities.

Heavenly Modella presents a microcosm of this larger issue, showcasing the challenges women face when resisting objectification. Thania's struggle mirrors the real-world experiences of women navigating industries that seek to commodify their bodies for profit. Her resistance raises important questions about whether true success is achievable without compromising one's values and whether the fashion industry can evolve to embrace more ethical and empowering representations of women. This study seeks to address these concerns by critically examining how *Heavenly Modella* portrays the intersection of gender, power, and commodification.

The problem addressed in this study is the persistent commodification of the female body in contemporary culture, where women are often viewed as objects of desire rather than individuals with honor and dignity. This reduction of women to their physical appearance not only sustains gender inequality but also creates harmful expectations that shape how women experience their bodies and navigate their careers (Szymanski & Feltman, 2022). Through a feminist reading of *Heavenly Modella*, this research aims to unpack how the play critiques this phenomenon, using Thania's resistance against the coercive norms of the fashion industry to reveal the broader social structures that sustain the commodification of women.

The objective of this study is to analyze how Chukwudebe's work addresses the objectification and commercialization of women's bodies and to explore how the narrative frames female solidarity and moral defiance as viable forms of resistance. By examining key dialogues and character interactions, this research seeks to demonstrate that *Heavenly Modella* not only exposes the exploitative nature of the fashion industry but also offers a powerful counter-narrative that centers on dignity, self-respect, and ethical entrepreneurship.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to feminist conversations on gender, power, and cultural transformation. As Mears (2011) argues, the control of women's bodies through beauty standards is a form of social control that must be dismantled for true gender equality to emerge. By situating *Heavenly Modella* within this discourse, the research underscores the importance of media and cultural productions that challenge patriarchal commodification and offer alternative visions of beauty and success.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a qualitative research design, employing textual analysis to examine Ruth Chukwudebe's *Heavenly Modella* through a feminist lens. Textual analysis allows for a close reading of the play's dialogues, character interactions, and thematic structures to explore how the commodification of the female body is critiqued within the narrative. This study uses thematic analysis to identify and interpret recurring feminist concerns within the text. The selection of dialogues and interactions for analysis follows a purposive sampling approach, ensuring that key scenes align with the study's research objectives. These selections focus on moments where the objectification of female bodies is explicitly depicted, particularly in the ways Thania is pressured to conform to patriarchal beauty standards. Additionally, attention is given to Thania's moral and emotional struggles, as well as her moments of resistance, to examine how personal integrity is negotiated within the exploitative fashion industry. The study also considers instances of female solidarity, particularly in Thania's relationship with Praise, to explore how their collective defiance challenges patriarchal norms and creates space for ethical alternatives.

This research relies on *Heavenly Modella* as the primary data source, with selected scenes examined to reveal the deeper cultural and gendered implications of body commodification.

The analysis is grounded in feminist literary criticism, a theoretical approach that examines how literature reflects, reinforces, or resists patriarchal ideologies. This framework is particularly suitable for analyzing *Heavenly Modella*, as the play foregrounds issues of female authority, moral integrity, and cultural resistance within the fashion industry. To support this reading, the study draws on Laura Mulvey's (1975) theory of the male gaze, which argues that women in visual culture are positioned as objects of male pleasure and spectatorship. In the context of the fashion industry, this gaze manifests in the expectation that female models expose their bodies for public consumption—a dynamic that the play directly challenges through Thania's refusal to compromise her values.

Additionally, Sandra Bartky's (1990) concept of disciplinary body practices provides a critical lens for understanding how the fashion industry enforces specific standards of femininity. According to Bartky, women are socialized into bodily practices—such as dieting, grooming, and dressing—that ensure their conformity to patriarchal norms. This theory helps unpack Thania's internal conflict as she grapples with the pressure to wear a revealing dress that violates her beliefs in modesty and self-respect.

By combining these theoretical perspectives, the study not only analyzes how *Heavenly Modella* critiques the commodification of the female body but also situates the play within broader feminist debates about power, resistance, and cultural transformation. This interdisciplinary approach allows for a deeper understanding of how literary narratives can challenge oppressive industries and inspire social change.

Synopsis of *Heavenly Modella*

Heavenly Modella, a play by Ruth Chukwudebe, explores the commodification of the female body in the fashion industry through the journey of Thania, a young aspiring model. Selected for a prestigious runway competition, Thania quickly discovers that the industry demands more than talent—it expects her to expose her body to meet patriarchal standards of beauty and marketability. Torn between her faith, her late mother's teachings on modesty, and the pressure to conform, Thania faces a moral dilemma that leads her to walk away from the competition.

In the aftermath, she crosses paths with Praise, a struggling seamstress who also refuses to create revealing clothing that dishonors her Christian values. Their friendship, grounded in shared beliefs and mutual support, becomes a powerful force of resistance against the exploitative fashion world. Together, they dream of creating a fashion brand that upholds dignity, modesty, and self-respect.

Through setbacks, heartbreak, and loss, Thania and Praise's unwavering faith and solidarity ultimately lead to the birth of *Heavenly Modella*, proving that beauty and success do not have to come at the cost of integrity. The play delivers a bold message about female empowerment, ethical entrepreneurship, and cultural transformation.

Findings and Discussions

- ***The Fashion Industry as a Site of Female Objectification***

Throughout *Heavenly Modella*, Ruth Chukwudebe constructs a vivid critique of the fashion industry's systemic objectification of women. The play explores how the female body is commodified, controlled, and reduced to its market value, revealing the psychological, spiritual, and social costs of such exploitation.

The objectification begins immediately upon Thania's late arrival at the fashion show. The reception she receives is a clear reflection of how women's bodies are policed and scrutinized in this space.

MR. THOMPSON: "Who is this? And what's good about the morning? Miss Marissa, who the hell is this, looking like a slave released from prison standing in front of me?"

MISS MARISSA: *"Sir, she's number 35, one of the contestants."*

MR THOMPSON: *"What! Who selected her? She isn't fit to be one!"* (Chuwkudebe, 2025, p. 160).

The instant association of Thania's disheveled appearance with being "unfit" for the contest reveals that in this setting, a woman's worth is directly tied to her physical presentation. The fashion industry, as illustrated here, prioritizes aesthetic perfection over talent, intelligence, or character.

Miss Marissa's defense of Thania, though well-intentioned, ironically reinforces this objectification:

MISS MARISSA: *"Sir, she's the candidate of Mr Boston Kings. Her figure and physique is one of a kind sir."* (Chuwkudebe, 2025, p. 160).

Even in advocating for Thania, Miss Marissa reduces her value to her "figure and physique," indicating that a woman's ability to participate in the fashion industry hinges on her body's desirability rather than her skills or identity.

The objectification becomes even more explicit when Mr. Thompson sees the revealing dress designed for Thania:

MR. THOMPSON: *"Yes, this will look good on you. Why have you not changed?"* (Chuwkudebe, 2025, p. 159).

THANIA: *"I can't do this."* (Chuwkudebe, 2025, p. 162).

This insistence on Thania wearing a dress that makes her uncomfortable exemplifies the coercive nature of the fashion industry—where women's bodily autonomy is compromised to meet commercial and aesthetic expectations.

The inner dialogue that follows further reveals the psychological toll of such objectification:

HER REFLECTION: *"Wise up Thania, if you've got it flaunt it, let people see the glory of your beauty."*

THANIA: *"It's the glory of God, not my beauty..."* (Chuwkudebe, 2025, p. 163)

This back-and-forth between Thania and her internalized voice shows the internal conflict experienced by many women in the fashion industry—torn between personal values and the societal expectation to commodify their appearance.

When Thania finally walks away from the competition, the reality of the industry's intentions becomes stark:

THANIA: *"All they want is my body. I won't offend my father the second time. Lord, have mercy upon me."* (Chuwkudebe, 2025, p. 165).

This statement is a powerful acknowledgment that, beneath the glamorous veneer, the fashion industry often seeks not to celebrate women, but to exploit them.

The objectification of women in the fashion industry, as depicted *here*, is not accidental but deeply systemic. Several interconnected factors drive this exploitation, making it a persistent issue. At the core of this objectification lies the capitalist exploitation of beauty, where the global fashion industry thrives on selling desire. Women's bodies are positioned as the ultimate commercial tool, with models often expected to expose themselves to "sell" fashion. This reflects a capitalist structure that prioritizes profit over ethics, reducing

women to mere commodities rather than individuals with autonomy. As Mears (2011) discusses in *Pricing Beauty: The Making of a Fashion Model*, the fashion industry perpetuates narrow beauty standards that serve as mechanisms of social control over women's bodies, reinforcing gender hierarchies and limiting women's opportunities.

Additionally, patriarchal standards of beauty play a crucial role in shaping the objectification of women. The play illustrates how male-dominated power structures impose rigid beauty ideals that demand conformity to objectifying practices. Mr. Thompson's dismissive attitude toward Thania until her physique is validated by a male authority figure, Mr. Boston Kings, exemplifies this form of patriarchal gatekeeping. It is not enough for a woman to exist in the industry; she must be endorsed by male figures who dictate the terms of desirability and worth. This aligns with Bartky's (1990) concept of *disciplinary body practices*, where women are conditioned to conform to beauty standards that serve patriarchal interests. The control of women's bodies through fashion not only reinforces male dominance but also ensures that women remain preoccupied with their appearance rather than seeking empowerment in other areas of life (Bartky, 1990).

Compounding this issue is the internalization of oppression. Thania's internal dialogue with her "reflection" reflects how deeply embedded patriarchal messages influence women's self-perception. The belief that their worth lies in their ability to attract and please others is a form of self-objectification, which the fashion industry exploits to maintain control over women's bodies. This internalization is a key factor in the perpetuation of gendered oppression, as women often police themselves to align with societal expectations, even when these expectations conflict with their personal comfort or beliefs. The psychological effects of such internalized objectification have been linked to diminished self-esteem, body dysmorphia, and disordered eating, all of which are prevalent issues in the fashion industry (Kvaka, Murnen, Nolen, et al., 2024; (Dittmar, Halliwell, & Ive, 2021).

The implications of female objectification in the fashion industry are far-reaching. One of the most pressing concerns is the loss of bodily autonomy. Thania's discomfort with the revealing dress, coupled with the insistence that she wear it, illustrates how the industry often strips women of their world, conditioning them to prioritize external expectations over their own comfort and values. This pressure to conform results in a troubling erasure of personal choice, as women are coerced into adhering to industry standards that may conflict with their own beliefs (Holla, 2018). The concept of *bodily capital*, where women's worth is directly tied to their physical presentation, ensures that their autonomy is secondary to the demands of the fashion industry and society at large (Kukkonen, 2021).

Beyond the physical, the psychological and spiritual consequences of objectification are profound. Thania's inner turmoil reveals the deep psychological toll of being treated as a commodity. Her feelings of guilt, spiritual conflict, and alienation highlight the emotional and mental distress that women in the industry experience. The objectification of women's bodies does not exist in a vacuum—it permeates their sense of self, affecting their confidence, identity, and emotional well-being (Luo et al., 2024). The broader implications of such objectification have been linked to increased rates of anxiety, depression, and

reduced political and economic participation among women, as they become fixated on conforming to unrealistic beauty standards rather than asserting their agency.

Also, the fashion industry's objectification of women reinforces broader structures of gender inequality. By valuing women primarily for their physical appearance, the industry perpetuates the notion that a woman's worth is defined by her ability to meet male-centered beauty standards. This extends beyond fashion and seeps into societal perceptions of women, limiting their roles and opportunities based on how they are seen rather than what they can contribute (Holla, 2018). The male gaze, as conceptualized by Mulvey, dictates that women in media and fashion exist primarily as objects for male pleasure rather than as active participants. This is evident in Mr. Thompson's immediate dismissal of Thania's value based on her appearance and his preoccupation with how the dress would make her "look good."

The depiction of female objectification in *Heavenly Modella* aligns with several key feminist theories. Laura Mulvey's (1975) *Male Gaze Theory* argues that women in media are often positioned as objects of male pleasure, existing to be looked at rather than to act. Similarly, Sandra Bartky's (1990) *Disciplinary Body Practices* suggest that women are socialized into bodily practices that ensure they conform to patriarchal standards of femininity. Thania's struggle with whether to wear the revealing dress, despite her discomfort, reflects this coercive socialization, where the pressure to adhere to beauty norms overrides personal agency. Moreover, Naomi Wolf's (1991) *The Beauty Myth* argues that the beauty industry constructs impossible standards of beauty to control women. The fashion industry in *Heavenly Modella* operates on precisely this logic, demanding that women expose their bodies to be considered beautiful and marketable. These theoretical frameworks provide insight into how the fashion industry sustains and legitimizes female objectification, making it not just an issue of aesthetics but a deeply entrenched form of systemic oppression.

- **Female Solidarity as a Form of Resistance**

In *Heavenly Modella*, Ruth Chukwudebe constructs a powerful narrative of female solidarity as a means of resisting patriarchal control and the commodification of women's bodies. This solidarity emerges as a critical force, allowing women to challenge oppressive systems and reclaim their dignity.

The bond between Thania and Praise, forged through shared struggles and faith, becomes the foundation of their collective resistance. Their first meaningful encounter takes place in Scene 6, when Thania comes to Praise's aid after a traumatic encounter with a gang. This moment of empathy and support marks the beginning of their powerful friendship.

THANIA: "Are you okay? I'm sorry if I frightened you but I don't have plans to hurt you. I saw what happened. I was hiding behind the bush."

THANIA: "You are so lucky to be alive. Those guys are very notorious in this community."

THANIA: "And I want to hear all of it but obviously not here. Would you like to follow me?." (Chukwudebe, 2025, p. 176).

This immediate offering of help, without hesitation or judgment, reflects the instinctive solidarity that often arises between women who understand the dangers of a world that commodifies and exploits them. Thania's decision to take Praise home initiates a sisterhood that will later serve as a force of resistance against the toxic norms of the fashion industry. As their friendship deepens, Thania recognizes Praise's talent for fashion design and envisions a shared mission to challenge the industry's obsession with female objectification. Their conversation in Scene 7 reveals how their solidarity transforms into a purposeful resistance:

THANIA: "Don't you think we can influence this industry? You are a top-notch designer and I'm a model and also a designer, I feel this is why God brought us together."

PRAISE: "So what do you have in mind?" (Chuwkudebe, 2025, p. 177).

This pivotal moment shows how female solidarity transcends emotional support—it becomes a call to collective action. By recognizing their complementary strengths, Thania and Praise forge a shared vision for a fashion industry that upholds modesty and dignity rather than objectification.

As the story progresses, their solidarity is tested through repeated rejections from fashion companies unwilling to support their modest fashion brand. Yet, even in the face of these setbacks, they sustain each other's hope and determination. In Scene 8, after their sixth rejection, their dialogue reveals how this support prevents despair:

THANIA: "Praise, what have we done wrong? What? We've done all, why are they not accepting our proposal?"

PRAISE: "I guess to make our proposal and mandate stronger... Seriously T, let's keep trusting God." (Chuwkudebe, 2025, p. 182).

This refusal to give up, even in the face of constant rejection, exemplifies how female solidarity can sustain moral resistance. Praise's unwavering faith acts as an anchor for Thania's moments of doubt, showing that collective resilience can challenge even the most entrenched systems of exploitation.

The ultimate culmination of their solidarity occurs in the conference room at Dawson Enterprise, where, after Thania's bold stand against the objectification promoted by Demilah's Groove, their partnership wins validation:

MR. DAVID: "Young lady... You've got yourself a deal."

THANIA: "I think we just won." (Chuwkudebe, 2025, p. 192).

This victory, won through their collective resistance, confirms that female solidarity can not only challenge exploitation but create a life-changing alternative.

Female solidarity emerges as a powerful form of resistance in *the play*, where Thania and Praise's bond serves as a counterforce to the objectification and exploitation prevalent in the fashion industry. Their solidarity is not accidental but is rooted in their shared experience of oppression. Feminist theorists such as bell hooks (2014) argue that solidarity among women is often born from a collective experience of marginalization. This play embodies that truth—despite their different backgrounds, both women recognize that their dignity is under assault and find strength in each other's support. The fashion industry,

which thrives on controlling and commodifying women's bodies, creates an environment where women are pressured to conform to harmful beauty standards. However, rather than competing against one another, Thania and Praise choose to uplift and empower each other, demonstrating how shared struggles can foster resistance rather than submission. Beyond their shared oppression, *Heavenly Modella* suggests that resisting commodification requires emotional and spiritual resilience, which female solidarity helps to cultivate. Praise's ability to lift Thania's spirits, whether in moments of rejection or in dealing with her father's death, illustrates the importance of emotional labor in sustaining long-term resistance. Feminist scholars have long highlighted the role of emotional support in movements against oppression. Crepax (2020) emphasizes the need for women to nurture emotional and spiritual strength as a means of survival in oppressive environments. In the play, Praise and Thania's friendship functions as a refuge from the industry's dehumanizing pressures, offering them the courage to resist its demands. Their emotional bond is not just a source of comfort but a vital tool in their fight against systemic exploitation.

One of the key implications of female solidarity in the fashion industry is its ability to challenge the culture of competition among women. The industry often thrives on pitting models against each other for limited opportunities, reinforcing the notion that women must compete for male validation and professional success. However, *Heavenly Modella* disrupts this toxic norm by presenting Thania and Praise's relationship as a model of cooperation rather than competition. Their unwavering support for one another offers a feminist alternative to the isolating forces of capitalism, where individual success is often prioritized over collective well-being (hooks, 2014). By choosing solidarity over rivalry, they dismantle the industry's efforts to divide women and instead create a space where mutual empowerment is possible.

Furthermore, their collaboration leads to the creation of *Heavenly Modella*, a brand that embodies their shared values of modesty and dignity. This suggests that female solidarity in oppressive industries can lead to innovative alternatives that challenge and ultimately change harmful cultural narratives. Their brand is not just a business venture but a statement against the fashion industry's exploitation of women's bodies. By creating an ethical alternative, they reclaim authority over their own representation and redefine success on their own terms. This aligns with feminist discussions on how women can resist systemic oppression by developing their own spaces and platforms that prioritize ethical and inclusive values (Crepax, 2020).

In addition to its practical impact, female solidarity also functions as an emotional form of resistance against exploitation. Praise and Thania's unwavering support for each other prevents the fashion industry's constant rejection from crushing their dreams. Their relationship reflects the necessity of emotional resilience in environments that seek to diminish women's self-worth. Nwankwor (2019) argues that emotional and spiritual resistance is just as crucial as political action in oppressive environments. By refusing to internalize the industry's objectification and instead reaffirming each other's worth, Thania and Praise create a form of resistance that is deeply personal yet profoundly impactful.

Their friendship challenges the industry's dehumanizing practices by asserting that women's value is not dependent on external approval but on their own sense of dignity and self-respect.

The dynamics of female solidarity in *Heavenly Modella* align closely with key feminist theories. bell hooks' (2014) *Theory of Sisterhood* emphasizes that true feminist solidarity requires overcoming internalized sexism and recognizing shared struggles. This is evident in Thania and Praise's relationship, which strengthens as they realize that their battle is not with each other but with the oppressive structures of the fashion industry. Rather than allowing themselves to be divided by societal pressures, they join forces to resist the industry's dehumanizing expectations.

- ***Speaking Truth to Power: The Fashion Industry and Moral Defiance***

Scene 10 of *Heavenly Modella* offers a climactic confrontation between Thania and the patriarchal, profit-driven fashion industry, represented by Mr. Patrick and Dawson Enterprise. Thania's bold stand against the normalization of female objectification reveals the power of moral defiance, even in the face of corporate authority.

The scene opens with the announcement of Demilah's Groove as the winner of the Pitch-athon. The fashion brand, which champions lingerie as fashionable outerwear, exemplifies the industry's fixation on nudity and profit over dignity and creativity:

MR. PATRICK: "After careful deliberation, we are pleased to announce the winner of this year's Pitch-athon is... Demilah's Groove." (Chuwkudebe, 2025, p. 189).

Thania's immediate reaction is one of disbelief and moral outrage. She refuses to sit quietly, even when instructed to do so:

THANIA: "I can't believe this! Over and over again you guys always do the same thing. How can you award her business..."

MR. PATRICK: "Young lady, you are causing a scene, I'll advise you to take your seat." (Chuwkudebe, 2025, p. 189).

Thania's refusal to comply marks a pivotal moment of resistance. She challenges the normalization of objectification, directly addressing the harmful impact of equating fashion with nudity:

THANIA: "No, I will no longer be silent. After all, what do I have to lose? This business you have graciously chosen to award plans to turn lingerie into fashionable wear on occasions. Why do we place fashion side by side with nudity?" (Chuwkudebe, 2025, p. 190).

The confrontation escalates as Mr. Patrick, representing the exploitative norms of the industry, dismisses her stance:

MR. PATRICK: "Modesty does not make money."

THANIA: "So, nudity sells?"

MR. PATRICK: "I did not say that."

THANIA: "But that's what you meant." (Chuwkudebe, 2025, p. 190).

This powerful exchange exposes the uncomfortable truth underlying the fashion industry: profit is often prioritized over ethics, and women's bodies are commodified to drive sales.

Thania's argument deepens when she invokes the emotional and cultural consequences of this commodification:

THANIA: *"What is the essence of wearing a cloth meant to cover if all it does is expose? Why are we sponsoring this madness that is poisoning the hearts of our young generation?"* (Chuwkudebe, 2025, p. 190).

The intensity of her words, framed as a plea rather than an accusation, shifts the tone of the room. She personalizes the issue, forcing the panel to confront the human cost of their choices:

THANIA (to Mr. Patrick): *"Do you have a daughter? Answer me honestly how you will feel seeing her in this wear?"* (Chuwkudebe, 2025, p. 191).

This rhetorical strategy transforms the abstract debate about fashion trends into a moral imperative, making it impossible for the panel to ignore the ethical dimension of their decision.

Thania concludes her speech with a visionary statement about beauty and dignity:

THANIA: *"I am not saying this because I was not chosen, but because it's a burden in my heart to see true beauty being appreciated without the display of nudity, to preserve the cultural heritage of our women and our rights as human beings, to secure the hope of future generations of young girls who would not feel ashamed of their body but be reassured that they are royalty, loved and cherished by God. And that is what Heavenly Modella stands for."* (Chuwkudebe, 2025, p. 191).

This declaration receives applause from Mr. David, a member of the panel who ultimately overrides Mr. Patrick's decision:

MR. DAVID: *"Young lady... you've got yourself a deal."* (Chuwkudebe, 2025, p. 192).

This moment of triumph, won through moral conviction rather than compliance, serves as the emotional and ideological climax of the play, confirming that integrity and resistance can challenge even the most entrenched systems of exploitation.

Moral defiance against industry norms in *Heavenly Modella* emerges as a response to the deeply ingrained commodification of the female body in fashion. The industry's prioritization of profit over ethical considerations is evident in Mr. Patrick's assertion that "modesty does not make money." This reflects a broader capitalist reality in which businesses exploit the allure of nudity and sensuality to drive sales, reinforcing a system where ethical concerns are often secondary to financial gain. Feminist scholars, including Naomi Wolf (1991), have argued that industries deliberately construct and market beauty standards that commodify women's bodies, ensuring that their perceived value remains tied to their physical appeal. Thania's resistance to these exploitative standards challenges a system that has long prioritized commercial success over human dignity.

Beyond capitalism's role, the cultural normalization of objectification has played a crucial part in shaping the industry's approach to fashion. Media and advertising have, for decades, conditioned society to view women's bodies as objects of visual consumption, making alternatives—such as the modesty advocated by Thania and Praise—seem radical or even unmarketable. Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity suggests that societal

expectations of femininity are continuously reinforced through repeated cultural scripts. The fashion industry, by perpetuating the idea that women must conform to revealing and hyper-sexualized standards to be considered desirable, enforces a rigid script that leaves little room for alternative representations of beauty. Thania's refusal to conform to this script disrupts the status quo, creating space for new narratives that challenge the industry's exploitative norms.

Another factor contributing to the persistence of these harmful industry practices is the lack of ethical accountability within corporate structures. Fashion corporations, like many other industries, often prioritize trends and market demands over moral responsibility. In Scene 10, Thania's confrontation with industry figures exposes the consequences of this dynamic, highlighting how unchecked corporate influence can contribute to cultural decay. Her moral stand against exploitation illustrates the power of ethical resistance in industries where market forces are often seen as the ultimate authority. As bell hooks (1994) argues, cultural production—including fashion—plays a critical role in shaping societal values. By questioning and confronting these harmful practices, Thania engages in a form of cultural critique that challenges dominant narratives about fashion and female representation.

Thania's defiance carries significant implications for the fashion industry, particularly in how it can shift industry standards. Her bold stand suggests that ethical alternatives are not only possible but can gain traction even in profit-driven spaces. Mr. David, a character who represents integrity within the industry, validates her vision, implying that resistance can plant the seeds of cultural change. This aligns with Wolf's (1991) argument that the beauty industry's oppressive standards can be dismantled through collective action and persistent critique. By asserting her right to define beauty on her own terms, Thania challenges the notion that profitability must come at the expense of dignity.

Additionally, the play underscores the influential power of women's voices in male-dominated industries. Thania's refusal to be silenced serves as a model of moral courage for other women navigating similar spaces, demonstrating that speaking truth to power can create ripples of change. This reflects broader feminist movements that advocate for women's empowerment through resistance to systemic oppression (hooks, 1994). When women like Thania challenge exploitative industry norms, they not only reclaim their own agency but also pave the way for future generations to break free from restrictive standards.

Moreover, the establishment of *Heavenly Modella* by Thania and Praise serves as a blueprint for ethical entrepreneurship, proving that fashion can prioritize dignity and cultural heritage without succumbing to exploitation. Their brand reflects a growing movement within the fashion industry toward sustainable, ethical practices that challenge traditional notions of success. This aligns with contemporary discussions on ethical consumerism and feminist critiques of capitalism's impact on women's autonomy. By redefining beauty and success on their own terms, Thania and Praise offer a powerful alternative to the industry's long-standing practices.

Mulvey's (1975) male gaze theory provides a crucial foundation for analyzing the objectification of women in *Heavenly Modella*, particularly in how the fashion industry reduces female bodies to aesthetic commodities. The insistence that Thania must conform to industry standards—by exposing her body in revealing clothing—reflects Mulvey's argument that women in visual culture are positioned as passive objects for male pleasure and commercial gain. However, while the male gaze theory effectively critiques patriarchal control over female representation, it has been challenged for oversimplifying women's roles in media and culture.

One critique, advanced by bell hooks (1994), argues that Mulvey's theory assumes a universal female experience, overlooking the ways in which race, class, and cultural context shape women's representation. *Heavenly Modella* complicates this notion by portraying Thania not as a passive victim but as an active agent of resistance. Her refusal to conform to industry expectations challenges the idea that women in objectifying spaces lack autonomy. Rather than being merely subjected to the male gaze, Thania disrupts and rejects it, choosing instead to define success on her own terms.

Building on hooks' critique, Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) intersectional feminism provides a broader framework for analyzing Thania's struggle, emphasizing how gender oppression intersects with cultural and economic factors. Unlike Western feminist theories that focus primarily on gender, intersectionality highlights how African women experience oppression in ways that are shaped by local cultural and economic conditions. In *Heavenly Modella*, Thania's resistance is not just about gendered objectification but also about the cultural and moral pressures placed on Nigerian women in the fashion industry, where Westernized beauty ideals often clash with traditional notions of modesty and respectability. Her dilemma reflects how African women must navigate patriarchal beauty standards while also contending with societal expectations rooted in religion and culture.

Another limitation of Mulvey's theory is its emphasis on male spectatorship, which neglects how women themselves internalize, negotiate, or resist the objectifying gaze. This is particularly relevant in the play, as seen in Thania's internal conflict when she questions whether she should "flaunt it" or uphold her convictions. Judith Butler's (1990) gender performativity theory offers a deeper understanding of this tension, arguing that femininity is not an inherent trait but a socially constructed performance that can be resisted or redefined. Thania's decision to reject revealing fashion represents a subversion of these gendered expectations, demonstrating that identity is not fixed but actively negotiated.

Additionally, Naomi Wolf's (1991) beauty myth theory extends Mulvey's argument by highlighting how patriarchal beauty standards serve as a mechanism of control, keeping women preoccupied with appearance rather than asserting power in other domains. In *Heavenly Modella*, Thania's struggle is not just about refusing to be objectified but about reclaiming her bodily autonomy and professional agency. When analyzed through an intersectional lens, her rejection of industry norms challenges both globalized capitalist beauty standards and the patriarchal structures within her own cultural environment. The

play critiques an industry that thrives on the commodification of women, reinforcing Wolf's assertion that beauty standards are not just about desire but about power and subjugation. The play does not merely expose objectification but also foregrounds female agency, solidarity, and ethical entrepreneurship as powerful counter-narratives. By incorporating an intersectional perspective, the play highlights the unique struggles of African women in patriarchal and capitalist structures, challenging both the systemic forces that sustain body commodification and the assumption that women must remain passive subjects within these structures.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this study is that *Heavenly Modella* powerfully critiques the commodification of the female body in the fashion industry, revealing how women are objectified, controlled, and reduced to their physical appearance for commercial gain. Through Thania's moral struggle, Praise's unwavering faith, and their collective resistance, the play exposes the toxic reality of an industry that prioritizes profit over dignity. By illustrating the psychological, moral, and economic pressures that women face, the play calls for a fundamental shift in how the fashion industry engages with female representation.

Based on the findings, the study concludes that female solidarity, moral conviction, and ethical entrepreneurship are viable and necessary forms of resistance against patriarchal exploitation. However, achieving lasting change requires concrete actions from industry stakeholders. Fashion designers, brands, and policymakers must work toward ethical industry standards that prioritize body autonomy, fair labor practices, and diverse, inclusive representations of beauty. This could be achieved through stricter advertising regulations, ensuring that models are not coerced into conforming to harmful beauty norms, as well as by promoting modest fashion movements that offer women greater agency in their style choices. Additionally, fashion education and mentorship programs should integrate body-positive and feminist perspectives, empowering young designers to challenge exploitative industry norms.

Furthermore, corporate policies must enforce ethical guidelines that discourage the hypersexualization of models and support sustainable and dignified representations of women. Media platforms and fashion publications should amplify alternative beauty narratives that celebrate women's skills, creativity, and agency rather than reducing them to objects of consumption. Governments and regulatory bodies can contribute by enforcing fair labor laws in the modeling industry, ensuring that women, particularly young and vulnerable models, have legal protections against exploitation.

In the end, *Heavenly Modella* affirms that standing firm in one's beliefs, even against overwhelming pressure, is not only possible but life-changing. The play serves as a clarion call for cultural and industry-wide reform, urging society to honor women's bodies with respect and reverence rather than as commodities for consumption. By implementing

ethical policies and championing fashion that aligns with dignity and empowerment, the industry can move toward a more inclusive and just representation of women.

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