"FEMALE IDENTITY AND THE DYNAMICS OF CULTURE IN SELECTED AFRICAN WOMEN-AUTHORED NOVELS"

Ph. D Thesis

By

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my mother, Lenient Azekhumen Aito and women like her

And

In loving memory of my father, Late Godfrey Iyere Aito, my guide on the "Path"

Abstract

The notion that women are subsumed and subjugated by male-devised social structures informs the concern of this study entitled "Female Identity and the Dynamics of Culture in Selected African Women-Authored Novels." The notion enables this investigation of the interplay of identity, gender and culture and in the light of recent debates by many women and men (including Western critics) about how women can be granted equality with men in all human relations. This study investigates the complex nature of identity in the context of perceptions of women in traditional and modern societies. Time and space (location and period) as well as notions of enslavement, liberation, rebellion, negotiation, womanism, and complementarity are shown to be central cultural issues in the realisation of female identity. Women's narratives from different places and even eras of African histories/experiences, politics and cultures have been critically analysed using Gynocriticism, a feminist theory by Elaine Showalter, to demonstrate women writer's perspectives into identity and cultural determinants. Biology, linguistics, psychology and other cultural issues underscore the women writers' narrative insights. The writers are shown to focus on communalism and complementarity in the analysis of their thematic interests. This study reveals how identity, sexuality and sensuality are conditioned by the dynamics of culture, gender, tradition and modernity. Eight representative narratives by six African women writers, defined by specific locations (four regions), have been explored to show that identity is not static concept, but progressive in representing the evolution of female identity in Africa. Culture-specific issues are of distinct significance to women in each of the region – West, North, South and East.

The issues that affect female identity in Africa have been presented in three sections of the study. Part One examines various arguments or definitions of identity. It also accommodates the Literature Review, Theoretical Framework and Methodology. Part Two presents the

analyses of the selected novels. It focuses on portrayals of identity from four regions of Africa. It interrogates how women are perceived (and how they perceive themselves) in each zone. Part Three presents the findings of the study and conclusion.

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Chapter One

Introduction

The thesis "Female Identity and the Dynamics of Culture in Selected African Women-Authored Novels" studies the interplay between gender and identity in selected narratives of Flora Nwapa, Nawal el Sadaawi, Evelyn Accad, Bessie Head, Grace Ogot and Rebeka Njau. It examines how culture shapes and defines gender issues within the womanist concept of complementarity which reveals how women writers negotiate their identity within cultural precepts. In this instance, literature can be regarded as an additional space for the exploration of gender relations and sexual difference; the means by which female identity issues can be reconstituted. Culture thus becomes a major defining variable of identity for the individual woman writer. However, it is 'apriori' because it keeps evolving as a result of the contemporary changes in the society and the individual. The thesis investigates various representations of female identity within cultural complexities and differences in the four regions of the continent.

Background to the Study

There is a gradual global resurgence of identity politics as a result of widening nationalist consciousness of the right to be different. This resurgence of identity awareness, often interpreted culturally, politically, and biologically, also results from increasing literary knowledge. According to Charles Calhoun in *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*, identity studies, particularly in relation to women, citizenship, boundaries and development, have generated complex interpretations and extensive research that seek to facilitate closer understanding of the evolutions and specifics of identities.

Identity is seen as the collective social and cultural behaviours of a group in a given society with discernible beliefs, cultures, tastes, attitudes, myths and rituals, which define their existences. It is the intersection between biological composition and social or environmental expectations. Stanley Aronowitz in *Dead Artists, Live Theories and Other Cultural Problems*, drawing upon Karl Marx's definitions of identity, views it as an interface between the individual and the environment, that is, "a biological being who is a bundle or assemble of social relations and whose historicity is a fundamental aspect of existences" (197). Thus, identity is a by-product of self and intersecting experiences. Identity as further posited by Karl Marx, is an intricate relationship between the "society" and the "individual" (cited in Aronowitz 197). Individual identity formulation is connected to institutional socialization through family, law, society, economy and environment, all of which fuse into one another to give "personal identity". John Locke defines Self as a constitution of consciousness and constraint of an environment of which conformity is most powerful (Aronowitz 93).

The concept of identity has generated various interpretations in contemporary studies in the humanities. It has taken centre stage in literature, particularly in gender studies where the ordeals of violated womanhood are fictionalised to redefine and justify the female Self. As a socio-cultural and political concept, identity has both individual and collective meanings. Erik Erickson defines it as "a person's sense of belonging to a group if (it) influences his political (and cultural) behaviour" (57). Lucian W. Pye corroborates this view and extends its scope. To him, "those who share an interest share an identity; the interest of each requires the collaboration of all" (124). From the above, identity seems the rallying and organising principle of social action. Geraint Parry and Morgan Moran in their work titled *Democracy and Democratization*

also suggest that identity informs and guides political behaviour, and adds dynamism to political, cultural, religious and social conduct in the context of plural relations.

Identity is thus a formulation of the individual's inner perception (consciousness) and outer construction (environment). So, personal or individual identity is inseparable from social (environmental) constitution. Nancy Chodorow observes that individual experiences and cultural orientation or formulation contribute to the formation of the individual's personality or what she calls "typical personalities" (87). "Typical personalities", according to her, are products of internalized cultural beliefs, values and experiences that subject a human being to the position of the Other. To Iris Young, the Other is constituted by division of 'inner' and 'outer' worlds, the border and boundary tenuously maintained by the "dominant" Self for the purposes of social regulation and control (133). The argument is that identity is a social perception that results from a series of interactions between self and society that sometimes create a position of deference and displacement, which Homi Bhabha in "The Other Question: Difference, Discrimination and the Discourse of Colonialism" refers to as the Other. Within the discourse of identity, Bhabha introduces a third dimension – not the Self or the appearance of reality or the assumed Other – but the distance between the constituents of the figure of 'colonial' Otherness.

The Otherness, according to Bhabha, is the process of demand and desire of identification that develops specific individual negation which challenges the invisibility of the Other, demanding recognition, sometimes through narratives. The demand for recognition becomes the enactment of complexity and contradiction in the subject's desire and leads to the strategy of subversion. In other words, the subject displays acts of rebellion in the cause of articulating his desire. In relation to our study, there is a third dimension in the intersection between the Self and the

Other, and that is the point at which female identity is regarded as radical in its demand for recognition or acceptance. Bhabha further explains that the desire of the Other is doubled by difference between Self and Other, so that both positions are partial; neither is sufficient unto itself (50). The demand for recognition eventually leads to tension that is both psychic and cultural or political. Simone de Beauvoir in the 'Introduction' to *The Second Sex* refers to the concept of Otherness as a site of objectification of women in a society where men constitute the majority and the standard.

Further, in identity discourse, social action means the way humans are placed within their own situations, past performance and social recognition. Homi Bhabha in his essay "Interrogation of Identity: Frantz Fanon and the Postcolonial Prerogative" states that: "The question of identification is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a self-fulfilling prophecy – (rather) it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of subject in assuming that image ... entails the representation of the subject in differentiating order of Otherness" (45). What Bhabha means by "the production of an image" is that identity is image-bound; it is a replication of desire or thought – the recreation of a notion "in differentiating order of Otherness." Erikson, however, calls it "a defined world of image," and E. Orling sees it as "that sense of space-time connection with states, thoughts and actions from the past" (quoted in Ibrahim Mu'azzam 2). In this vein, identity is subject to human heritage or inherited ideas, habits and values which are complex and divergent in application or definition: thus, it defies a singular designation. This means that identity is a cultural issue annotated by differences and divergences in human relations. Theorizing on cultural identity, Stuart Hall views it differently as a position of enunciation, plural and diverse ways in which human subjects are positioned by, and

positioned themselves within, the narratives of the past. For Hall, identity is a *production* which is "never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation" (392). Particularly, Hall conceptualizes all forms of identity as essentially *cultural*: first, because any form of identity is an act of imaginative 'recovery' grounded in the *retelling* of the past – a result of past heritage; second, because even when identity is conceived as a tangible object, as *something*, a concrete objective experience, it is, in truth, historical with definite and specific symbolic effects (394). This means that identity is by nature plural; it has its other side, its *aporias*, ruptures, and discontinuities. In this argument, identity, like history and memory, is cultural, pluralistic and psychological, and it is always constituted in, and by narratives, or what Hall calls 'representations.'

This invariably implies that any given person must fit into a number of distinctly or mutually conflicting identities, which in the long run constitute and reconstitute that person. As Goran Therborn puts it, "a single human being may act as an almost unlimited number of subjects, and in the course of a single human life a large number of subjectivities are acted out ... (because) a given human being usually has several subjectivities" (78). Ibrahim Bello-Kano, commenting upon Homi Bhabha's "Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition," observes that perhaps there is no such thing as identity-in-itself, but a cultural process *connected* to, or *completing* a condition, situation, or state of affairs (3). Hence, when we speak of cultural, ethnic or racial identity, we mean the same individual form of identity: a position of enunciation, as positioned and positional, which may be interpreted as social recognition.

Social recognition implies a subject or human being's *imaginary* relationship with the conditions of existence. According to Bello-Kano, the word *imaginary* "is intended to indicate the fluidity,

the unlimited possibilities, and the shifting nature of identity." In other words, identity is dynamic and not static. It also emphasizes that the human subject's relation to self and to others is always mediated by an individual relation to Self.

From the above arguments for the purpose of this study, (female) identity may be defined as the ensembles of socio-cultural values and internalised behavioural patterns – both biological and environmental – reflecting individual specific cultural, political and economic dynamics. In addition, identity in this context is used as a generative notion. Consequently, there are different platforms through which female identity is expressed: traditional, wifehood, motherhood, professional, cultural, religious, social, and political.

Statement of Problems

The issue of an 'authentic' identity interpretation of the African woman in the face of rapid social change has continued to interest critics and scholars alike. The shifts from the rural to the urban, the agrarian economy to the work service sector as well as other such changes have created a complex identity pattern for the woman. Similarly, the evolution from the colonial to the postcolonial era, as well as the transition from the non-literate to the literate, has conferred on the woman a certain status that has either been misunderstood or inappropriately interpreted. Obioma Nnaemeka in "Feminism, Rebellious Women and Cultural Boundaries: Rereading Flora Nwapa and Her Compatriots," for instance, argues that the plethora of identities applied to the African woman has led to her being named, renamed and misnamed (81).

On the basis of the peculiarity of African female identity, crucial problems inform this study and they include the following: the inclusion or exclusion of women in the mainstream culture, the

pertinence of culture in the formation of female identity and the perspectives of representation of female identity by women writers. Would the representations feature the African cultural reality of communality or complementarity and considering the fact that culture is sometimes inimical to progress, would it change to suit the dynamism of identity? The definitions of African female identity become problematic in the interplays between culture and regional specificity. African women's attainment of identity right is geared to cultural change, that is, the need that launches women on a search for identity drives them logically and practically to the politics of cultural change without subversion of the *status quo*. There is the need to know how female characters negotiate their individuality within their specific societies. This way we may be able to distinguish between the portrayals of female identities in Africa and those situated in Western cultures.

In these days when focus is on women and related issues, these problems have continued to feature prominently in discussions of gender and the role of women in society.

Research Questions

This study will address the following questions:

1. How do the various definitions of female identity as part of African cultural realities feature in womanist narratives and relate to Gynocriticism, a Western theoretical framework?
2. Can female identity be considered a deviance, complementarity, or part of contemporary culture given the diversity that exists within specific cultures?

3. What is the role of culture in the realization or configuration of African female identity? What symbolic implications do the applications of aesthetics images of women in the configuration of identity?
4. How do African women writers project contemporary African women's identity and sexuality within the dynamics of different cultures? In other words, do their definitions of female identity reflect the acceptability of patriarchal limitations or do they reinvent or redefine female identity and sexuality within contemporary realities?

Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study is to attempt some well-thought out responses to the issues of female identity in Africa as defined by selected women writers, their cultures and other factors of existence. This has become imperative in the face of male social and political dominance.

This study thus has the following objectives:

1. Investigate identity as a progressive representation that is dynamically constituted within African specific socio-cultural contexts;
2. Examine how African women renegotiate female identity through cultural dynamics with images that connote vitality and productivity as aesthetic symbols without inverting tradition;
3. Show that African women's identity is complementary without situating it within strict definitive categories of the subject or object;
4. Demonstrate the subverting of patriarchy or woman in deviant reconstructing of identity and sexuality.

Significance of Study

This work is relevant as a vista into women's artistic expressions that proffer views of difference in identity structures given in individual stories rooted in race, culture and history. It documents how African women perceive womanhood within ever-changing global contexts. The study of African women is significant because it offers unique perspectives on women.

Scope of Study

This research focuses on women's novels from four regions of the continent and analyses the women-related interests in them. The novels are: Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and *One is Enough*; Nawal el Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero*; Evelyn Accad's *Wounding Words: A Woman's Journal in Tunisia*; Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *A Question of Power*; Grace Ogot's *The Promised Land*; and Rebeka Njau's *The Sacred Seed*. The interpretations of African female identity woven around themes of wifehood, motherhood, procreation, polygamy, womanhood, nationhood, religion, tradition, complementary relationship, negotiation, modernity and politics will be the areas of concentration. As there is no 'single' identity in Africa, the label 'Africa' suggests that cultures within the continent are merely points in a continuum; so our selection is informed by this understanding. The scope of this study is limited to four regions of Africa which represent various cultural differences in the expressions of the African women's identity. In other words, the selection is based on geo-political/social structures, which provide variants of culture. The Gynocritical theory is used for analysis.

Justification

It is imperative that certain clarification be made regarding the choice of the text *Wounding Words: a Woman's Journal in Tunisia* by Evelyne Accad, a non-African writer. The choice of her text as a non-African writing about African women in North Africa offers a different perspective about the issues of identity and how the women negotiate their situation and how they are portrayed or are represented by the "outsider," who is not an African but expresses interests in the conditions of being women in Africa.

Clarification of Operational Terms

This study uses the following terms as defined below:

Female: The term 'Female' is used interchangeably with 'woman' in this study to depict gender status. However in Africa, 'female' is used in a different sense from 'woman.' Though the two terms refer to the same sex and are often used interchangeably as gender reference, the former is a biological label while the latter is a social construct. 'Woman' as a social construct, evolves from traditional descriptions and involves a number of gender roles and responsibilities. In other words, the term 'woman' in Africa connotes submissiveness, obedience, maturity, and social responsibilities such as motherhood or wifehood. 'Woman' as a social concept in Africa is more encompassing than the term 'female' as a subjugated person, although, it is from 'female,' a biological label that femininity and woman evolved.

Culture: 'Culture' in this study is used as a determinant in defining identity. In this study, it is not the same as 'tradition,' but captures 'patriarchal structure' of dominance and other factors that inhibit the articulation, acknowledgement or definition of female identity in Africa. It

represents the social practices or conditions that negate or deter female participations in social, political and economic development of their community. The general perception of culture is that it is 'fixed,' that is the 'body of efforts' that convey, describe and justify actions through which people have kept themselves in existence. In this study, culture is presented as dynamic in portraying the women's changing conditions of existence. In other words, within the 'changing' nature of culture emerges a transforming and dynamic definition of female identity that consequently effects changes in the socio-cultural set-up of a society. Another way of putting it is that, despite the perception of culture as static or 'fixed,' the process of redefining female identity entails a cultural dynamism. So in this study, identity and culture are simultaneously expressed as dynamic in the sense of the changing female identity condition with culture signifying the position of women in the scheme of things.

Womanism: 'Womanism' is the sense of feminine self-expression, self-retrieval and self-assertion in positive cultural ways. It is the highlight of the black women's movement on female bonding and collective actions as part of the larger struggle of all Africans, of all blacks, all women and all dispossessed and oppressed groups. The concept is centred on the need for positive gender self-definition within historical, geographical and cultural contexts. African womanism is a culture-specific concept peculiar to African women derived from the African-American model of Alice Walker's womanism. The concept defines the difference in African-American literary culture and history. African Womanism is a concept which interprets 'female identity' by African women, with emphasis on cultural portrayals of the African woman's 'image'. It focuses on the social transformation of society for the well-being of both men and women. Such an interpretation has become necessary in the light of new concepts that project

identity as an essential product of a nexus of cultural and social factors of development. In this study, the womanist concept will be used not as a theory or concept; rather it will be adopted as a determinant in the definition of female identity, with particular focus on the element of complementary relationship between sexes for social transformation.

Theoretical Framework

This research utilizes Gynocriticism as a theoretical tool. Gynocriticism was formulated by Elaine Showalter as the theoretical process to examine women's writings from the writers' cultural perspective. The common theoretical framework used to evaluate women's writing is the popular feminist theory. It is an approach that 're-visions' women's identity to disclaim customs and traditions that repress and oppress women – customs that have often been regarded as patriarchal in structure by a community of African and black female literary critics like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Sojourner Truth and Maya Angelou. It has been criticised for its silence on the history of racism and sexual marginalization defined by culture. With this drawback, several movements emerged. However, they are grouped into two interpretative approaches: the feminist theory from a reader's interpretative approach and the feminist theory from a writer's interpretive approach. According to Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn, the task of the feminist theory for a reader is "deconstructing predominantly male cultural paradigms and reconstructing a female perspective and experience in an effort to change the tradition that has silenced and marginalized us [women]" (1). It is concerned with the exploitation and manipulation of female sexuality, the omissions and misconceptions about women in criticism.

The feminist theory has often been regarded as the most appropriate framework for the analysis of female-authored texts until Elaine Showalter's *La gynocritique* demonstrated that the feminist theory is imbued with inherent pitfalls that render it inadequate in contemporary studies of divergent histories, experiences and cultures. Katherine Ruthven declares that the feminist theory is an:

> Obsession with correcting, modifying, supplementing, revising, humanizing, or even attacking (women) … within the frame of the masculine universe, which circumscribes its manifestation as a positive concern for women as writers of history, styles, theories, genres and structure. (93-4)

Carolyn Heilbrun and Catherine Simpson aptly describe feminist theory "as righteous, angry and admonitory like the "Old Testament" and "looking for the sins and errors of the past"; yet disinterestedly seeking "the grace of imagination" which they compared with the "New Testament" (64). Annette Kolodyn in "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" also observes that the feminist theory appears "more like a set of interchangeable strategies than any coherent school or shared goal orientation," that is, still "wandering in the wilderness of criticism of Geoffrey Hartman's *Criticism in the Wilderness*: *the Study of Literature Today*" (458). This implies that feminist theory is still tied to the masculine paradigms and depicts a lack of coherence in its response to issues of victimization and discrimination. Black critics such as Harryette Mullen, Clenora Hudson-Weems, bell hooks and others have also objected to the empirical postulations of the feminist theory that is discriminatory in terms of race. Therefore, they call for a black feminist aesthetic. Further, while Marxist feminists see class, alongside gender, as crucial determinants of literary production and literary historians seek to uncover lost traditions, Freudian and Lacanian critics theorise about women's relationship to language and signification (Elaine Showalter 458).

The general view is that feminism is a reactionary theory, an act that resists the exclusion of women's writing from the male literary tradition; a confrontation with canons and judgements which Josephine Donovan calls "a mode of negation within a fundamental dialectics" (458). The theoretical perception of feminism is that the male literary tradition often projects females as mere symbols and stereotypes or ideological references. Susan Arndt opines that it seems feminism as a theory springs from the history of women's experience of subjugation and the assumption that the victimization of women is universal (10). Though human nature and history are distinct, feminism as a theory with its ideological constructions only further marginalizes cognitive texts as culturally situated expressions, not as feminist issues. Its quest for redress is built on existing patriarchal models despite rejecting male representations of women. For example, the characters in African-American writings and texts from the Third World are interpreted as victims of historical conditions because the theory fails to understand that:

> …Women live their social existence within a general culture… as members of a general culture and as partakers of women's culture. (Gerda Lerner 52)[1]

It claims that experience of the hierarchy of "oppressions" seems more lived by some than others because there are underlying premises within specific cultural orders that enable or influence oppression. In these circumstances, a discourse on women's literary identity is only feasible in others who have identical characteristics of 'oppression.' Thus, identity entails the metonymic selection of such characteristics as race, gender, history, and culture. As a result, the variables of society, culture, history, and gender which influence the African woman's narrative experience are subsumed in a universal feminist discourse on the definition of human identity.

In a nutshell, the feminist theory is a mode that interprets women's texts from a reader's perspective on culture, race and history among others. The theory however is inadequate for this study because of the cultural specificity and the varying issues of identity represented by the selected writers.

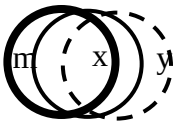
Gynocriticism is a theoretical approach that critiques women's writings from the writer's perspective. It is a theoretical tool for women's literature which develops new models for the study of female experiences. It is often used in women's research in history, anthropology, psychology and sociology, where hypotheses of female subculture on the ascribed status and the internalised constructs of femininity have been developed. It is a political concept concerned with the positive and liberal task of defining the cultural specificity and dynamics of women's writings. In practice, it is an important shift from the androcentric and revisionist reading of the male canon that constitutes the major activity of feminism as a reader's theory. Gynocriticism came into being because of the shortcomings of the feminist theory. It identifies distinctively feminine subject matters in literature written by women – contexts of domesticity (experiences of gestation, giving birth, or mother-daughter and woman-woman relations). Also, it highlights distinctive feminine modes of experience or "subjectivity" in thinking, feeling, valuing and perceiving oneself and the outer world. For Showalter, it is no longer the ideological dilemma of reconciling revisionary pluralisms, but the essential question of difference. The emphasis on difference brings into focus awareness of the female body and the right to be different in language and text, that is, the specificity of women's writing. Difference in this case is a matter of experience captured in style. Gynocriticism thus emphasizes that women's writing is a reflection of their oppression, repression and expression defined by culture and location.

Drawing upon culture and location, it recognizes women's dynamic nature and complementary involvement in a general culture through the various contexts of lived experiences. The theory is a conflation of four theoretic models – the biological, linguistic, psychoanalytic and cultural variants – in the exploration of female literary expressions and experiences.

Culture and location are major interpretive parameters of the Gynocritical theory. Michelle Rosaldo views culture as an institutionalised mode of behaviour or thought expressed in socially recognized rules to which members of a given society conform (36). Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* sees culture as "the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify, and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence" (188). However, he recognises that the "body of efforts" can never be stable or fixed. Stuart Hall also agrees that there are many points of similarities and significant difference in culture which constitute "what we really are." Thus in cultural identity discourse, it is not possible to be exact and fixed. Further, Hall argues that "we can not speak of one experience, one identity" because of the ruptures and discontinuities that take place (394). Culture in the sense of defining identity is a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being,' which belongs to the future as much as the past. This is because of the constant transformation that constitutes culture and thus defines identity which transcends place, time, history and culture.

Showalter believes that the difference between her construct (the feminist theory from a writer's perspective) and the orthodox "androcentric" method (feminist theory from a reader's perspective) lies in the fact that the former not only accounts for the recovery of the neglected and how womanhood and culture constitute the shaping structure of women's creative

expressions, it offers insight into “what women actually write” (475). She argues further that women are part of a mainstream culture because both sexes are dependent on each other for existence. This argument is based on Edwin Ardener’s essay “Belief and the Problem of Women,” which explores the intersecting relationship between the dominant and the muted group (3). Showalter’s theoretical proposition is captured in this illustration in the intersecting circles below:



The darkened circle is the main culture, the unbroken circle is the male culture termed X chromosome, and the broken circle is the female circle also on the periphery of the main culture and termed Y chromosome. However, Showalter argues that women are part of the main culture because the X chromosome requires the Y chromosome for existence, thus X and Y intersect the main culture. However, critics of female culture like Katherine Ruthven in “Gynocriticism” (1988) argue that the Y entrant is dependent on the X invitation. Still, the summation of Elaine Showalter’s theoretic framework is that both cultures, male and female, must intersect inside or converge in the main culture.

Gynocriticism is our critical tool to evaluate the African female literary tradition or identity because of its adaptive framework, which assesses texts from the perspective of the writers’ locale and culture. It takes into consideration the dynamism of individual culture and society. According to Elaine Showalter in “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness,” the Gynocritical theory unveils the literary biases of feminist theory; it takes into account the occupations, interactions and consciousness of women. It is a writer’s perspective theory that focuses on how

womanhood and culture constitute the structure of women's creative expressions and it situates women's novels within the contexts of "what they actually write" as against the metaphoric position of feminism on "what they ought to write." Through subtle negotiation, it recognizes women's dynamic nature and complementary involvement in a general culture through the various contexts of lived experience (179-205).

Complementarity is a mainstay of African women's narrative about their individuality. Their individuality or identity is defined by their communal and complementary relationship, which is diplomatic, mutually supportive and dynamic.

Significantly, Gynocriticism is a combination of four defining models: biology, linguistics, psychology and culture. This makes it appropriate for our examination. In other words, it is a cluster of inclusive approaches to interpreting literary texts, particularly women's writings. Each model attempts to define and differentiate the qualities of women as writers and women's text (their "oppression," "depression," and "expression") within a given cultural location. Gynocriticism also effectively interprets women's expressions and experience through cultural maxims since women are part of the collective experience of a whole culture shaped by men and women.

In spite of its assumptions, Gynocriticism is not without inherent shortcomings. Katherine Ruthven suggests that the word "androcentric" is from the Greek word "androgyny" and "gynocentric" from the Greek "gynogyne." As both refer to 'male' and 'female,' it means that women's studies embrace a theory that is sexless, one that takes care of both male and female

interests in a complementary manner. In her opinion, Gynocriticism is a separatist theory that concerns only women's experience as a minority group, as such:

> It will be a pity if the feminist critique, which had been so successful in identifying androcentric bias against women writers and in making possible a critical discourse free of such prejudices, should be betrayed by a gynocriticism developed along separatist lines. For that would simply reproduce the polarity between women's writing and men's which feminist criticism set out to combat in the first place. And it would also make it that much harder next time to persuade men and women that they have far too much to learn from one another to risk going their separate ways. (128)

Ruthven's "sexless theory" however fails to acknowledge that the male tradition is more established than the female one. A combination of the "ando" and "gyne" is "a continuum" of the male literary tradition that may create another form of subjugation of women's writing, bearing in mind that female dialectics is a result of male-centred history. That is not to say that her ideological proposal is not plausible since Gynocriticism preaches complementarity. The significance of Gynocriticism however lies in the fact that it considers both male and female writings as interactions, unlike the feminist 'model oppression' that presents women's literature as merely subordinate. It illuminates works by women in relation to the mainstream structure which it redirects.

Methodology

This study "Female Identity and the Dynamics of Culture in Selected African Women-Authored Novels" focuses on Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* and *One is Enough*, Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *A Question of Power*, Nawal el Sadaawi's *Woman At Point Zero* and Evelyn Accad's *Wounding Words: a Woman's Journal in Tunisia*, Grace Ogot's *The Promised Land* and Rebeka Njau's *The Sacred Seed* in order to explore the representation and evolution of the identity of

African women. Identity is the "intersection of self and culture," and narrative is the articulation of "silenced and subjugated experiences within the context of a textual inquiry." The narratives are considered definitive studies of identity. Their condition of being female in Africa coupled with their knowledge of the society enables their stories to bring order to a past, situate the present, and give direction to the future. On this basis, the portrayals of women's identity in Africa are situated within four regions in the continent: West, North, South, and East. The interpretative strategy is based on a selection process informed by thematic interests in female identity as narrated from the selected authors' points of view in relation to wifehood, motherhood, childbearing, polygamy, womanhood, nationhood, religion, tradition, politics, and socialization. The analyses of the narratives entail a chronological arrangement in the order of publication while the thematic focus is a reflection of the African woman's image: a hybrid of traditional and modern values. The selection is planned along geo-social arrangements that provide valid 'judgment' according to societal, cultural and location variables defined by the gynocritical theory.

The perceived plurality of female authors, texts and the range of issues examined inform the restriction of authors to one per region and two novels per author, except the North and the East that have two authors with a text each. The selection is also time specific, exploring 'identity manifestation' in the colonial and post-colonial periods. Thus, in each region, through the select texts, the dynamism of identity will be traced from traditional to the modern times and colonial to post-colonial periods and how the element of complementarity is adopted in relation to contemporary changes.

The selected texts are evaluated with the Gynocritical framework which analyses women's experience by their cultural situations. In the evaluation, each text is explored based on its location and culture. Each location is defined by existing conditions such as variables of history, society, class, nationality, region, ethnicity and religion, which are significant determinants of gender in women's novels.

A number of African women's novels are considered female responses to experience or history within various cultures. So, Gynocriticism embodies the revised notions of artistic representation about the writing and reading of novels by African women. The dominant patriarchal culture in Africa, with structures of subjugation and silence against women, compels women writers to "liberate from further tyranny" the female characters in their novels. So, in charting the Gynocritical interpretation of female identity, this study assesses the selected narratives as "double-edged discourses, containing 'dominant' and 'muted' stories" ("Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" 474). The purpose is on the one hand to affirm women's equal rights with men in social life and on the other to correct and transform a society wrecked by Western colonialism and patriarchy.

The activities, tastes, roles, contributions and behaviour of the female characters will be evaluated using the gynocritical frame, which affirms "manifestation of ideological differences". The selected texts focus on the interpretation of Self and interrogate the male canon, revise the criteria for establishing tradition and resist the relegation of women.

The mode of analysis is culture-specific and has a distinct meaning for women's identity in each region. Through gynocriticism, a precise cultural situation of female identity and the literary

prowess that intersects the individual woman writer are examined. For example, in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, the protagonist, Efuru, challenges the static definition of women within the limits of socio-cultural constructions. Its "narrative construction" embodies the protagonist's shift from patriarchal subjection to a pragmatic and empowered woman. The text of *Efuru* is a negation and negotiation of a woman's image in a changing world. As the novel unfolds, it is a celebration of tradition and an attempt to overcome destructive traditional practices by creating an alternative cultural meaning. This checks patriarchal excess within Efuru's sphere without an overt subversion of the social order creates a balance between traditional and personal identity. However, Nwapa's interrogation of the dilemma of womanhood within her 'moribund' traditional setting is a symbolic signifier which constitutes what the subsequent writers and their heroines like Nwapa's Amaka in *One is Enough*, Head's Paulina in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, Sadaawi's Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero* and Ogot's Nyapoh in *The Promised Land* and others make their subject matter. The fusion of the challenges of being women and their conformities within a dynamic or fluid society thus becomes the mainstream from which an answer to the identity issue of contemporary women is drawn.

Drawing upon gynocritical emphasis on specificity of African women's situation in terms of culture and location, the study investigates identity constructs from regional labels within the narratives. After all, the societies bound by the regional label 'Africa' are not singular and the definitions and constructions of gender identity are not homogenous. A culturally-hybrid definition of identity experiences and expressions in an Islamic woman's text differs from a non-Muslim text. Mary Beth Norton in her essay on social construction of women affirms that experiences and perceptions differ according to class, race, and ethnic background (17).

The selected narratives are read within the context that "allows the silences to speak." The term 'cultural-hybrid' covers the mobility of heroines from the traditional situations to modern conditions while still retaining a complementary link with history, culture and gender, without violation and accommodating contemporary changes within their variant interpretations of identity. This may be an indication of cultural syncretism and the fluidity of social conditions. For example in the novels of Head, there is cross-cultural marriage and other issues connected with fluidity of boundaries.

The exposé on cultural-hybridisation enables an assessment, through the gynocritical model, of how the women's solidarity and complementary relationships in Africa have challenged the patriarchal Western feminists' dominance. It also advocates equality among sexes and restructures the human value system to accommodate interests of all women inside and outside different cultural milieu.

In a nutshell, the texts being reviewed encompass a plethora of experiences that conform to the theory outlined earlier. This means that Gynocriticism not only names and identifies but also provides a social validation that enables women to express themselves without being subsumed within the contemporary changing realities. The method is to reveal the ways in which the selected writers define and embrace the Womanist orientation, redefine womanhood and respond to contemporary female identity issues in Africa.

Essentially, this research involves critical analyses of primary texts and other texts on the issue of female identity and the dynamics of culture. The methodology also involves the consultation

of published works on African women's writings from various academic and non-academic research sources.

Literature Review

In recent literature on identity, cultural and social issues are significant factors. For example, Ruthven claims that the feminist ideology is said to be a product of culture that sets out to correct concepts of identity associated with patriarchal traditions (96). For this reason, feminism seems to accommodate cultural differences, complex individual experiences and particular social situations. Identity is represented in different roles and situations, and these include workplace identity, cultural identity, political identity, racial or ethnic identity, etc. African women's identity, whether that of the workplace, cultural, or ethnic one, has been structured by socio-cultural experiences derived from traditional mythic perceptions of their personality.

The perception of the female in African tradition and the notion of male supremacy which pervade Africa in some male-authored narratives like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Wole Soyinka's *Season of Anomy*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat*, and Peter Abraham's *Mine Boy*, to mention a few, have significantly complicated the definition of female identity. Kamene Okonjo claims that role divisions, for example, have been largely beneficial to men in establishing the deep-seated state of gender relations in African cultures (47).[2] It is obvious that female identity is forged by traditional or social perceptions of women. That is, it is a result of a process that takes place during a series of interactions between the Self and the society, and what these interactions produce is the Self (a personal or individual identity) and Other (the result of series of interactions that are extraneous to Self). Female identity, particularly in Africa, is

connected with the subjugation of the "biological self" (individuality) to a "traditional other"; what is also called the "communion" (*Feminist Frontier111* 87).

Nancy Chodorow commenting on the women's communal personality draws upon David Bakan's viewpoint on male agentic personality and female communal personality in "The Duality of Human Existence: Isolation and Communion in Western Man,"[3] proposes that:

> Male represents experiences of self, others, spaces and time in individualistic and objective distant ways, while female represents experiences relatively personal in subjective (communal) immediate ways. (261)

This means that the female identity has always been subjected to "phallus' interaction, yet the proposition of "phallocrats" is that being woman connotes subjectivity, communality, emotionality, docility, and dependency (being receptive to internalized patriarchal social codes). Sherry Ortner expanding Chodorow's proposition holds that women tend to experience things, feeling and people as concrete rather than abstract, subjectively and interpersonally rather than objectively (82). However, critics like Chioma Opara and M.P. Eboh explain that such subjection is the result of cultural influence (2).

The personal identity of the woman in identity discourse, especially in African women-authored novels, is therefore seen as the original or biological image; the Other is the result of a series of interactions (internalised personality). Within patriarchal notions, the personal identity of the woman is subsumed; it often loses its originality in the power plays due to social recognition. In other words, the Self is invertedly defined in the Other. As a result, 'women,' often seen as the Other, are consigned to fit into what Bhabha in "Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition" calls a permanent patriarchal framework (93).

In this study of female identity and the dynamics of culture, the interpretations are categorized within the philosophy of African womanism. African womanism is a culture-specific concept peculiar to African women. It is a notion designed to acknowledge difference and complementarity in African women's literary culture and history outside the discrimination of feminism. Womanism focuses on the specificity of African women's literary culture and is committed to the social transformation of a society for the well-being of both men and women. Obioma Nnaemeka in "Feminism, Rebellious Women and Cultural Boundaries: Rereading Flora Nwapa and her Compatriots" and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi in *African Woman Palava: the Nigerian Novels by Women* respectively are of the view that the feminist theory is prejudiced. A score of African writers and scholars like Ama Ata Aidoo, Catherine Acholonu, Ifi Amadiume, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, Emelia Oko, Modupe Kolawole, and Chioma Opara also share this view about the racial and class biases inherent in the feminist theory.

African women writers through their characters have questioned the 'real' female identity within their cultural enclaves: what is the "real me"? – rephrased from Bhabha's psycho-analysis of cultural identity. This is because the identity notion of patriarchy is inconsistent with the representation of the female self by women writers, who define the "real me" based on the binary dynamism of the society. Such binary form to Jane Gallop is marked by experiences of polar oppositions which offer Illusion of Alternatives – nature/culture, passive/active, and male/female – rather than a continuum of differences (57). This affirms Jacques Derrida's argument on signifier/signified, form/content, writing/speech, presentation/presence as well as the transcendental signified – Man, God or History – who stands outside to ensure stability. The problem here is that the binaries or differences are dependent on the subject that conceives issues

in relation to gender. In this sense, female identity discourse is said to have survived the fluxes of history in terms of period (from the pre-colonial and colonial) and even manifests itself in the postcolonial situation based on presentation/presence and signified/signifier experiences. In other words, we have identities in conflicts, consenting identities, racial identities, even the gay/lesbian identities among others in contemporary human existence. As it is, identity is no longer the main focus; the issues are individual identities because an individual may have more than one identity as a result of factors that determine his existence. However, in this study, the focus is on identity as generic for the various manifestations of female experience in Africa. The postcolonial narratives have been classified as a hybrid of colonial cultural power and traditional control from which women's identities are defined.

Hybridity is an enactment of two contexts: the rite of power and the site of desire. The rite of power is the dominant context (colonial or patriarchal) and in this context, it is regarded as a sign of the colonial presence (dominant) and its discrimination in identity, which is also replicated in the postcolonial situation. It controls the relevance of the site of desire that is the dominated or discriminatory context of relevance. The site of desire, the discriminated site of identity, is dependent on the dominant power for its relevance, and to do this, subjects its individual relevance by imitating the dominant power or presence for significance. The site of desire thus becomes discriminated.

Scholars have, however, argued that in the pre-colonial and colonial eras, female identity in Africa is not entirely discriminatory; rather it is based on complementary relationships between the male and the female. Research documents provided by social, economic and political organizations in Africa often reflected the complementarity and communalism in male and

female relationship. (An example of this is in the account on Aba Women's War of 1929 and its fictionalization in the first of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's trilogy: *The Last of the Strong Ones*).[4] It is in this vein that Niara Sudarkasa describes women as the vehicle of co-operation and collaboration with men:

> The presence of women at the highest level of indigenous government has been dismissed as an instance of women distinguishing themselves individually by entering the 'public world of men.' I would suggest that a formulation that makes an 'a priori judgement' that any participation of women in the public sphere represents entry into the world of men simply begs the question. For in West Africa, the 'public domain' was not conceptualised as the world of men. Rather, the public domain was one in which both sexes were recognized as having important (and complementary) roles to play. (154)

Kamene Okonjo's "Dual-Sex Political System in Operation: Igbo Women and Community or Politics in Midwestern Nigeria" in *Women in Africa* also calls the complementary relationship "dual-sex politics in Africa: a pre-colonial social condition" where women act as power brokers challenging the autonomy of men as well as having a world of their own (45-58). The world of women, Obioma Nnaemeka further emphasizes, is portrayed in literary texts like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, where the goddess Ani is depicted as vocal and powerful (101). Ifi Amadiume in *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* corroborates that the African male/female system allows for flexibility and complementarity that grant men and women rights to share roles and status. Okonjo Ogunyemi defines complementarity as the cooperation between men and women towards social or cultural change. It is derived from the communal nature of African societies where there is focus on communality, cooperation, and collaboration (126). Timothy Asobele also comments on the communal relationship that exists between male and female in the pre-colonial era:

> In classical African society women in pre-colonial days were treated virtually as partners with their husbands, and even the first wife in a polygamous family was highly respected and had privileges; and kings ruled side by side with their wives: *Nneka* which means 'mother is supreme' attests to the fact that in the African worldview, mother being the seat of motherly affection is the future of the world. (42)

At this juncture, it is imperative to examine representations of female identity by both male and female writers to provide an insight into the gradual change or difference in the portrayal of identity.

Female Identity as Represented in Male-Authored Novels

To examine the representations of female identity within the dynamics of culture in the selected narratives, an understanding of the relationship between male and female as reflected in literature is pertinent to our research. That is, it is necessary to examine some 'established' male texts in order to plot the identity pattern represented therein.[5]

Up to the 1970s, African Literature was male-dominated. Male writers depicted women in different ways as symbolic images in social, historical and political terms. Simply stated, they feminized the African continent by evoking it as an abstract projection of the female body – Mother Earth or Woman Earth (see Chioma Opara in *Her Mother's Daughter: The African Writer as Woman*). The female 'scarred body' manifested the dents of a scrambled and ailing continent and the site for correcting misconceptions about Africa that pervaded the writing of European travellers and pioneer African writers like Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness*, Camara Laye in *African Child*. Contemporary African male writers transferred the female image from the feminized continent to sites or appendages of male desires. Cyprian Ekwensi, one of the most popular writers of imaginative literature in Africa, is reputed to have 'said' the most about

women. A cursory look at his fiction shows that he represents women as being sexually liberal. Perceived culturally, she is a deviant akin to a prostitute or in local parlance as an *agaracha*. His novel *Jagua Nana* and the sequel *Jagua Nana's Daughter* are examples of post-independence Nigerian narratives with symbolic images of women as prostitutes, manipulators or simply procreators.

Wole Soyinka in *The Lion and the Jewel* and *A Dance of the Forest* has also been critiqued for portraying stereotyped images of women; however, though he refines the image of women as prostitutes by giving them depth through strength, resilience, resourcefulness and sophistication, they still remain appendages of their male folk (Sylvia Bryan in "Images of Women in Wole Soyinka's Works"). Like other male writers, Soyinka limited his portrayals typically by showing women simply as mothers or women leaders, lovers or whores, or portraying them as symbols of difference between traditional and Western cultures. Bryan analyzed the women characters in Soyinka's works and concludes that he represents his female characters as "symbols and essence," the catalyst in revolutionary socio-political change (119-130). For example in *Season of Anomy*, Iriyise is metaphorically projected as the prostitute with a rather unwholesome view of Self. She is classified as the Other whose self is dependent on male perception.

The metaphoric depiction of women in male narratives is also entrenched in Chinua Achebe's trilogy: *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God*, where they are upholders of norms, virtues and traditional attitudes, even where such are oppressive. *Things Fall Apart* portrays the 'silences' of women in spite of their strength and complementarity in a patriarchal society embodied by male characters like Okonkwo. It is in this light that Okonkwo wished

Ezinma was a male child and Achebe symbolically represents her as an *Ogbanje* (a returning spirit). Even in his representations of his characters' ancestral lineage – a traditional form of defining man culturally – Achebe is silent on the heroic contributions of female characters.

The notion of Womanhood as a glorified figure of Africa is further seen in the works of Nuruddin Farah, who depicts the African Woman as a symbol of nationalism and racial pride. The Mother Africa image though celebrated, also paradoxically presents the African woman as a whore invested with a history that reflects African conditions from the time of colonialism to independence. Ebla in Farah's *From a Crooked Rib*, for example, is an index of the condition of a battered Somalia.

Elechi Amadi in *The Concubine*, in the opinion of some scholars like Eldred Jones, depicts women as agents of destruction. Even the title of the novel symbolically relegates woman to the inert nature and sphere of biological essentialism of Sigmund Freud, underscored by his catch slogan of "Anatomy is Destiny" (Chioma Opara in *The Fiction of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo* 192). Given the above, Maryse Conde observes that:

> The personalities of African women have been hidden under such a heap of myths, so-called ethnological theories, rapid generalizations and patent untruths that it might be interesting to study what they (women) have to say … (132)

Michele Barrett's analysis of the dichotomy of masculinity and femininity elaborates Conde's observation in terms of such polarizations as "culture and nature", "truth and duplicity," "reason and passion," "day and night" – terms associated with the female always controlled by the superior male. The meaning of gender in patriarchal perception therefore is "not simply 'difference,' but… division, oppression, inequality, and interiorized inferiority for women" (112-

113). Nonetheless, the portrayal of the female in negative images does not imply male biases but simply an effective representation based on experiences in many male-authored texts.

Female Identity Portrayal in Women-Authored Novels

While male writers often wrote of a golden age before the advent of colonialism, female writers show that traditional life also had its hardship and oppression of women. Obviously, there is truth in the African proverb which says that until the lion begins to write his (or her) own story, the hunter will always be the hero. There is a need to know how women also represent their identity in order to fashion a "valid argument" on what is and what should be the contemporary female identity within the dynamics of culture. How is the African gender system translated and reconstructed in the tradition of African female writing?

Contemporary African women prose writers represent the role of women and their dynamic contributions to cultural preservation and social cohesion through complementarity. Their thematic thrusts go beyond death, suffering, and compromises, to celebrating life, motherhood, ageism, sisterhood, childrearing and more as part of the issues that define their identity. They show that gender roles are dynamic and ever evolving, as well as puncture the non-progressive 'myth' of female portrayal in the male literary tradition. Their narratives indicate efforts to define an identity and through it become visible to themselves and to others, to participate in the definition and solution of the "world's problems", and help develop an order of priorities and relationships that is different from the patriarchal order (Mahnaz Afkhami 220). However, some Western critics like Florence Stratton submit that the novels of writers like Flora Nwapa, Grace Ogot and Bessie Head are dialogic responses to male writers. Flora Nwapa in her interview with

Akachi Ezeigbo negates this view. To her, her work is not a contestation with male representation of what women are, but how she as a woman sees herself and other women (90). They represent the condition of women in contemporary Africa based on two 'interfacing' levels of tradition, which are traditional and contemporary identities.

African women novelists seem to represent multiple identities and different conditions that define the identities of their characters within their socio-cultural enclaves. These are traditional and modern identities, and they often complement each other in the post-colonial socio-cultural structure. However, certain roles or identities are defined by the dynamism of the society. An example is the work place identity, which empowers women, some of who sometimes choose to be single parents. Several factors may be responsible for such an identity option. These include: work pressure, insecurity, unplanned pregnancy, etc. In various experiences in the workplace, the woman is able to stand on her own. Yet, both at the traditional and modern levels, African women often structure their identity to reflect socio-cultural exposure, communal or complementary involvement, and female-bonding and personal development. The selected novelists, Flora Nwapa, Nawal el Saadawi, Evelyn Accad, Bessie Head, Grace Ogot and Rebeka Njau, question the general classification of the African woman's image as 'docile,' 'traditional,' 'silent,' 'overburdened' and 'uneducated.' These classifications reveal inadequacies and require alternative views of identity. As such, some female writers exhibit a radical stance in their interrogation of African women's identity; while some express liberalism or what some scholars of the African Womanist "school" regard as complementarity. The complementarity school expresses a need for tolerance between men and women, society and individuals, and amongst people of diverse races, cultures and constitutions.

Representations of female identity as depicted in women-authored narratives are hinged on culture and location as bases for human behaviour. Rosalind Miles opines that this is because culture is the internalized mode of behaviour or thoughts expressed in socially recognised rules to which members of a given society conform. The 'perceived' contemporary female identity is a reflection of patriarchal identification and colonial experience which may be subject to analysis or argument. But African women writers contend that contemporary African women's identity has moved beyond 'patriarchal' role divisions to depict female and cultural dynamism. These are defined by the level of exposure and development in the educational and work sectors, in addition to traditional expectations.

To fully appreciate and interpret gender relations in Africa, it is necessary to identify the pattern of metamorphosis of female characters starting with Flora Nwapa's fiction in the 1960s, which journeys from the colonial era into the postcolonial and which interfaces tradition with the post-independence urban challenges. Flora Nwapa presents a conservative female image with a complex sense of self-preservation and vibrant independence, especially in her earliest texts like *Efuru* and *Idu*. The images of female identity are more or less in conformity with the cultural values of the Igbo society, yet with a streak of independence which is akin to deviance. This representation is the female version of the male portrayal of African women as 'invisible.' The African female 'tragic' reality is also depicted, for example, by Nawal el Sadaawi as a character whose refusal to obey social norms and expectations is regarded as deviant behaviour. From the patriarchal perspective, this must be 'nipped in the bud.' In *Woman at Point Zero*, Firdaus typifies a tragic heroine of modern day African female writing.

However, there is a new generation of female writers who present postcolonial African women in a bolder and individualistic style. They show women in contexts of weakness and of strength. They assume distinctive political positions in their writing like Chimamanda Adichie does in *Purple Hibiscus*. Even though there are significant commonalities in their works – Africa is a large continent and by no means homogenous – their examination of women is based on ethnic, social, and economic locations that define their narratives. Thus on *prima facie* evidence, female identity in Africa can be divided into traditional and modern identities. Within this, female characters find themselves in conflict and conformity with both traditional expectations and their changing societies.

To this extent, the 'translation' of African female identity as manifested in contemporary novels by women attempts to address the degree of influence which the 'liberal,' and 'democratic' framework has had on women's identity since independence. How are women defined by the male folk? To what extent have the construction of female identity by women writers changed since the attainment of independence? How does the contemporary image of women fit into the concept of the Womanist activity or definition of Self? The image in the pre-colonial period is that of complementarity or communality. The invasion of the colonialists upturned the communal nature and relegated the powerful public relevance of women to the Victorian system of dependence on male authority and violence (Leith-Ross 112-13; Ifi Amaduime 14). The British or Victorian ideology of the masculine power over female visibility redefined and eroded African women's public appearances and this is observed in the British colonialists renaming the Aba Women's War of 1929 (amazons) as 'Aba Riot.' The term 'Aba Riot' is a denial of women's political involvement in public issues. Asobele observes that colonialism is responsible

for the relegation of the public relevance of African women to the background especially as education was restricted to men only (57). Okonjo Ogunyemi interprets these concerns as 'traditional' sites of female subjugation and springboards for her empowerment (106). But the post-independence African women are defined by two cultures: Western and African traditions. Thus their identities are informed by global economic and social trends. For example, their responses to motherhood in the colonial and post-colonial periods have different implications. Elleke Boehmer summarizes the African women's identity as:

> The idealized African woman of the male-authored fiction removed from her metaphorical role within the dominant nationalist tradition and pluralized by women writers as an active character within a social life. (7-11)

In postcolonial African societies, independence, urbanization and Western education afford women new roles and interpretations of female identity as depicted in some of the selected novels. Hence, in these modern societies, women see themselves as being free from the fetters of customs and tradition. Post-colonialism restores a degree of voice (contemporary identity) to women. This voice may have inspired more contemporary literary efforts like Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* which celebrates not only the traditional and modern images, but the life of women in Nigeria, drawing metaphorically upon the purple colour and the hibiscus flower to depict symbolically their African royalty and tenacity respectively, to overcome the oppressive socio-cultural conditions of being women. Within the text is the indication that many women are still patriarchally subjugated (culturally, psychologically, maritally, socially and economically) and could only rise above such subjugation through female solidarity. For instance in *Purple Hibiscus*, it is through the character of Aunty Ifeoma (a widow and single parent) and the journey to her house that Kambili's mother gradually moves 'outside' the

patriarchal imposed role of silence and docility. Her history of violation and silence justify Adichie's suggestion that many women in contemporary Nigeria are still inexplicably subservient to patriarchy.

It is these identity assumptions in fiction that contemporary African women writers seek to redefine. Identity is thus subjective with infinite interpretations to which many African women writers, through the Womanist identification, focus on in the postcolonial environment.

NOTES

1. For further reading see Gerda Lerner: "The Challenges of Women's History". *The Majority Finds its Past: Placing Women in History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.

2. See Kaneme Okonjo's "Dual-Sex Political System in Operation: Igbo Women and Community/Politics in Midwestern Nigeria". *Women in Africa*, 1976. pp. 45-58. Okonjo addresses the roles and status of women in pre-colonial and colonial African cultural landscapes. Of particular interest is Judith Van Allen's documentation on the Women's War of 1929, titled "Aba Riot or Igbo Women's War? Ideology, Stratification, and – the Invisibility of Women". This documentation captures the complementary roles of women during colonialism, even though their roles, it seems, are "patriarchally" termed "Aba Riot" instead of Women's war. Further reading in *Women in Africa*, by N.J. Hafkin and E.G. Bay, 1976, pp. 59-85. More readings on complementary contributions of women in Africa are to be found in Niara Sudarkasa's "The Status of Women in indigenous African Societies" in *Feminist Frontiers III*, 1993, p. 154.

3. Bakan a psychoanalyst describes the "patriarchal personality" as "agentic" and the female personality as "communal" in his analysis of male and female relationships. His expanded definition of the two concepts shows that the male "agentic" is preoccupied with self-assertion, self-protection and self-expansion and isolation, alienation and aloneness; female "communion" manifests itself in oneness, cooperation and removal of repression. Also, Gutmann in his contribution to the discourse on male/female relationship contrasts male socialization personalities as "phallocentric" and the female as "autocentric". In this case, Gutmann suggests that the male is "objective" and the female is "subjective".

   Based on this characterization, Carlson merging both psychoanalytic propositions confirms that, "males represent experiences of self, others, space, and time in individualistic, objective and distant ways, while the females represent experiences in relatively interpersonal subjective, immediate ways." Further readings in Carlson, R. "Sex Differences in Ego Functioning: Exploratory Studies of Agency and Communion". *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 37, (1971), pp. 267-77. Chodorow, N.

"Family Structure and Feminine Personality." *Feminist Frontier III*, Taylor, V., and Richardson, L. (eds.) New York, McGraw-Hill Inc., 1993, p. 89.

4. "Gender interaction is regarded as being complementary and balanced… Rather than being conflictual or competing for the same positions of social and political power" in *Writing African Women: Gender, Popular Culture and Literature in West Africa* by Stephanie Newell, 1977, p. 3. Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo also reflected this observation in her trilogy: *The Last of the Strong Ones*, *House of Symbols* and *Children of the Eagle*. Her study portrays social stratification in Africa especially pre-colonial structures as captured in her text – *The Last of the Strong Ones*, 1996. Adimora-Ezeigbo's argument is that it is not the society that imposes silence on women but men in the society who make the rules.

   Also, Obioma Nnaemeka's response to a feminist review of African Literary texts using *Things Fall Apart* as a reference, buttresses Sudarkasa's anthropological explanation of African societies. In her opinion, while African men operate within a male centred world, women also exist within their own separate sphere. This calls to mind the different traditional roles and status of women in certain ethnic groups, as one finds in Ghana, a matriarchal society.

5. Apart from the "patriarchal" fictional representations of African women, a few African male writers have given positive portrayal to women in their novels. From the eighties, for example, Ngugi's *Devil on the Cross* (1982), Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) and Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* (1970) have portrayed complementary images of women. These three novels are examples of male writers who pay positive tribute to spirited female characters.

Chapter Two

Emerging Female Identity: A Womanist Perspective in *Efuru* and *One is Enough*

Antecedence of Gender Gaps and Identity Conception in Nwapa's Igbo Society

This chapter charts the emerging pattern and evolving structure of female identity in West Africa represented by Flora Nwapa in *Efuru* and *One is Enough*. The novels explore subversions of traditional African notions of marriage and motherhood as determinants of female identity. This is from an Igbo ethno-cultural system of a 'quasi-flexible' gender space in language and culture. In this context, the position and condition of woman are fraught with contradictions, tensions and oppositions caused by British colonialism and the Victorian gender culture that relegated the erstwhile African women's public visibility to the status of being domestic benefits.

Gender gaps between males and females predate the postcolonial period. Interestingly, women in traditional African societies before British rule were highly visible, influential, and acted as custodians and transmitters of the cultural heritage. From this traditional frame, pioneer African male Negritude writers developed their concepts of the feminization of Africa's cultural identity by addressing Africa as 'Mother Earth,' 'the hub of culture' and 'the black woman.' The relevance of African women in traditional societies is documented in essays by anthropologists like Niara Sudarkasa as one of complementarity. Kamene Okonjo's "Dual-Sex Political System in Operations: Igbo Women and Community Politics in Mid-Western Nigeria" also discussed this issue. African women, in the views of these writers, are involved in communal decision-making, preservation as well as self or group individuation or development. As such, the mores

and values of the community are preserved and passed on from one generation to another through the elders, especially women. The oral tradition thus provides directions for members of the community. Through their prayers, folk songs, dances, proverbs, riddles and life stories, these women taught, moulded and preserved the African personality. Their activities pragmatically fostered development and community participation and well-being, until the advent of the British or Victorian system of male superiority and female subjugation:

> Times changed and men began to assert their masculinity over their industrious wives. Men made fun of husbands, at drinking places and functions, whose wives were well-to-do, saying: "Look at him, just take a look at him. He is less than a man, depending on a woman to buy his shirts for him, to spread the mats for him. One day, instead of him, "forking" her, she will fork [sic] him. And they spat to show their disgust. (*One is Enough* 17)

The Nigeria/Biafra war further entrenched in no small measure, the dichotomous relationship between males and females in terms of sex, social relevance and economic benefits. The perception of the gender gap and identity in post-colonial Nigeria as a result of the war was contentious in terms of women's involvement and its effect on them. In other words, defining the identity of women in West Africa is subject to periods and events. This argument is further highlighted by Trinhn Mihn-ha:

> … a group of mighty men attributed to itself a central dominating position vis-à-vis other groups, overhauled its particularities and achievements, adopted a protective attitude toward those it classified among its out groups and wrapped itself up in its own thinking, interpreting the out-group through the in-group mode of reasoning while claiming to speak the minds of the in-group and the out-group. (in Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi 46)

In the pre-colonial period, women were involved in community development. The colonial period marked the redefinition of women's identity which was relegated to the domestic realm, which created a gender gap between men, women and the society. The post-colonial period

records contradictions and tensions regarding the female identity. In this third phase, women reject the status of "scapegoat" for social change by breaking loose and looking for new ways of self-redefinition.

The traditional African definition of a woman was culturally delineated and further reflected in male child-sex preference. However, such preference was subject to cultural norms. In the Igbo ethno-cultural locale, the male child was preferred to the female due to the occupational superiority or traditional interests of society, which reinforced a gender gap in terms of occupational interests. The traditional occupation of Igbo women was 'relegated' to cassava farming, while yam cropping was a male-dominated activity. According to Emelia Oko, a woman's worth was devalued in Igbo culture because of her lack of economic strength (262). Cassava was a woman's crop, while yam, the king of crops, was a man's crop as illustrated in Achebe's historical trilogy. In that cultural landscape, man was symbolically equated with the strength, nurture and reverence demanded by and accorded to yam. The androcentric logic in this analogy presupposes the inferiority of women like the inferiority of the cassava crop which, according to Oko, is useful in undermining the signification of the androcentric notion of difference in contemporary times. Thus, the female characters from that region change the tides of signification of difference and value to their benefit. Difference at this juncture conforms to Obododimma Oha's argument that contemporary feminist thought is no longer concerned with signifying feminized inferiority but with feminine existential credibility (420). The critic's viewpoint was based on the social perception of cassava, regarded as a 'saviour' especially in Nigeria during the Biafra War of 1967 and as a staple meal for the poor (421). Oha concludes that the prejudice against women is to enable men to emphasize women's Otherness (416).

Drawing upon Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Chioma Opara argues that patriarchy justifies its essence in the image of the woman. In other words, his authority is defined, contrasted and acknowledged in the female essence: she is incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is, on the other hand, the subject being and the absolute (18). From these arguments, describing the woman with the cassava metaphor is a presumptuous form of distancing women and accentuating their difference and apparent insignificance.

Emelia Oko contentiously submits to the viewpoint that the male gender is the weaker biological sex and therefore less male children are born than female ones. The scarcity of the male child results in a higher value being placed on maleness and the justification of imaging the male child as being biologically and mentally superior to the female one. This submission, drawing upon progressive societies that recognized the fallacy of kingly power symbolized by maleness, negates the gender gap metaphorically depicted by the yam and cassava analogy. In such societies, actual power resides in the queen, with the king being a ceremonial head. Women in several African societies or cultures are accorded superior status in terms of rituals, religion and politics (202).

The coded superiority of women is also documented by Ifi Amadiume in *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. This text presents another perspective of gender structure in Igbo culture, which appears liberal to some people. Within its context, traditional Igbo culture allows women roles in public life and decision-making, marriage, motherhood and parenting. According to Amadiume, the title of the book is derived from the traditional practice of a daughter assuming the role of a male (family head in her father's house).

Even when she was married, she could sometimes manage her family affairs from her father's house. This was so especially in cases where there were no sons in the family. The daughter could also choose to marry another female to continue the family lineage or line of her father:

> In rare cases, women owned land as 'male daughters' when they had been accorded male status in the absence of a son in order to safeguard their father's Obi, the line of descent and the property associated with it … (34)

A background study of gender in Igbo culture is imperative to understand the characterization of Efuru and Amaka in *Efuru* and *One is Enough* respectively.

The gender system among the Igbo, drawing upon Amadiume's study, shows a flexibility which enables a construct that separates gender from sex, unlike the rigid Victorian gender ideology that constructs gender by sex (15). In the Igbo construction, daughters could become sons and consequently male by virtue of their social and familial status. A daughter could stay in her father's 'obi' and become the head of her family for lineality. As a result of this status, she takes in a woman who will produce sons for her. She, in this vein, becomes a husband to the woman and consequently the male in relation to her wife. In Sylvia Leith-Ross' study of the Igbo women gender identity as it influences their political system, she comments on the ethnocentric structure:

> I had occasionally caught glimpses of some peculiar conception of sex or of a thread of bisexuality running through everything… or of a lack of differentiation between sexes … (15)

Igbo women in this context perform dual sex roles especially in genealogical continuity and socio-political decision-making. The 'lack' of differentiation between sexes referred to by Leith-Ross is classified by Kamene Okonjo as "dual-sex political systems." Ifi Amadiume regarded it

as the flexibility of gender construction predicated on language and culture (17). Leith-Ross explains this in a nutshell that further assessments of Igbo women reveal that they are: "capable of remarkable system of government… (who) have intelligence as we understand it, the power of thought and the power of reason. Yet their thought is still almost entirely self-centered, their intelligence limited, flowing along the narrowest channel and mirroring only the slightest facts ... they are dangerous, in that they appear to be so much more advanced than they are" (in Amadiume 14). However, in her conclusion, she describes them as "… rare and invaluable force, thousands upon thousands of ambitious, go-ahead, courageous, self-reliant, hard-working, independent women …" (337)

The description aptly justifies Flora Nwapa's (and other Igbo writers') heroines as women with voice and visibility in spite of the acquired Victorian culture of gender defined by sex. In the narration, she feminizes and maternalizes the symbolic 'cassava' by stylistically drawing attention to the role of 'mother' and Other embedded in it and suggesting a relationship of feminine nature to maternal identity (Oha 413).

Modupe Kolawole also corroborates this view that traditional African women were visible before colonialism as agents of change, not just in political organizations and leadership (indicated by the Aba Women's Riots of 1929), but also by participation in ritual matters and exercise of authority (159). Micere Mugo maintains as well that the average "African Woman is not invisible. She is visible on the farm; she is visible in the market place." The contemporary condition of African women, particularly Igbo women, is a result of colonialism and African autochthonous system which empower patriarchy.

Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie also accepts the argument on the visibility of traditional African women before and after colonialism. According to her, African women are not invisible if one cares to search for and listen to their voices in the right places, for they are there in women's spaces and modes such as in ceremonies and work songs (11). Amadiume locates these women's spaces and modes in Igbo women's cultural heritage and identity. Her illustration of the contradictions and co-existence of gender notions is derived from the Nnobi social organizations and cultural ideologies – the town is the centre of rituals and the seat of the Idemili religion.

Flora Nwapa derives some gender narrative materials from these social organizations, rituals, contradictions and Igbo cosmogony. The traditional Igbo society of her heroines mythically defines its origins and ritual through the agency of its women. For instance, according to Amadiume, the first man in Nnobi, *Aho-bi-na-agu*, and a hunter, meets a supernatural woman, Idemili, and produces a daughter called Edo, a beautiful and highly industrious woman. Edo marries Ezenewi of Nnewi. When Edo leaves to join her husband in Nnewi, the supernatural Idemili blesses her with her idol and *ite uba*, the pot of prosperity. In Nnewi, Edo prospers like her mother in Nnobi. Thus, Nnewi inherits Nnobi's hard work and prosperity (28).

Within the gender space, women have more prominent place in myths and indigenous religious and cultural concepts – the goddess is female and the stream, *Iyi Idemili*, is the source of divinity. Thus the mediator between the natural, human existence and the supernatural interference is a woman, Edo. The present towns of Nnobi and Nnewi inherited hard work and industriousness from their women. In agriculture, the Igbo society relies heavily on female labour to produce such staple food as cassava, cocoyam and plantain.

The traditional Igbo women feature predominantly in the cultural, political and economic structure of the society and are mythically superior to the males. The Igbo society of Flora Nwapa is resilient and benevolent. The hard work and industriousness of women are valued over the strength and superiority of males. The value structure of women is derived from the economic and emotional realities of their nature. These include the peculiarities of maternity, menstruation, feminine astuteness and vision. Their economic acumen and public involvement also merit social recognition like that of men of achievement. Ogwuta, the home town of Flora Nwapa is no exception to this traditional Igbo structure.

However, the invasion of colonialists and the empowerment of patriarchy (moving the traditional societies like Nnobi, Nnewi, and Ogwuta from the matrilineal to the patrilineal) created a gender gap that pitched men and women in a binary opposition. The traditional society was thus faced with the challenges of tradition and modernity. Colonialism created changes that enhanced patriarchal control. Yet, through the Igbo women's solidarity and women writers taking initiatives, remarkable or dynamic achievements were recorded in the socio-cultural, economic and political spheres.

Women writers through their narratives react and respond to the challenges of modernity (colonialism) through personal stories, experiences and expressions about the dynamic transition of the Igbo women's past into a suppressed present. They also engage the subversion of their status or cultural confusion by challenging their present condition in order to redefine the future.

Flora Nwapa champions the reaction and responses of the modern Igbo women through her narratives as the first published Igbo female writer. Her narratives are dedicated to the critical

assessment and elucidation of misogynistic socio-cultural relationships in Nigeria. Her prose is regarded as the pathfinder that unmasks the phallocentricism of colonialism and patriarchy (Okonjo Ogunyemi 131). The novels of Nwapa examine and revise the prevalent notions of marriage, social responsibility, Self, sacrifice and service to society and humanity.

Another angle to Nwapa's narratives is that the actions of her heroines catalyze events which redefine the fate of other women (characters) in her stories. In other words, she stresses the realism of the day-to-day interactions in Igbo society where women are industrious, and successful in their social, economic, cultural and religious activities. It is in this regard that the religious and cultural undertones in Nwapa's novels are significant and may be perceived as didactic responses to the literary representations of male writers like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka. For example, the 'Goddess of the Lake' is given much respect in the Ugwuta community, which means that women like Efuru who become her priestesses have respect and dignity attached to them. In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the priestess of Agbala, Chielo, is given only occasional portrayal, while the priestess of the Goddess of the Lake in Nwapa's story represents a model for other women in terms of attaining individual or personal consciousness. Nwapa's narratives thus alter the gender implication of women as mediators or the "carriers": women feature prominently as characters that make sacrifices in the interest of a community or people or become models of self-actualization. The representation of the female essence of priesthood in Nwapa's fiction subverts the literary tradition of patriarchy in Nigeria. Thus, the fictionalization of Ugwuta's (Igbo) religious reality is an act through which the identity definition of women is argued and reinvented.

Florence Stratton, in her analyses of Flora Nwapa's novels, subscribes to a revisionist (dialogic) argument on the nature of African women's literature, particularly Nwapa's and Buchi Emecheta's. Her argument is:

> When literary discourse is considered from the perspective of gender, it becomes evident that dialogic intersection between men's and women's writing is one of the defining features of the contemporary African literary tradition … What it indicates is that neither men's nor women's writing can be appreciated in isolation from the other. (9)

Ifi Amadiume has described the interplay between the Igbo cultural system and female traditional power and value in defining female identity. She explores their cosmology and traditional structure as they reflect the relevance of women in terms of religion, culture, politics and economy. Importantly, the ideology governing the sexual division of labour and gender relations stresses social and political rewards like traditional titles for economically dynamic women (49).

The metaphysical presence within the human interaction in the Igbo narrative of Nwapa is significant in its capacity to resolve the conflicts over female identity. The Goddess of the Lake (*Uhamiri*) on the religious platform acts as a model of restitution, creating co-existence between male and female, with the female as the priestess. The functionality of traditional worship in spite of the infiltration of Western faith, further voices Nwapa's viewpoint on the complexities which define the nature of worship and she advocates co-existence between the two modes of worship.

Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi ("Introduction: The Invalid, Dea(r)th, and the Author: The Case of Flora Nwapa, a.k.a Flora Nwanzuruahu Nwakuche") comments on Nwapa's artistic search for

relevance through cosmic belief and practices (16). Nwapa, in the view of this critic, carves a feminine space out of this cultural imagery by placing the female water deity known as the 'Woman of the Lake' or 'Mammy Water' (*Uhamiri*) at its centre in order to resolve female identity conflict. Also, *Uhamiri*'s mystical and complicated relationship with her irascible husband, *Urashi*, is built up controversially around gender relationship and is transported into a national discourse. It is in this vein that novels of African women are interpreted at two levels: the dominant (national) and muted (personal). Okonjo Ogunyemi in *African Wo/man Palava: The Nigerian Novels by Women* explains the 'dominant' concern in Nwapa's novels as communal or national transformation: the liberation of all people from attitudes and practices that retard growth, and the use of the released energies for social and spiritual development. The 'muted' operates on the personal level, and is specifically gender-oriented. Its thrust is the role of women in the family. It concentrates on disabling gender arrangements that prevent women from performing optimally in the private as well as the public spheres. Both are interwoven as the personal merges with the public in communally-oriented cultures where boundaries are not sharply defined. Okonjo Ogunyemi concludes that the personal must therefore be liberated to enhance development in the public arena (134).

Nwapa as a novelist, thus, represents her public (cultural/communal) and personal (gender) issues through the oral tradition and the religious belief in the river goddess, *Uhamiri*. She draws from the religious or mythic belief in the lake goddess as a model of female empowerment and communal transformation. The river goddess wields immense spiritual power and symbolizes the elemental storm in male/female relationships. She symbolizes the candour, humility, and economic independence of African women and she "douse(s) all the insidious flames of the 'filth

fire' which, left alone, will establish new heaps of rubble for future generations" (Chimalum Nwankwo 339). She also represents an external conflict implicit in the marriage institution of patriarchal societies. The concept of the river goddess, mammy water, according to Jell-Bahlsen, is more than just divinity. She embodies and manifests important aspects of womanhood in the pre-colonial Igbo culture and is still visible today, as both men and women still pray to the divine pair of water deities – Uhamiri and Urashi (43).

The river goddess is a symbolic narrative model of personal and national transformation; part of an "oeuvre" that connects the past and present in the process of redefining the African woman's identity. The river goddess reflects the Igbo belief, which Nwapa pragmatically fictionalizes to capture the Igbo polity, cosmogony, reality and history. However, Chimalum Nwankwo (in *Emerging Perspectives on Flora Nwapa: Critical and Theoretical Essays*) cautions against sweeping assumptions about universal notions of the lineaments and 'modus operandi' of African religious institutions; and the generalization of historical experience and modes of acculturations in continental Africa by the West without any fore-knowledge about their way of life (340).

The structure of Nwapa's fiction is such that it moves from the threat of fragmentation, through the *leit-motif* of fragmentation to restitution and victorious anchor in the autochthonous system. The narrative voice is authorial with critical irony in favour of the 'underdogs' – the women and the cultural worldview that define them (marriage, motherhood, religion etc) – through the intervention of the ubiquitous Lake Goddess. The resilience of Igbo culture is a concomitant vehicle for addressing the Igbo woman's identity.

The characters in Nwapa's fiction are structured by words and actions that reflect the overall socio-political framework of traditional Igbo culture. The world of men is differently structured from the world of women through the age grade system and sex status; yet, they are bonded to the visible support system that unites them during critical moments. Women on their part rise to the level of bonding and cooperation in the activities of their community. The narratives present a male-female world either in conflict or conformity in their cultural landscape, and both negotiate their ways in and out of advantageous or disadvantageous standpoints.

The patterns of negotiation are serious issues in Nwapa's fictional narratives. Negotiation is a main approach in the cultural legacy of Igbo socio-politics. Negotiation is significantly woven around Nwapa's thematic focus on marital relationship, motherhood, wifehood, religion and sisterhood. Obioma Nnaemeka calls the relationship or connection 'Negofeminism' (106). The characters are allowed to make their choices, justifications and compromises, acts which some critics like Florence Stratton have mis-represented as rebellion (106). On the religious levels, the heroines negotiate between Western Christianity and traditional religion. Negotiation informs the resolution of the conflicts that divide human relations in male and female, with each acting as the middle point between conflict and harmony; divergence and convergence, which Nnaemeka refers to as a "crossroad" (106). The factors that constitute divergence and convergences are also captured on the sphere of traditional religion to justify the rationale for conflicts and negotiation or reconciliation.

The constitution of conflict between male and female is justified by Nwapa in an interview with Jell-Bahlsen and Francis Ebiri as natural, drawing upon the fact that the male and female water

deities often have conflict (44). It is therefore not out of place for mortals (males and females) to be in conflict (see Chimalum Nwankwo 343). From this point, it is easier to understand that conflicts between males and females and husbands and wives in Nwapa's novels are indications of the fallibility of human nature that has become an artistic representation in oral religious compositions. The conflicts or quarrels are not endorsements of rebellion or an aspect of empowerment, but a natural human expression of emotion.

Nwapa's novels represent these cultural behaviour and patterns of negotiation. For example, the marital relationship in *Efuru* between Efuru and Adizua and Efuru and Gilbert-Eneberi; and in *One is Enough* between Amaka, Obiora, and Fr. McLaid; and Idu and Adiewere are patterned along traditional understandings of conflicts, compromises, negotiation and complementarity. The African culture represented in Nwapa's narratives indicates that there is always room for conflicts or objections as represented between Amaka and Obiora; and Efuru, Adizua and Gilbert-Eneberi. Within the grounds of conflicts or rebellion is a patterned traditional space for negotiation and sometimes compromises.

The general structure of the Igbo culture is highly religious – hinged on cultural/religious beliefs and practices that define roles and expressions of men and women. These norms are explained by Ifi Amadiume in *Male daughters*, *Female Husbands* and narrated by Nwapa. The religious/cultural life of the Igbo setting ensures continuity and enables compromises or negotiation. The question is how continuity features in the process of complementarity through negotiation. Nwapa's novels indicate that the element of continuity, ancestral worship, marriage, motherhood or procreation, sisterhood and family relationships, and the process of sustaining

conformity in these spheres is through negotiation. Negotiation ensures tolerance, compromises and complementarity. Nwapa's narratives – *Efuru, One is Enough, The Lake Goddess, Idu,* and *Never Again* – are focused on resolution of conflicts and the restitution of the lost felicity through the process of continuity and negotiation. Nwapa, in spite of being labelled as a radical feminist writer by Western critics, depicts independent female characters that negotiate their identity for continuity with the female goddess of the river acting as trope for the female empowerment process. Her characters often make compromises either individually or communally for the process of continuity to take place (see Okonjo Ogunyemi 6).

The belief of African men and women in negotiation or compromise brings to mind the observation of Herbert M. Cole about Igbo artists and art scholars:

> The human couple is a paradoxical unity in life and art. United as one, it is the elemental force igniting sexuality and reproduction to maintain the species. As two, it is equally the elemental force of opposition and reciprocity. Matched pairs of sculptures carved or cast at the same time for a unitary purpose are simultaneously two and one … Dualities are often articulated in African belief systems and are implied in art, where they serve as explanatory models. Maleness is understood in relation to femaleness, hot to cold, night to day… Dualistic systems such as these compress practical and philosophical notions associated with gender, morality, time, space, cosmology and transformation. (68)

The dualism in African art is apparent in the Igbo culture; and it draws sources from Igbo cosmogony, history and politics. Duality in this case translates into all kinds of complementarity rather than bellicity in opposition. Obvious to us is a kind of dialectical continuum often articulated by other art scholars. This necessitates the male-female harmony seen in the high level of sacrifice and negotiation imposed on Nwapa's female characters for the sake of

peace/continuity. Compromise and negotiation are part of an Igbo male/female reality. Roy Seiber and Roselyn Adele Walker in *African Art in the Cycle of Life* also state:

> One of the most pervasive concerns of African societies is continuity. The future of the family and the group depends on the ability of the present generation to sire and bear children. Additionally, an individual's sense of social and biological competence lies in his or her ability to become a parent… Thus, it is not surprising to find in African thought and art ubiquitous emphasis on human fertility. (28)

The above emphasizes the Igbo world view on the issue of fertility that also allows polygamy as men and women seek to ensure the process of continuity. Okonjo Ogunyemi categorizes the Igbo structure in Nwapa's work into male and female or 'family members' whose resources must be pooled together for survival (*African Wo/man Palava: The Novels of Nigerian Women* 134). However, such categorization and compromise do not preclude an occasional confrontation between men and women, which Chimalum Nwakwo regards as natural (343). In this context, the focus is on the nature of the conflict and the process of conciliation. Nwapa thus draws from Igbo myths, mysteries, realities and paradoxes, as they constitute their polity and its pragmatics.

The discussion of gender in Nwapa's narratives applies to both men and women at communal and individual levels, with *Uhamiri* transcending gender. She presents *Uhamiri* as a model of female empowerment and marriage institution in Igbo society. Through this symbolic religious deity, Nwapa advocates a different type of marriage or society, and the acknowledgement of women's contributions to development through womanist ideals of tolerance and mutual understanding of the individual's value. Thus, the writer 'steeped in Igbo tradition' and orature, attempts to subverts patriarchal notion of male/female relationships and power from a womanist

perspective in order to depict positive growth in African women's identity. These, subsequently, are juxtaposed by the cultural pragmatics of complementarity and negotiation.

The Emerging Womanist Matrix in *Efuru*

Efuru as a matrix and pivot of African gender discourse serves as the ingenious outreach that defines other female literary output. It is the story of a young woman who, unable to flourish in marriage and motherhood, seeks succour in religion as a priestess of the lake goddess, *Uhamiri* – for spiritual, sensual and psychological transformation and redefinition. Efuru, the eponymous heroine is a woman who lives under the constraints of a society that defines a female's decision and desire by dictating her choice and status in the community. The community is defined and sustained by customs and norms dictated by ancient, unquestionable traditions that are patriarchal in nature. The traditions specify roles that favour the male and leave no room for deviation for both male and female. Consequently, a woman must marry in a certain manner and she must submit herself to specified laws and rituals of the community. These roles and expectations are the concerns of Nwapa in *Efuru.* The heroine attempts to survive these ancient traditions and transverse them by deviation (deviation from the laws and rituals means total ostracism from the community).

Efuru represents the African womanist philosophy from two major perspectives: clitoridectomy (the status of being a complete woman) and motherhood (as it forecloses childbearing or childlessness) – as the bedrock for other issues like female empowerment, religion, dowry, and female-bonding. Set in rural Igbo land in the town of Ugwuta, the novel dates its events between 1940 and the early 1950s. It was the period when Ugwuta was just experiencing the impact of

colonialism and was on the verge of rapid social and cultural transformation. Nwapa's focus in this narrative is 'the women's world.'

Presented on two levels of muted (gender) and dominant (national) perspectives, Nwapa pragmatically represents a womanist negotiation slightly different from the original Alice Walker precepts. Such areas of departure include the African society's obsession with having children as well as its intolerance of lesbianism. Nwapa's *Efuru* projects an African womanist praxis that seeks a relationship between men and women in complementarity, while in the same vein it reaches for self-development or actualization. What is viewed as the 'dominant' perspective in *Efuru* is a communal rehabilitation in terms of attitude and culture. This encompasses the liberation of all people from moribund cultural attitudes and practices that retard prospects while harnessing related energies for social and spiritual development. The 'muted' operates on the personal level and is gender-oriented in its specificity. It concentrates on subverting gender arrangements which limit women in achieving optimal goals in personal and public spheres. The personal sphere, however, merges with the public in communal oriented cultures, where boundaries are almost invisible. The end result is a situation where the liberation at the personal level will enhance public development.

Nwapa's fiction captures the African worldview concerning multiple communalities, where female identity is defined by individual and communal interactions/identity. *Efuru* presents the life of an individual in a community and her effort to be different in the era of the slave trade. The womanist ideology is established in the economic independence of the female character as

an integral part of the socio-economic development of a nation. Thus, she succeeds in placing men and women in a cultural bond that is mutually dependent.

In *Efuru*, Nwapa metaphorically presents a literary exposition that challenges the male literary tradition predicated on the "blast of the canons" at the death of Efuru's father. It is an indication of a literary revolution that embodies a national discourse by men as well as women all in the spirit of the Lake woman. *Efuru*, as a pioneer novel of the emerging African womanist literature, offers criticisms of the gender and power structures of the Igbo society in Nigeria. The novel criticizes the choice of partners, roles of wifehood (bride price) and motherhood, childlessness, female economic relevance, spiritual rejuvenation, father/daughter and husband/wife relationships, and the Igbo political culture. These issues inform most of the aspects of the novel.

Efuru is the story of a young successful female merchant who elopes and marries Adizua, a man of her choice, against the will of her father and traditional marriage conventions (subverting patriarchal interference by exercising the 'stubbornness innate' in Igbo women). Even when the marriage fails to flourish, it is obvious in the novel that the author never insinuates that the failure has anything to do with Efuru's independent choice. By implication, she rejects the custom of forced marriage and categorically advocates freedom in the choice of a marriage partner. The failure of the marriage is caused by Adizua's faithless and irresponsible behaviour which is hereditary. It is traced to Adizua's father who married his wife, Ossai, the antithetical sister of Ajanupu, "as a woman was married in our days. He paid his bride price in full and performed all the customs of our people" (59). But he also abandoned his wife. In a similar fashion, Efuru's other conventionally sanctioned marriage with Gilbert-Eneberi failed. These

marriage portrayals show certain aspects of men in marital relationships. Nwapa, thus, canvasses for new insights, freedom and scope for women in marriage.

An advocation for women to seek happiness and fulfilment in life is central in *Efuru*. Efuru is not willing to "keep face" like Ossai, Adizua's mother; rather, she seeks other sources of happiness and fulfilment after two failed marriages and childlessness. The difference between these two women is that while Ossai maintains a complacent identity, Efuru moves out of disillusionment by confronting the dishonesty of her two husbands and challenging "the standard" or roles between males and females especially in marriage. She concludes that "marriage is like picking a parcel from numerous parcels. If you are lucky, you pick up a valuable one" (96).

The *mode operandi* of controlling the vitality and sexuality of women's identity and ensuring role divisions is through clitoridectomy, traditionally known as the "bath". This ritual is a traditional process believed to enhance child bearing, for as the novel suggests, any child born of a woman with her clitoris intact will become "unclear" (an imbecile) and the chances of its survival slim. Nwapa presents her story to depict the hardships and triumphs of the heroine. Yet, on closer reading this simple story deconstructs into a complex presentation that raises a number of questions about the status or identity of Efuru and the women in her world who undergo the "bath".

The efficacy of female circumcision or 'bath' becomes questionable concerning the fact that Efuru failed to conceive after undergoing the ritual. Does the ritual have any psychological implications? Was it the impetus that Efuru needed to worship *Uhamiri*, the woman of the lake? Do women in Africa like Efuru simply comply with such rituals because they are dictated by

tradition and enforced by the older women in the community (the enforcers of patriarchal authority) in order to overcome the fear of childlessness? *Efuru* provides answers to several of these questions like marriage issues like bride price, circumcision (bath) and in the end, the decision of the heroine to be a priestess of the lake goddess. The clitoridectomy, classified as genital mutilation, is a significant aspect of gender studies which is considered a process of subjecting the female sexual power and overturning her identity. Fatima Mernissi believes that clitoridectomy like the veil reduces women's sexuality and ensures their submission (148). Linda Strong-Leck adds that circumcision is required to keep women's sexual desires under control; however, men must remain in power sexually (539). Paula Bennett asserts that "the clitoridectomy is presumed beneficial for women and the society and Efuru is 'deadened' sexually or spiritually after the removal of her clitoris" (129-130).

The control of female sexual identity is elaborated through marriage rites and expectations. These include the payment of the bride price, a form of devaluing the worth of a woman as a wife and individual in marriage. Bride price is a traditional rite of marriage agreement that stamps the legality on the union between a man and a woman and their respective families. Efuru reversed this tradition by providing her own bride price when Adizua was unable to pay it. The novelist by this act insinuates that in a marriage agreement the payment of dowry should not be a male prerogative just as the choice in marriage should be left to the individuals.

Wifehood and childlessness are other areas of conflict and milestones to female transformation that emanate from the ritual of circumcision. They are some of the several obstacles that an African woman must face in order to attain respectability. Oftentimes in pre-colonial and

postcolonial African societies, female identity in terms of sexuality and sensuality is censored through early marriage and premature motherhood. Another form of censorship is through circumcision – the process of traditionally excising the sexuality (identity) of a woman physically and psychologically – it creates a disconnection in the physical act of contact or intercourse. Gayatri Spivak elaborates more on the issue of clitoridectomy:

> The pre-comprehended suppression or effacement of the clitoris relates to every move to define woman as a sex object, or as a means of reproduction – with no recourse to a subject function except in terms of those definitions or as imitators of men. (181)
>
> Investigating the clitoris's effacement is therefore a passage into understanding the historical and theoretical suppression of women … To the extent that male domination is based on women's sexual subordination to and within the family, the "excess" this organ represents – the excess of absolute sexual autonomy – is a threat to individual males and male rule generally. (118-19)

Efuru's circumcision is thus beyond the act of 'clearing' the woman, but to Bennett, it is "the desire within man to remain in control politically, economically, and sexually." According to Bennett, drawing upon Sigmund Freud's description of the 19th century traditional patriarchal societies in Europe, asserts that female sexuality is controlled to ensure an ordered society, that is, "actual clitoridectomy, medical assaults upon the clitoris were routinely performed… to control socially undesirable forms of female sexuality such as masturbation, lesbianism, and 'nymphomania'… It is only in rendering the clitoris accidental to female sexuality that complementarity is made possible" (130). In this case, taking on Helene Cixous, this condition makes women 'passive and men active' and the image of women described by Freud connote negativity in male perception and the female sexuality is absorbed into the "'uterine social organization' of family and state" (878). In this circumstance, she can never be what she wants –

independent and autonomous – but a subjected woman assisting in the maintenance of her compliance. This observation is further stressed by Okonjo Ogunyemi: "the 'bath' is a metaphorical cutting down to size, a reduction of an individual female power at the critical point when a woman is at the peak of her strength and moves into the marital sphere…" (138).

It is in this light that marriage and childbearing become traditional 'cover-ups' for the actualization of that compliance. Since the debut of *Efuru*, the status, position and responsibilities of womanhood especially in Igbo culture have not changed. Marriage is an aspect of womanhood and its essence is to procreate. Thus, the purpose of circumcision or 'bath,' according to the traditional women like Ajanupu in *Efuru*, is for marital bliss, particularly conception but critically, it is an act of female submission to male authority. The ritual of circumcision castrates Efuru in mind, spirit and body. She attains authority economically but is limited to a great extent by her aspiration to excel in the traditional responsibilities – marriage and motherhood. Efuru's inability to conceive two years into her marriage questions her 'femaleness' (and the 'truth' implied in circumcision). Her limitation or failure at motherhood is psychologically worsened by rumours that raise 'doubt' about her femininity. By implication, childlessness in Igbo society is deeper than the inability to conceive. It is like losing the biological label of woman. Womanhood and motherhood are therefore synonymous because a woman without a child is not considered a woman:

> A year passed, and no child came. Efuru did not despair. I am still young, surely God cannot deny me the joy of motherhood, she often said to herself. But her mother-in-law was becoming anxious … Neighbours talked as they were bound to talk. They did not see the reason why Adizua should not marry another woman since, according to them; two men do not live together. To them Efuru was a man because she could not reproduce. (*Efuru* 24)

Childlessness, which is as important as spirituality, creates a gap in human living cycles that must be maintained for constancy. Thus, Efuru regards conception as a 'success' beyond comprehension, a signifier in the definition of identity or the value of being married:

> Efuru lay there thinking of it all. 'Is this happening to me or someone I know? Is that baby mine or somebody else? Is it really true that I have had a baby, that I am a woman after all? Perhaps I am dreaming. I shall soon wake up and discover that it is not real. (*Efuru* 31)

The novel challenges the notion that womanhood should be defined by motherhood considering the psychological and emotional trauma that result from childlessness. The novel further assumes a distance from the act of woman against woman discrimination and Efuru's internalization of such discrimination through self-castigation. The discrimination often takes the form of gossip or chastisement like when Efuru and Gilbert-Eneberi went to the stream. While they were swimming, the people there began to gossip:

> 'Husband and wife, they are swimming together,' one woman began … 'seeing them together is not the important thing', another said. 'The important thing is that nothing has happened since the happy marriage. We are not going to eat happy marriage. Marriage must be fruitful. Of what use is it if your husband licks your body, worships you and buys everything in the market for you and you are not productive?'... 'Did you look at her body when she was changing?' one of the women asked. '… A woman, a wife for that matter, should not look glamorous all the time, and not fulfil the important function she is made to fulfil.' (*Efuru* 137-8)

Gossip is a major tool or weapon of chastisement against a barren woman or female infertility. It retards a woman's positive identity growth. It performs a symbolic function of what Patricia Meyer Spacks terms "voice of the world" (75). It is a repressive force which insists on the maintenance of patriarchal norms. Efuru is thus punished through gossip for deviating from 'the standard.' Nfah-Abbenyi and Juliana Makuchi also affirm the self-castigation and discrimination

that confront a childless woman in an African society. To them, "identity and motherhood are sites of struggle with motherhood often interwoven with or presented as an intrinsic or shifting component of women's identity" (37). When a woman fails to conceive, gossip is used to strip her of her sexual identity, while motherhood enhances that identity. Thus, like many African women writers, Nwapa reconstructs a female sexual identity to move beyond sexual difference in gender discourse. Efuru's identity, though biologically achieved at the initial experience of motherhood, can only be understood within the context of sexual politics, where motherhood is inscribed into the Igbo value system.

The essence of motherhood is traditionally for patrilineal continuity. The process of continuity is to maintain and promote a sex or gender system that transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity. Efuru's identity as a wife is premised on her ability to maintain continuity through her fertility, and this gives her value. Female identity in the Igbo value system is achieved through reproduction and procreative capacities; marriage and child-bearing legitimize male-female relationships either in traditional or modern contexts. These further domesticate women and being fertile makes someone a 'woman' and a 'man.'

Failure to bear children "for one's husband" is a disadvantage that implies a loss of identity. Adrienne Rich has criticized the devastating effects of institutionalized motherhood, asserting that a "woman's body is the terrain on which patriarchy is erected" (55). Her argument is that motherhood, for women, should be by choice. But her view is drawn from the Western perspective. Efuru's childlessness is premised on the institutionalized psychic condition of Africans. Filomena Steady, however, approaches the issue appropriately. To her, the most

important role that women play in African traditional society is that of motherhood because it is central to all other roles. She adds that, "even in strictly patrilineal societies, women are important as wives and mothers since their reproductive capacity is crucial to the maintenance of the male lineage, (thus) it is because of women that men can have lineage at all" (15). One could say at this juncture that the struggle for control over women's reproductive and child bearing capacities becomes the parameter for acknowledging their value. Efuru epitomizes the enslavement of women through the cultural expectations of wifehood and motherhood. Women like Efuru are not only enslaved by their gender but by tradition as well. Several African or Nigerian female writers have focused emphatically on this issue of enslavement. Buchi Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood*, Zaynab Alkali's *The Stillborn*, Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* among others have fictionally addressed the issue of enslavement. Through their heroines, these writers question the multiple expectations and varying contradictions and yearnings that have gradually shaped the female sense of Self – sons or male supremacy over daughters or female without which patriarchy cannot be sustained. The only channel of self-discovery out of these contradictions is spirituality.

The supernatural force of *Uhamiri*, adopted by Nwapa, becomes a trope for Efuru to rise above her subjected Self and the myths of marriage and motherhood. Efuru, in moving into a relationship with *Uhamiri* redefines and gives expression to the inner recesses of being female by indicating that freedom begins with seeking one's happiness and "rejecting the patriarchal glorification of motherhood" (Nancy Bazin 50). Nwapa creates a disconnection between her protagonist and her antagonists, the patriarchal society, by subverting norms to become a non-conformist.

Through the structural strategy of defining female identity in the Igbo society, Nwapa moves her protagonist from the private domain of subjugation to the public arena of transformation. Efuru foregrounds the private identity and emerges in the public through her desires and choices to redefine her identity and sexuality. The circumstances of her essentially private life and condition snowballs her into public roles as a result of her desire to live a life of dignity. In a chat with Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo, Nwapa defended her representation of Efuru which was not intended to subvert tradition in the feminist sense but to tell a good story (90). In another interview with Marie Umeh, Nwapa rejects the critics' tag of being a radical feminist. Rather, she insists that "I try to project the image of women positively. I attempt to correct our men folks when they started writing, when they wrote little or less about women, where the female characters are prostitutes and ne'er-do-wells ... I try to paint a positive picture about women … who are very, very independent, and very, very industrious" (69). Thus, in order to break the shackles of traditional mores, Nwapa makes her heroine escape by establishing her independence through the powerful woman deity.

Uhamiri is presented as an agent of success, economic independence, love, peace and healing. The fictionalization of *Uhamiri* by Nwapa portrays her as a prototype of all independent women and an example of what childless women should aspire to. She is presented as a protector of women (and men), and in some cases, husbands of chosen ones like Efuru. Thus, Efuru as a chosen priestess of *Uhamiri* always had visions of the woman of the lake:

> Efuru slept soundly that night. She dreamt of the woman of the lake, her beauty, her long hair and her riches. She had lived for ages at the bottom of the lake. She was as old as the lake itself. She was happy, she was wealthy. She was beautiful. She gave women beauty and wealth but she had no child. She had never

> experienced the joys of motherhood. Why then did women worship her? (*Efuru* 221)

Efuru dreams of the Lake Goddess, the 'Patron Saint' of women and in her sleep passes silently to the next level of her life. Hereafter, she will serve the Lake Goddess, *Uhamiri*, the symbol of beauty, wealth and fertility, even though she never had children herself. Being childless causes Efuru grief and suffering in the hands of fallible men and women, including her mother-in-law and her two husbands. She becomes the priestess of *Uhamiri* by moving from the private sphere to the public, opposing male oppression and the worrisome women who act as men's agents to perpetuate the public or private hierarchies and sexual stereotypes. As Efuru moves from 'silence' and 'private' to 'voice' and 'public,' she readjusts her roles as a woman and renegotiates the limits of her sexuality and reality. This movement significantly connotes a protest in Nwapa's text which many critics like Marie Umeh, Ebele Eko, and Susan Arndt among others, regard as radical. Efuru's decision to live a public life of spirituality as a woman transcends the family and the world of men. Her decision is labelled 'desire' by Shivaji Sengupta. According to Sengupta, desire is the energy, a vector with direction and purpose. In fiction, desire unfolds in the theme and the author's style. It is regarded as the energy of the characters, which informs their movement (553). This desire transcends oppositions and obstacles and often lies in the writer's language. Through the structure of the novel, Nwapa explores two aspects of desire from a rigidly closed pattern: thematic socio-cultural structure and literary constructs.

The thematic socio-cultural structure indicates displacement. Nwapa uproots Efuru from a private life to a public life – displaced from her location as daughter in the house. However, this

displacement leads to a transition and Efuru's discovery of a new vista as a priestess – with a new home and identity. Sengupta asserts that the protagonist finding a "voice" in the public domain is also a sign of transition from the private to the public (554). As the daughter of Nwashike Ogene, "the mighty man of valour" (11), Efuru's sign of transition is first initiated by her falling in love with Adizua, a poor fatherless man. The novel opens on a note of love and defiance, leading to elopement due to the differences in family status of the couple:

> It was after the festival in which young men and young women looked for wives and husbands that Efuru first met Adizua. Adizua asked her to marry him and she agreed. One moonlit night, they went out. They talked of a number of things, their life and their happiness. Efuru told him that she would drown herself in the lake if he did not marry her… Efuru … Went home very happy and slept...
>
> It's late, Efuru, where are you coming from?" one of her cousins asked her as she was opening the gate of the compound.
>
> "Don't you see the moon?"
>
> 'Is that the reason why you should come home late? I shall tell your father. A young woman like you should not be out so late."
>
> "I don't care whom you tell." (*Efuru* 7)

Nwapa uses language and thematic structure to represent desire, displacement and integration, which are subsumed into two locations: the private and the public (Sengupta, 554). Efuru's fateful utterance to her cousin sets the thematic process of desire and displacement towards transition by integration. She unconsciously pre-empts her desire, displacement and opposition or transition early in life. Her defiant response voices rejection of stereotypes and pre-empts the transition into the public domain where she becomes the priestess of *Uhamiri.*

Her other stage of transition involves clitoridectomy (bath) and motherhood. Both are traditional expectations of an African woman in her private domain. It is justified by certain beliefs, such as

procreation of a male child as captured in the conversation between Efuru, her mother-in-law and Omeifeaku, the local operator of clitoridectomy and an agent of men's perpetuation and hierarchies:

> "Do you know Nwakaego's daughter? ..."
> "She did not have her bath before she had that baby who died after that dreadful flood….their folly cost them a son, a good son." (*Efuru* 14)

The next stage of her transition is the rejection of stereotypes after the 'bath.' After her 'bath' Efuru shows off her new status, identity and value, but more importantly, she rejects the confinement that goes with it. She wants to dress up and go with her mother-in-law to the market to trade:

> So on Nkwo day, Efuru dressed gorgeously. She plaited her lovely hair very well, tied velvet to her waist and used aka stones for her neck. Her body was bare showing her beautiful breasts. No dress was worn when a young woman went to the market after the period of feasting. Her body was exposed so that people saw how well her mother or her mother-in-law had cared for her. A woman who was not beautiful on that day would never be beautiful in her life. (*Efuru* 18)

Nwapa structures tradition with the characteristic bold nature of Efuru. The last part of the quotation above is a cultural signature informing readers of the beauty that is attained in the rite of womanhood. Within the setting of the novel, circumcision is not an abnormality, but a cultural identity that enhances the value and security of Igbo women, even though it is considered to hinder sexual pleasure. It is regarded as an enhancement of beauty and sexuality in Nwapa's patriarchal society. This assumption is buttressed in the outward radiance of Efuru and her temporary joy of motherhood with the birth of Ogonim. However, as her value as a woman increases so does her consciousness. Her transition is captured in her desire to go public rather than stay confined. "… We have not paid the dowry yet" (*Efuru* 18), Efuru says referring to the bride price Adizua is required to pay her father, which is the excuse she needs to go public

immediately after the 'bath.' Consequently, Efuru goes to the market to raise money for her dowry.

Nwapa artistically merges the private or conventionality with the public or unconventionality in the characteristic boldness of Efuru. She inadvertently asserts that circumcision is not necessarily about sexuality, but the expression of family and communal love and wealth. Nwapa's perspective of the 'bath' is not in the pleasure that it denies which is a main concern of Western critics and some African ones, but in the traditional value it adds to female identity in terms of beauty and procreativity. Thus, in order to shift attention from the patriarchal connotative sexuality or the promiscuity it portends, she makes Adizua disappear. His disappearance empowers Efuru and provides more space for an expression of her value as a homemaker as she cares for her mother-in-law, Ogonim, her daughter, and her young maid, Ogea. Nwapa's motif is to distinguish between women's economic empowerment and the ineffectiveness of men, who draw upon tradition for their significance. Susan Arndt observes:

> Though the novel shows no man to have changed for the better, it emphasizes that there are different types of men. Accordingly, men are not condemned as a group, and no man is given an entirely negative portrayal. Instead (only) single characteristics of individual men are criticized more or less strongly. It is chiefly those attributes of men such as dishonesty, unreliability, infidelity, mendacity, the unwillingness to treat women as equal in rights and status ... that are brought under the acerbity of Nwapa's criticism. (103)

The failure of the men is paradoxically exploited by the heroine in her transition from the private to the public. One major fact in Efuru's relationship with men is that, in spite of her failures with the men in her marriage, not all men are as ineffective like Adizua and Eneberi. Efuru's father is one of such men presented in positive light and her doctor friend. They treat women with respect, and the latter is faithful to his wife whom Efuru narrates her story.

Uhamiri, the river goddess of Ogwuta, is employed by Nwapa as an empowerment trope for women. The lake woman thus becomes the unconventional refuge outside convention who grants space to redefine personal identity. Through the lake woman, Efuru gains respect and dignity as she steps outside the private world of the stereotype to the public domain as the priestess of the lake woman. This justifies the view that motherhood and wifehood are merely means to prescribed ends. Hence, the lake goddess becomes an alter-ego for women like Efuru.

Uhamiri is a model of a successful woman. She is strong, ageless, rich and powerful. She is married to the Great River Okita. Okonjo Ogunyemi draws a connection between the union of the deities and the marriage institution in patriarchal society: "Nwapa is advocating a different type of marriage – the reintegration and rehabilitation into society of industrious women through the womanist ideals of tolerance and mutual understanding of each individual's worth" (140). By fictionalizing Ogbuide as *Uhamiri*, Nwapa portrays the deity as the prototype of all independent women and an example of what women, particularly childless ones, should aspire to.

Efuru, the protagonist, is strong-willed, intelligent strikingly beautiful, the apple of her husband's eye, and pure like the woman of the lake. Underneath however, something weighs Efuru down (18-19). She is worried by the traditional definition of her femaleness, even after she proves her fertility by submitting to excision and procreation. Nwapa, through her, raises pertinent questions about the pragmatic value of women in the society. Whether women really find 'joy' by escaping traditional or societal roles dictated by both patriarchy and the community of older women? The answers to such issues are fictionalised in Efuru's spiritual relationship with *Uhamiri*. Her personal identity and value are transformed outside convention in the world of *Uhamiri*. There, she remains single but becomes a public personality with pragmatic relevance to the

development of her community, so that she that is rejected within the private limitations of tradition is ironically accepted within the public expanse of development. At this stage, Efuru experiences freedom and completeness, something her husbands could not achieve. She becomes the centre of the community's indigenous spiritual lives. Efuru's decision to dedicate herself to the service of the goddess, even in the midst of her marriage to Gilbert (Eneberi), articulates her intense dedication to the woman's spirit that the childless goddess represents.

She now commands her destiny. Pragmatically, Nwapa's *Efuru* offers ways in which women can thrive while changing societal attitudes. It must be noted that men also revere *Uhamiri* as a deity (201). The rhetorical question at the end of *Efuru*: "why then did the women worship her?" (221) finds an answer in Nwapa's other novels like *The Lake Goddess* with Ona, the voice of the voiceless women, speaking for the all-powerful woman of the lake:

> Ogbuide wants all women to have voices. Women should not be voiceless. Ogbuide hates voiceless women, said Ona. This is why the goddess whom I serve calls certain women to be her priestesses. She communicates with her fellow women. (*The Lake Goddess* 241)

It is in this 'fellow woman' that Efuru finds a new identity safe from the stereotype. Within the spiritual realm she does not need to subordinate her desires to those of men. Ernest Emenyonu also affirms that the "new woman" of Nwapa resembles the essence, the mystical *Uhamiri* which manifests a paradoxical mixture of motherly tenderness and masculine fierceness. Okonjo Ogunyemi in *African Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novels by Women*, however, views Flora Nwapa's artistry from a political point of view. Nwapa's artistry captures the evolution of Nigeria through the changing status of a woman. To her, the political awakening in the 1930s

following the South-Eastern women's struggle (Aba Women's Riot of 1929) is manifested through the spirited Efuru (144-145).

Positivism, Acculturation and (Dis) Empowerment of "Joys of Motherhood" in Nwapa's *One is Enough*

One is Enough has been criticized as a radical African feminist novel that breaks traditional and social conventions so the protagonist can attain self-actualization. Radicalism in this sense means being unconventional, that is breaking the penal or traditional codes of human or societal relations. In the context of African gender discourse, it is an unconventional maxim that proposes the individualism of the Western feminist consciousness. The notion of individualism, of course, runs contrary to the communal nature of the African cultural perspective on gender discourse. To Katherine Frank in "Women without Men: Novels in Africa", radicalism implies individualism proffering a gender resolution of "a world without men" (34).

However, radicalism within the cultural context of African womanism is drawn from Alice Walker's 'Womanism,' which asserts that, "a womanist is a black feminist or feminist of colour… committed to survival (but who) loves herself and the folk" (12). This statement in the African context implies commitment to the culture and to the people; the perception of Self is important especially with the woman being the "agent of her own change or freedom," the perception of Self must result in self-actualization.

Womanism focuses on the female condition as it offers opportunities and choices to women and yet advocates individual strength in mind and body drawn from self respect and self-reliance. The African womanist concept is closely related to African feminism from which Filomena

Steady draws up the contact point in her definition to include "female autonomy and co-operation… the centrality of children, multiple mothering and kinship" (12).

One is Enough reflects many of the concerns in *Efuru* and *Idu*, but with an urban or contemporary setting. The novel is set in the period after Nigeria's independence and the civil war. The main character, Amaka, like her predecessors, is a strong and industrious woman. She is good at business but is childless and in a marriage that restricts her. When she is thrown out of her marriage in Onitsha by her mother-in-law and Amaka decides to move to Lagos. Her life in Lagos details her growth where she turns her skills in "attack trade" during the war to gain business contracts in the capitalist post-colonial Nigeria. In the process, she seduces a priest and gets pregnant. However in the end, she decides that one marriage or husband is enough and, like Efuru, ends up independent and fulfilled.

One is Enough, like many of Flora Nwapa's fiction reflects Okonjo Ogunyemi's definition of African Womanism (in Susan Arndt 39). It acknowledges the centrality of children in the Nigerian culture which must be preserved. Most importantly is the focus on self-actualization and complementarity between men and women in order to attain a societal connection and harmony. The guiding principle fundamental to this proposal is an awareness empowered by education and self-reliance, and the elimination of stereotypes against women such as: compulsory motherhood, women against women, economic dependency etc. Nwapa's novels including *One is Enough* are thus channels through which these limitations are reconstructed. Reconstructing the female identity by demystifying the stereotypes, Nwapa represents a

positivist image of women through the heroine's response to issues of female crises, and communal attitudes towards the female identity.

Acculturation, embedded in positivism, is seen as the process of breaking the cultural *status quo* and inverting the aims of tradition. Being acculturated implies being branded an iconoclast, a deviant or westernized or being indifferent to culture. The point is that in the discourse of gender or female identity in Africa, the influence of Western culture on African traditional landscape or locus due to colonisation is undeniable. Both exist conjointly: women's subjugation or empowerment and cultural imperialism. For example, if a woman is complacent with her lot, then she is the ideal traditional woman; but if she asserts herself, that is, if she kicks against tradition, then she is a deviant, un-African and acculturated.

Flora Nwapa's presentation is a contemporary African womanist negotiation between tradition and modernization. *One is Enough* pitches traditional ideology against Western philosophy. By a process of subversion of 'authority,' Nwapa inverts the interpretive process of positivism and acculturation as a context of what Frank calls 'necessity.' The image of a female character considered deviant and westernized through 'moral' and 'self' awakening is presented as the womanist strategy for confronting male domination. Also, it must be noted that what is 'moral' in the patriarchal society is a prescription of male control and reality. In essence, positivism and acculturation are presented in this textual discussion as positive approaches to proffer solutions to problems faced by women in a sexist society. In a fashion often considered radical and pro-Western (acculturation), Nwapa distils her womanist praxis, which includes her acceptance of single parenthood and marital separation where it becomes necessary in the contemporary Nigeria. She acculturates Alice Walker's womanist philosophy of individual development with

the African notion of complementarity and conciliation, rather than the Western individualism and separation. Inadvertently, radicalism finds its way into the reconstruction of an African female image that results in "no holds barred" where conciliation becomes impossible.

Characteristically, Nwapa's heroines are victims of societal, traditional and patriarchal oppressions, but she turns their oppression and hysteria into radical instrument of change. Within her womanist praxis is a radical agenda that calls for a change on the scale of power in sexual and gender politics through defined purposes. As a result, her characters are more vociferous as they move from failure to Selfhood and a new consciousness. Her notion of a new consciousness is hinged on a complementary relationship through dialogue between men and women. However, her main focus is an educational and economic empowerment of women as the parameters for negotiation or complementary relationship.

In the search for a sustainable balance between communalism and individualism, Nwapa focuses on the theme of childlessness in marriage especially in Igbo land; mothers-in-law who embody traditional/patriarchal values, urbanization and traditionalism; the impact of colonialism on tradition and urbanization, as well as the transformation of the society with its women. Symbolically, facing all odds, Nwapa's heroine captures the evolution of Nigeria (Africa) on her gradual move towards the national and international reconstitution through the emerging status of women. The destiny of women merges with the evolution of the community and the level of consciousness exhibited by the characters.

One is Enough, like *Efuru*, is a narrative of emancipation of the female Self from 'shadows' and 'impotence.' Like Efuru, Amaka, the heroine of *One is Enough* is significantly transformed after

her failed attempt to submit to conventional roles and expectations. The novel is framed as a provocative, subversive text that aims at reinterpreting and reconstructing the conventional notions of women's radical and positive (dis)empowerment. In a radical process of womanism, the writer sets to relocate, uncover and correct the shocking and disturbing 'truths' about women's conditions of power and disempowerment in a post-independent society. The process of revealing the 'truths' of disempowerment and power is through portrayals of men as victims of their own moral values. The female characters, in search of their identity, become predators in traditional and contemporary spheres by reframing the tortured images of women as the oppressed silent victims of male power. The men are turned victims by the female power of sexuality. However, this (womanist) representation is attained by allowing the heroine to experience two different worlds: conventional (tradition) and unconventional (modern). To this end, the journey motif is used as an expression of the movement from one location to another in the subsequent process of (dis)empowerment. Tess Onwueme analyzing Cornel West's *Race Matters* reconfigures "the Aniocha Igbo mythic vision of the world as a market place" on his comments on post-modern culture of "gangster mentalities and self destructive wantonness engulf us all" (10), is no means discriminatory, nor gender specific. This implies that women are not excluded, and like their male counterparts, they share in their gift of being carriers of (en) gendering and violence (292).

Implied in this argument of a 'market place' culture is selfhood which theoretically defines the womanist concept of empowerment. By virtue of their search for fulfilment within conventional or unconventional worlds, both men and women are driven by personal interest to gain power compelled by factors such as competition that on occasions create tensions and conflicts. Tess

Onwueme in order to buttress her 'market place' analysis examines Chimalum Nwankwo's assumption about the Igbo cosmic order on dual existence and concludes that his argument is inadequate:

> The Igbo world is a world of fluid dualities, and the pragmatics of existence derives from those dualities. The flexible relationship between man and woman, between human being and their 'Chi' or guardian spirits, between society in general and other metaphysical entities and realms indicate a world that is never closed in terms of meaning and possibilities. To understand what Nwapa has done with that specific reality, we cannot afford to read the world in isolation and see the lake goddess merely as 'a goddess of contradiction': Contradiction denies the Igbo sense of wholeness… the spirit of the healthy paradoxes. (294)

This argument concurs with the male-female relationship as a market-place platform for survival (negotiation for survival). In Nwankwo's assumption on the principle of dualism, Onwueme recognizes "the healthy paradox" but negates the "possibilities of tensions and conflicts." She opines that "the dialectics or negotiation" does not necessarily foreclose "the spirit of healthy paradox," but inspires "the spirit of tragic paradox" (294). Her argument is based on reconstructing the disempowered women, not as losers but as gainers especially in market place competition. The market place notion in this case is symbolically inverted as the playground for the negotiation of identity that involves both men and women. It must be recalled that Igbo women have always been players in the socio-political structure of their communities. For instance in *Efuru*, the heroine is involved in trading in the colonial period and *One is Enough* presents post-independence Igbo women in market place. The 'market place' culture of the Igbo women represented in *One is Enough* is seen by Florence Stratton as the agentic or productive nature of African women. These indicators present women as significant agents and share-holders in the market forces and values of change and power. At some point in Stratton,

however, negotiation for identity is equated with prostitution. Prostitution is a stereotypical image of women from the male perspective, but which Florence Stratton invertedly justifies in her representation of women as a condition of necessity.

At the opening of the novel, Amaka desires the traditional/conventional role of being married:

> Amaka had always wanted to be married. She envied married people and when at last Obiora decided to marry her, she was on top of the world. She was going to show everybody that a woman's ambition was marriage, a home that she could call her own, a man she would love and cherish and children to crown the marriage. (*One is Enough* 1)

The novel opens on tragic notes with the loss of selfhood and barrenness, which are recurring themes in Flora Nwapa's literary corpus. From the beginning, Amaka discovers early that a woman has no home she (can) call her own unless she builds a house for herself, and that loving and cherishing a man means a loss of one's identity, that is, subjugation, self-abnegation and humiliation, especially for a childless woman. So, when Obiora thinks Amaka is unruly, "he beats her and point(s) an accusing finger at her and call(s) her a whore" (23). For her failure to have a child, he declares her 'barren' and takes another wife. Because she is childless, he reads her the riot act that: she must not "raise (her) voice in this house" (19). "If you step out of this house in protest," he adds, "you stay out forever" (20). Disempowered of her identity and human rights, Amaka's marriage headed for annulment. She then realizes that the traditional belief in children as the crown of marriage is deep-rooted. She also awakes to the limitations in the conventional roles of being married and considers the possibility of other options for human fulfilment:

> Was there no other fulfilment for her? Could she not be happy in the real sense of the word, just by having men friends who were not husbands? (22)

Thereafter, she decides to break the bounds of marriage:

> She would leave and set up home somewhere. She would live a single and respected life… She would find fulfilment she would find pleasure, even happiness in being a single woman. The erroneous belief that without a husband a woman was nothing must be disproved. (23-24)

At this juncture, Amaka becomes the contemporary dual-image of Efuru in expressing her decision and desire. Both women make life-changing decisions toward positive growth. So, at the age of 30, Amaka sets off to Lagos "to start life again" (38), after her rejection at home and in marriage:

> Mother, forgive me,' she heard herself saying, it will not happen again… please, don't throw me away mother. (1)

Her decision to "start life again" is a process of emancipation through mobility that symbolizes a new definition of selfhood – the empowerment of women through economic 'theology' and Western education. The heroine undertakes a position of change or acculturation through her personal decision to conquer cultural taboos that subject her to a voiceless being. This odyssey enables her to voice her confusion and confront her obstacles. However, Amaka's relocation and venture into the world of business dislocates the system of 'subjectivity,' not by subversion but by transcendence of illumination. Amaka's transformation is commended by Katherine Frank as a condition of necessity for positive change in a newly independent society. She sees her identity transformation as a "painful faltering but ultimately successful movement from traditional roles to westernized urban life" (18). One major result of the strategy of inverting the *status quo* and dislocating 'subjectivity' is that the male counterparts who thrive on traditional patriarchal norms and the institution of rural control are proved to be ignorant of women's strategy; thus, they become victims of their own strategy or desire. The result is the disempowerment of men and the

empowerment of the women through the social instrument of education and economic 'theology.'

As the men continue to assume that they still have control of the social institution, the economic empowerment of Amaka in Lagos creates a disempowerment of a male counterpart like Obiora and Fr. McLaid by her use of a pestle to hit Obiora on the head and her rejection of Fr. McLaid's marriage proposal. The disempowerment strategy is the "Cash Madam Club" that creates new stages of power for elevation and promotion. The club becomes the symbol of dynamism in trade, buying, selling, producing and contracting businesses, both legal and illegal.

Drawing upon Nwapa's female economic empowerment paradigm, Tess Onwueme calls the strategy "attack trade":

> Amaka went on with her business in Onitsha, supplying timber, sand and food. She was a contractor, one of the numerous female contractors who had sprung up during and at the end of the war. Before the war, she was a teacher. At the end of the war, because she took part in the attack trade, she rediscovers herself. (4)

Adaobi, Amaka's friend and one of the three musketeers at the "Cash Madam Club" also earns her economic empowerment through trading. Economically, she disempowers her husband:

> She was putting up a bungalow in Ikeja on the plot of land bought without saying a word to her husband. Amaka had helped her do one or two contract jobs she got herself and they shared the profit. (80)

For Amaka, in spite of the economic strength she acquired in the "attack trade" and her "sterling qualities" at domesticity, hard work and a flourishing business that contributes to her household comfort, her development in identity is delayed until the symbolic journey to Lagos. The reason for this delay may be as a result of her early exposure to Western culture, a victim of imported culture and the notion of gender ideology of the British system. She is a product of Western

colonial education or acculturation and lacks orientation in traditional norms regarding womanhood. Thus, Amaka develops late in the traditional womanist culture because of the dictates of the missionaries, "the good missionaries (who) had emphasized chastity and marriage and the home" (11), justifying her dream to be married at the beginning of the novel. Nwapa represents contrastively the two cultural identities, the traditional and the Western in *One is Enough* and the impact of each on the development or empowerment of her characters. On the one hand, Amaka who is acculturated by the Western missionary education and virtues becomes a victim of traditional expectations that result in her failed marriage. On the other hand, Amaka's mother and aunt who are steeped in tradition depict the inner Igbo women's psyche in relation to Self and the finance. Educated women like Amaka are less confident and self-reliant in their youth than older ones like their mothers. Amaka's mother and aunt like Efuru, the eponymous heroine, portray traditional notions of self-reliance, courage and confidence. Amaka's mother and aunt encourage her towards a womanist consciousness when they advise her to be "financially independent of her husband by endeavouring to be successful in business." A clear summation of the impetus behind the female identity in Nwapa's novel is self-determination. Towards this goal Filomena Steady also advocates that "true feminism is the abnegation of male protection and a determination to be resourceful and self-reliant" (in Ebele Eko et al 81). Thus, Amaka's "attack trade" becomes her channel of independence, strength and identity.

In addition to the "attack trade," sexuality becomes another means of self-reliance and subsequent preference for an independent life to wifehood. To Amaka's mother, self-determination and motherhood are the essence of African women (23). So Amaka's journey to Lagos reveals that the place is "a jungle [for] the survival of the fittest" that must be ready to

"move [in] for the kill." She empowers herself through her sexuality drawing upon the essence of her mother's teaching that her sexuality is a source of empowerment which a woman must exploit in a male-dominated society. This lesson brings to mind the "Aba Women's Riot" of 1929 where women exploited their sexuality in the traditional sense to drive home their grievances. The public display of their sexuality (breasts) during the protest against taxation is a traditional expression of rejection or a curse. This exploitation of sexuality as a channel of expression equates the empowerment of the female presence and the dis-empowerment of male domination, whether through colonialism or patriarchy. However, this sexual power of expression is often out of necessity. Amaka's mother, according to Katherine Frank, represents "traditional African values" connoting patriarchal values. To her, marriage is of secondary importance and the colonial dictates of "virtues" – chastity and faithfulness – are meaningless in the changed orientation of the society. This stance is initiated in Efuru, who upon realizing her sexual potency decides to focus on spirituality which further enhances her sexuality or identity. So, when Amaka fails to be impressed by her various suitors, her mother advised her to "make men friends and start thinking of having children" (11). In *Efuru*, the heroine after two failed marriages and a state of childlessness chooses a union with *Uhamiri*.

According to Tess Onwueme, the presence of overbearing mothers in the text is a strategy to challenge the belief by many feminists that women or mothers should use the absolute power that tradition confers on them to empower or dis-empower others, especially their sons (307). With the endowed maternal power of women, men are disempowered and cannot renegotiate the powers of motherhood. This assertion negates Frederick Engels' school which insists that male

domination displaced the rights of mothers during the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. He states that:

> The overthrow of the mother right was the world historic defeat of the female sex. The man seized the reins, in the house also, the woman was degraded, enthralled, and the slave of the man's lust, a mere instrument for breeding children ... This lowered the position of women … (which has become gradually embellished and dissembled …). (481)

The women's rights have however not entirely been eroded as stated by Engels, especially in the African traditional context. Rather, Nwapa's narrative in *One is Enough* portrays the endowment of women and (dis)empowerment of men through motherhood in mothers and mothers-in-law. Though Nwapa redefines female identity through Amaka's self-awareness, she (dis)empowers the men like Obiora and Fr. McLaid through the characters of Obiora's mother, Amaka's mother and her aunt. *One is Enough* significantly interrogates and represents the often ironic depiction of women by male writers as weak, docile and as victimized characters dominated by men. Interestingly, Nwapa uses motherhood to redefine female identity and the dominance of the male in marriage. The text provides the matrix of the womanist concept while challenging patriarchal (mis)presentations of motherhood politics.

Nwapa in contrast represents the tragic male alternative in Obiora and Fr. McLaid as the image of the Other who is confused, victimized, (dis)empowered and silenced by the heavy cloaks or presence of motherhood. In the reverse, patriarchy is framed as the victim of the traditional norms that confine the woman's role within the space of motherhood. In this manner, Nwapa shifts the paradigm of profit and loss of Igbo 'market trade' to produce a new balance of power through motherhood where men become losers and women profit in a positive shift in the redefinition of power. Invertedly, male power and identity are marked in female identity and

agency. This same paradigmatic shift in the balance of power is also captured in *Efuru* where Adizua is "feminized" just like Obiora and Fr. Izu McLaid in *One is Enough*. The subjection of patriarchy and the exposition of the power of tradition in *One is Enough* simply challenge the matriarchal roots of tradition that marginalise (wo)men, especially, in the Igbo enclave. For instance, Kamene Okonjo in "Dual-sex Systems in West Africa" asserts that because most West African societies are patrilineal, men tend to dominate the societies. Therefore, many observers conclude that the position of women in these societies was totally subordinate, and has resulted in the depiction of African men as "oppressive" and the women as "deprived" (45).

Tess Onwueme challenges Okonjo and other feminist summations that African women in patriarchal societies are marginalised. She refers to Gay Wilentz who observes that:

> The child is central to this matrifocal culture that Nwapa writes about and the woman – mother, grandmother, aunt, older sister – is the link between the child and community. Nwapa's novel, as a woman-centred *oraliterature*, focuses not merely on the woman's position as mother, but on her role in child-socialization and its implications for the community as a whole. (Wilentz 9-10)

Wilentz's view seems to be in agreement with Onwueme's argument; however Onwueme dissents from the feminist and womanist stance in witch-hunting men for women's subordinate image; after all, she argues, women are in charge of the education and initiation of the various girls into adulthood, though they are still limited in what they teach (10). As upholders of tradition, they are compelled to act out patriarchal scripts. Onwueme in this critique attempts to establish the agentic power of women within its own sphere and identity that not only preserves cultural norms and values, but also subjects men to the "tyranny" of matriarchy. It is this inversion of power and identity that Nwapa radically and positively focuses on. That is, the positivism in the identity of women in Igbo societies and the paradigm shifts in the power

balance. For instance, in *One is Enough*, Obiora's mother pushes him over and silences him, indicating the power of motherhood: "will you shut up and let your wife talk!" shouted Obiora's mother. "Who asked you to come here anyway? Please remove yourself from my room. Obiora left the room and the two women were alone" (2). This clearly indicates the displacement of Obiora in the power tussle between the two women, and he increasingly becomes an outsider as his mother takes charge and consolidates her power in his marriage (Onwueme 311).

Similarly, this dictatorial position of women is also unveiled by Nwapa in Amaka's aunt – a surrogate mother – who instructs Amaka on the choice of husband and the most important aspect of marriage (children): "What is important is not marriage as such, but children, being able to have them, being a mother" (8). Amaka later laments her inability to achieve this feat: "Only her fate played pranks. God had deprived her … the joy of being a mother" (20). First, Nwapa through Amaka's aunt focuses on the tradition that centralises children in marriage. This indicates that a woman without a child lacks complete identity. To this end, Onwueme highlights the relevance of some Igbo names like 'Nneka,' which mean 'mother is greater.' The question is: who is she greater than? Obviously, she is greater than the father, the silent figure. Thus, to Okonjo Ogunyemi (148), men are "feminized." *One is Enough* ensures there is no father figure or image, or deliberately subsumes male presence in the mother or female presence rendering him useless, reckless or irresponsible. Examples are Obiora and McLaid/Izu in *One is Enough*.

Amaka's aunt further magnifies the view that men are worthless with her statement: "I married a man I did not love. And in spite of the fact that I have my children, I have neither respect nor regard for my husband. You can see that, can't you?" (8). Her power and authority are attained by motherhood: "He has given me seven children. What else did I want?" (9). This increases

Amaka's yearn for the absolute power of definition through motherhood. Her concern, as the author signifies, is not with Obiora or her personal god or destiny (chi), but the positive (traditional) advantage in the joys of motherhood identity. The struggle to live the tradition by overlooking the virtues of missionary education to seek a man to father her children for her is deemed by Onwueme as an intra-gender conflict between Amaka and her powerful mother-in-law. In this contest, Obiora's mother delivers the ultimatum by substituting Obiora's voice with her own and raising the issues of women against women in intra-gender conflict. So, Amaka's mother-in-law negates the spirit of female-bonding or solidarity (*Ngambika*) in womanism:

> Whether you hear or not, it will end today. Everything will end today when I finish with you. The hold you have on my son will end today. Do you hear me? I have waited for six years, and I cannot wait for even one day more. Didn't you see how I hushed up Obiora when he came in to interfere? ... But I know he takes after his useless father ... if my son heard me, if he listened to me, his house would have been full of children by now. (13)

In spite of her sterling qualities, Amaka's marriage is annulled. Obiora rebels against his mother by regaining his voice and challenging her authority (82) to seek reconciliation with Amaka:

> Amaka is about to go back to Lagos and I heard she has got a lawyer to start divorce proceedings. I don't want that, Mother. I hear she is very wealthy now. ... She could be very useful to me. I want her, Mother. I am miserable without her. (92)

Obiora represents "everyman" who suffers victimization from mothers or women as a result of the privileges of motherhood represented by Amaka and his mother.

The baseline of this critique is that it is not just through urban migration and education that Amaka earns her empowerment but also through motherhood; a feat her alter ego, Efuru experienced only briefly. To her, motherhood is power. This is seen in the ability of Obiora's mother and Amaka's aunt to silence the men. Their intention, however, is to motivate Amaka in

her quest for motherhood by any means possible. Nwapa in *One is Enough* depicts Igbo women in contexts of identity enclosed within experiences of motherhood and female empowerment economically and educationally.

To resolve the narrative tension of decision and desire in the experience of empowerment through motherhood, Nwapa shifts the quest to the Lagos metropolis. The urban migration creates the ambience for exploitation, negotiation and the redefinition of identity: "Lagos was good for her, Lagos was kind to her ... She had not come to Lagos to be a whore. She had come to Lagos to look for her identity, to start all over again ... (45). The urban lure of the heroine to Lagos is not to create a platform for sexual negotiation or to interrogate male texts, such as, Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana*, Soyinka's *Season of Anomy* and Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*; rather, it focuses on the empowerment of women. Unlike Ekwensi and Ngugi, Nwapa does not judge her character for trading in sex. Rather, she rewards her with wealth and children. Florence Stratton however, argues that *One is Enough* is an interrogation of male texts on definitions of female identity through sexual negotiation (103). Nwapa's representation of female identity may indeed have an embedded sexual negotiation, but it results from necessity. *One is Enough* undermines the trend where male writers represent women as immoral characters. Prostitution in Nwapa's characters results from necessity, and cannot be expressly equated with women identity generally, especially in the changing phase of the society from tradition to modernity. Reacting to this, Katherine Frank raises the question: "how can the contemporary African woman negotiate her way between the claims of tradition and modernization? …" (18). On one side is Amaka's mother and aunt representing and asserting the patriarchal values of the African society; on the other side, Amaka represents the image of a new woman in the Lagos Metropolis.

Her migration to Lagos is a narrative confrontation with the realities of contemporary life which includes prostitution as a mean of empowerment. As such, she figures out her choice or desire and pursues it with determination. Her determination contradicts Maryse Conde's assumption that Flora Nwapa's female characters are stereotypes of wasted or destroyed personalities (134).

Amaka's development or empowerment also questions the moral codes of conduct in a newly independent nation plagued by corruption, "bottom power" and other illegal survival strategies. These moral codes become the trope for her success story which started in her desire and decision to find her identity. Her desire and decision for independence and empowerment pre-empt the narrative: Firstly, she disproves the belief that "without a husband, a woman is nothing" and that her rightful place is in the kitchen. Secondly, she sets the stage for emancipation at all costs for "Lagos opened her eyes and she began to see what she could do as a woman, using her bottom power, as they say in Nigeria" (120). Thirdly, she depicts the new African woman who is a blend of traditional and modern expectations that include motherhood, career and personal independence. Thus, Amaka (dis)empowers patriarchy (the pestle attack on Obiora) and empowers Self through the "cash madam club" syndrome prevalent in the 1970s whose members acquire economic status through "bottom power" or "attack trade."

Amaka's empowerment strategy in the city provides her social security. Parts of the strategy are: telling functional lies, displaying wealth, and sleeping with Alhaji and a Catholic priest, Father Izu McLaid. Amaka had finally arrived (82). Father McLaid becomes an instrument of actualization. For example, she uses Father McLaid, whom she met through Mike and Adaobi, for fun and profit. For one, he uses his power to secure contract for her from the military, where contract fee is taken by the Brigadier (77). Soon she is able to return Obiora's dowry. Her life in

Lagos is a process of actualizing her female identity. For using her "bottom power" (120-1), Amaka is not condemned by Nwapa for the act. In no time, she actualizes her motherhood identity by the birth of twin boys fathered by the Catholic priest, McLaid. He decides to leave the priesthood and marry her, but she rejects the offer:

> I don't want to be a wife anymore, a mistress yes, with a lover, yes of course, but not a wife. There is something in that word that does not suit me. I am never free. I am a shadow of myself. As a wife, I am impotent. I am in prison, unable to advance in body and soul. Something gets hold of me as a wife and destroys me. When I rid myself of Obiora, things started working out for me. I don't want to go back to the "wifely" days. No, I am through with husbands. I said farewell to husbands the first day I came to Lagos. (127)

Her act of rejecting marriage marks her deliberate choice of female independence and freedom in post-independence Nigeria. Critics, however, view Amaka's purported empowerment of freedom as a "bottom power" negotiation. Katherine Frank asserts that "bottom power" is a shrewd kind of prostitution. This means that Amaka's success is questionable and undermines the validity of her success (21). Frank, however, defended her assertion by arguing that Amaka's use of "bottom power" is done out of necessity. Frank's shift in opinion moves Amaka from the male writers' classification of independent 'post-colonial' women as prostitutes as portrayed by Cyprian Ekwensi and Ngugi. Nwapa actually inverts the idea of prostitution by subverting the status of figures like Jagua Nana, Iriyise and Wanja. Another critic, Patricia Ruddy in Florence Stratton justifies Amaka's involvement in prostitution as a necessity (12, 103). In the novel, the heroine defends herself: "You know Lagos. No man can do for a woman … without asking for her precious possession – herself" (67-8). Thus, by using her "bottom power" to negotiate for the power of acknowledgement and empowerment, Amaka (dis)empowers the men; even though it is in Lagos. Rather than give herself for nothing, she uses what they desire to get what she wants. It

becomes a strategy for confronting male domination. So, just as Father McLaid empowers her identity as a woman, he and Alhaji actualize her economic freedom. Each man however, becomes a victim of (dis)empowerment by his own male demands and desires. The reconstruction of power thus renders men the Other at the margin; this reversal of power or destiny is shared by Obiora, Father McLaid and Mike, Adaobi's husband.

Unlike Jagua Nana in *Jagua Nana*, Wanja in *Petals of Blood* and Iriyise in *Season of Anomy*, Amaka, the alter-ego of Efuru, takes up and acts out her constitutional rights to dignity, personal liberty and freedom from discrimination in order to reconstruct her identity. The urban setting of Lagos enables the positive assertion of rights and identity by playing the games of marital infidelity, rejection, corruption, oppression and religious pretentiousness. For instance, Ayo, Amaka's sister, is referred to by the author as a "schemer" (48), and she grooms Amaka on how to 'shoot down her male targets without missing.' Earlier in the novel, her mother boasts of Ayo's power to motivate, mobilize and intimidate Amaka into joining the female force in (dis)empowering men:

> Ayo is the only one among you who is like me. She took no nonsense from any man. When her husband came up with his pranks, she left him and got herself 'kept' by a Permanent Secretary, whose wife went to the land of the white people to read books… Ayo moved in. In four years, her husband has sent her to school to improve. She is cleverer than all of you… In the fifth year, she was able to make her 'husband' buy her a house in Surulere. … In her position, what does she want from a man? (33)

In this context, the man is unaware that his weakness, in spite of his dominant traditional image, is being exploited and manipulated. Nwapa in the guise of the omniscient narrator subscribes to this female strategic mission of redefining Self.

In the final analysis, men like Father McLaid, the Permanent Secretary and Alhaji are like Obiora, reborn and reconfigured in the modern context to be disempowered for the female positive and 'radical' empowerment. These men are apparently politically and socially powerful, yet they are subject to reversal of power play or identity definition. Just as Obiora seeks his mother's protection and approval, Fr McLaid finds the mother figure he lacks in Amaka.

From the foregoing, Nwapa presents two major perspectives in her narration of positive and radical empowerment of women in post-independent Nigeria – the importance of motherhood in actualizing female identity and the use of female identity empowerment to reconfigure male dominance. The latter perspective is most conspicuous in the relationship and the familiar past between both Fr. McLaid and Amaka. For instance, his tragic revelation to her that he had always been an outsider, a victim of the rigid custom has no impression on Amaka (65). Instead, Amaka at this juncture, relocates the male power from the centre and turns him into a mere object of desire by demanding:

> I haven't told you about myself, Amaka. I want to tell you tonight. You remember your question, when I was introduced to you as Rev. Fr. McLaid? I remember very well, said Amaka. She had changed into her nightie and was lying on the bed. Father McLaid went and lay beside her. *But I want you now Izu. You can tell me afterward, please*. (Emphasis mine) (69)

Flora Nwapa, unlike many other African writers except perhaps Bessie Head, depicts the 'humaneness' in a man in his desire to bare his soul of his past with the hope of deepening the emotional bond between male and female. Nwapa presents a contrast between strong aggressive and mercenary women like Amaka and weak, considerate and gentle men like Fr. McLaid who loses himself to her power of control:

> Izu was crying. She said nothing. She went to the toilet, got a towel and wiped his tears away. She caressed him, she touched him in forbidden places, and he was aroused. They made love again. It was the first time in her life that she had planned the total annihilation of a man, using all that her mother taught her, which she had sadly neglected because of what the spinster missionaries had taught otherwise. (74)

Unfortunately, even though she was aware of the moral implication of her act, without any compunction she subdues McLaid with her female power. After all:

> A priest was also a man capable of manly feelings. Father McLaid was a man, not a god. Perhaps Father McLaid had never been tempted. She, Amaka, was going to tempt. That was the task that must be done. (57)

Part of the female strategy for (dis)empowering is through her sexuality as a temptress – using the power of desire to unknot female subjugation/domination. Thus, rather than establish a complementary relationship between man and woman, Nwapa's female characters manipulate male desires to their advantage.

A number of critics like Charles Nnolim and Rose Acholonu have criticized Amaka's moral rectitude as contrary to African woman's image (Opara 105). In spite of such criticisms, the author deliberately uses this shocking gap to mock the society's holier-than-thou-patriarchal attitude and stance, as well as the moral bankruptcy and weakness of men like Obiora and Father McLaid who represent the patriarchal society. The novel also takes on the religious institutions and the sexist silence of the church on the ab(uses) of women's rights. In other words, in her presentation of the female identity, Nwapa unveils patriarchal weaknesses.

In conclusion, Flora Nwapa's commitment to the radical development of her heroines is reflected in the manner she moves them from different literary levels of idealism to realism in the male-female relationships. Her heroines negate patriarchy's dominance by creating an empowered

world of women that allows complementarity in the male-female relationship. In order to achieve her literary resolution, Nwapa approaches the dominant concern of communal development or changes in norms from the muted, domestic issues of indigenous Igbo life and culture. Steeped in the practises of the people's oral tradition – their speech patterns, songs, proverbs, rituals, myths and beliefs – and without the benefit of Western education or its accompanying exposure, the novelist's traditional woman is a heroine of great character and dignity.

The first stage of her fiction presents the restiveness of being a woman, wife and mother in the traditional African context. This restiveness is portrayed through the novelist's skilful attempt to find resolution to crises such as, childlessness, without necessarily subverting the codified pattern of social behaviour. In other words, Nwapa's narrative of female identity in *Efuru* is constructed within the Igbo cultural system.

The second part of her fiction details the challenges confronting female identity in contemporary urban society. Here, the harsh social reality of a woman's brave struggle to redefine Self within the cultural dynamism of the society is represented. Nwapa presents women in their natural conditions, contestations and challenges as they struggle for survival. Generally, the women characters, through a conscious manipulation of the oral tradition, are depicted as strong, individualized, and unburdened by the constraints of traditional societies. They make decisions that question the assumptions and practices that put womanhood in subjection. Efuru and Amaka move beyond the boundary of the marriage institution to redefine their identity as women.

In spite of the colonial intrusion, Flora Nwapa captures the Igbo cultural heritage in her creative works. The Igbo proverbs, folkways and linguistic syntax are captured in her narrative to

strengthen her plot and add realism and colour to her characters' portrayal and speech. For example, Amaka in *One is Enough* in order to stress that one husband is enough, employs an Igbo idiomatic expression:

> You heard me. I didn't have water in my mouth when I spoke to you. I don't want to be a wife anymore, a mistress yes, with a lover, yes of course, but not a wife. (127)

"I didn't have water in my mouth" is an idiomatic folk expression. Amaka's speech pattern identifies women as "carriers" of Ugwuta verbal art. An example is her figurative expression that reflects a traditional art form: "As a wife I am never free… I am almost impotent. I am in prison, unable to advance in body and soul" (127).

The use of an oral tradition or what Marie Umeh (1995/2007) calls "oraliterature" is distinctive in its use of proverbs. It brings to mind Chinua Achebe's defence of his use of proverbs as: "the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (6). In this sense, just as palm-oil is an essential food ingredient in Igbo culture, proverbs spice and flavour the Igbo verbal art. They reflect the Igbo culture, communal outlook and philosophies of life. Thus, Nwapa uses folk proverb to moralize and comment on the conducts of her characters. These proverbs sum up situations, pass judgment, offer advice, and resolve conflict, or are employed in decision-making.

Umeh submits that Nwapa gave African women an authentic identity (4) through what Brenda Berrian refers to as the empowerment of women through conversations and choric language (32). For instance, while Amaka was still married to Obiora, there was the use of paradox to indicate the privileges accorded the male gender:

> You changed a good deal, my husband, I too could change you know. Meaning what? Meaning that I could do a lot behind your back, without you ever finding out, she said… Like prostitution? No, God forbid, our land forbids that. Our gods and goddesses forbid that… Go on you haven't said anything… What then? Sleep around with other men? …What have you been doing behind my back? I am a man. I am not a woman. (26)

The conversation pattern is a deliberate effort by Amaka to draw Obiora's attention to herself, while he acts as a catalyst between her and his mother. But the guilt-ridden Obiora insinuates that Amaka is a prostitute, the worst insult to a woman, while feebly asserting his manhood.

However, upon Amaka's migration, the language pattern changes and reflects the metropolitan attitude. The language structure reflects the desire and decision of the heroine. An example is Amaka's linguistic expression depicting her persistent quest for self-identity: "… I am never free. I am a shadow of myself" (127). The word "shadow" propels her "to look for her identity to start all over again."

Gay Wilentz sums up the quality of this 'oraliterature' as "an oral quality in which the voices of the women define the pattern and structure of her work" (179). Elleke Boehmer (in Brenda Berrian) also applauds the choric language which enables Nwapa to empower the represented Igbo characters in *Efuru*, *Idu* and *One is Enough (*32). Through the empowerment of women's conversations, Nwapa disproves a traditional assumption that without a husband, a woman is nothing (24).

Humour is another form through which Nwapa expresses the hypocritical behaviour of insensitive men to women especially towards the childless ones. For example, when Amaka cannot conceive, Obiora calls her a prostitute; Mike calls her a miserable spinster, and her mother-in-law calls her a stupid girl. None of them sympathize her, but the moment she becomes

successful, their animosity turns to respect and deference. Drawing upon the market place humour, Nwapa incorporates "njakiri", where characters deliberately provoke each other with verbal pranks to elicit a forced response. At other times, the humour could verge on slapstick. This is seen in Fr. McLaid confession to the bishop on his desire to leave the church. Events that dovetail into this action seem humorous – his drunkenness and bedding of a stranger, as well as his taxi-bus collision in which two people died, seem to him as divine Providence working against him because he desires to abandon the church.

Brenda Berrian in her essay "The reinvention of woman through conversation and humour" responds to the superficial comments of R. Dathorne in *African Literature in the Twentieth Century* that "Nwapa's style of writing is unimaginatively pedestrian" (in *African Author* 31). A close reading of Nwapa's fiction reveals a complex symbolism interwoven amid themes, comic effects, and a skilful dialogue that probe social and moral issues that confront Igbo women in their everyday lives (31). Through the characters' conversation and humour, the myth of male superiority and the importance of wifehood are destroyed in *One is Enough* and *Efuru*. Through the conversations, blames and humour are apportioned on both men and women such as mothers-in-law (women against women), Amaka's mother, and her aunt for their individual actions and failures.

Chapter Three

Countering Invisibility through Deviance in *Woman at Point of Zero* and *Wounding Words*: a *Woman's Journal in Tunisia*

Women, Religion and the Culture of Invisibility

This chapter examines the Muslim Arab woman's identity vis-à-vis her social, cultural, political, sexual and religious status. A progressive interpretation of formations of female identity as they evolve in the liberation process will be appraised to evaluate a 'culture' of invisibility in Islamic Arab society.

Invisibility in the Islamic Arab society is a cultural feature for women – not to be seen or heard – based on the doctrines of Prophet Muhammad's institution of *umma.* The u*mma,* according to Fatima Mernissi in *Beyond the Veil: The Dynamics of Male-Female Relationship* consists of the totality of individuals bound to one another by ties, not by kinship or race, but by religion, in that all its members profess their belief in the one God, Allah, and in the mission of his prophet Muhammad (18). The codes of *umma* are enforced through the Muslim family, distinguished by its strictly defined monolithic structure. The family structure is regulated by religious laws, especially the sexual aspect; that is, in a Muslim's mind, the link between sexuality and the *shari'a* (the Islamic Laws) is shaped by the family structure that defines the sexes. Invisibility in this case is not necessarily an indication of inferiority but a strategy for controlling the sexual power of Muslim women. It is a society where sexual equality violates the tenets of Islamic injunction and any change in sex roles is prohibited. Paradoxically and contrary to common belief, inequality in sex roles such as invisibility or inferiority results from specific social institutions which restrain female power through segregation and legal subjugation in the family.

In other words, the Muslim family structure or marriage is based on male dominance (Mernissi 19). A Muslim woman's invisibility within a 'vocal' cultural myth seems to enjoin a silent female presence concealed in 'the veil,' which is the symbolic marker of female control, non-existence or invisibility. The sex role, determined by ideological and biological factors, results from specific social institutions designed to restrain her power. Researchers of female identity or sex role in the Muslim world like Fatima Mernissi claim that the restraint is in place because women are considered powerful and dangerous beings. Consequently, all institutions of sexual control (polygamy, repudiation, invisibility, segregation etc) can be perceived as strategies for restraining their power. The ideological interpretation of Islam that portends equal socialisation between Muslim men and women in the traditional past now creates discrepancy or segregation where men and women view one another as enemies. The Muslim ideology thus empowers men with the institutional means to oppress women; thus there is incoherence between ideology and reality.

The Muslim society is controlled by the *shari'a*, a system of laws which transcends humanity and temporality to mould human minds and actions in morals and pastorals. *Shari'a* defines the society's legal systems, spirituality and social actions in both private and public, which also include the sex, sexuality and sensuality. The Muslim individual, thus, cannot survive outside the social order decreed by the *shari'a*. The individual's destiny, sexually and morally, is subject to the religious censorship of the *shari'a*. The Muslim law defines the destiny of individuals, subject to the 'appropriate' use of the instincts on good and evil. In other words, an individual's instinctive actions are subject to the religious law. The *shari'a* forbids certain human expressions like aggression and sexual desire, which it regards as subversive activities. Sexual desire and the

social order are antithetical within the Islamic religion because the expression of the first destabilizes the second. Sexual desires, especially in women, are presumed to be aimed at gaining one advantage or another:

> Sexual desire is created solely as a means to entice men to deliver the seed and to put the woman in a situation where she can cultivate it ... in order to obtain progeny.... (in Mernissi 28)

Another is of a divine nature, which is a manifestation of God's design. This means that God created two sexes traditionally in the past to complement each other in order to realise His design of a social order. But the contemporary interpretations regulate the sexual instinct through devices that project women as threats or disruptive forces to the new social order. This means that a woman's sexuality is a threat to the man's sexual instinct and may be responsible for any disorder in the male or patriarchal sphere. Thus, extra precautionary measures are devised to limit socialisation and enhance the internalization of patriarchal interpretations of religious rules or law through avoidance rules, surveillance, veiling, and seclusion to ensure women's invisibility in the men-devised social order. Female sexuality is consequently restricted and patriarchally defined by religious interpretations of Islamic laws.

In Muslim societies, female sexuality is regarded as active. In the view of Fatima Mernissi, the seclusion, veiling and segregation of women are devices to protect men because women are better able to control their sexual impulses. The sexuality of Muslim women is called a *fitna*; a disorder or chaos. *Fitna* connotes *femme fatale* or a woman who makes men lose their self control. To Mernissi therefore, it is men who should be veiled, not the women:

> If what men fear is that women might succumb to their masculine attraction, why did they not institute veils for themselves? ... Preventing women from showing themselves unveiled expresses men's fear of losing control over

> their minds, falling prey to *fitna* whenever they are confronted with a non-veiled woman. The implications of such an institution lead us to think that women are believed to be better equipped in this respect than men. (31)

In literary discourse and critical thinking, an 'unveiled' and visible Muslim woman is regarded as bad, a disease or a religious taboo. That is, she is a sexual threat to men who are weak in their ability to control their sexual instincts. In general terms, the interpretation of the word 'woman,' in this state, fails to capture the general perception of the experiences among women. 'Woman' in Islamic interpretation connotes sexual disorder, that is, she is defined in her sexuality, unlike the interpretation in the other regions where 'woman' is seen in cultural terms. Teresa de Lauretis, citing Adrienne Rich, says essentially that there are different histories of women, which affect the different baggage they carry (164). Thus, in Northern Africa, the woman's history of invisibility is different from stories of being women in other regions. It is an experience of being a sexual threat to the social order of men.

Many feminists and womanists in Northern Africa strive to reconstruct such religious subjectivity from the disruptive perspective of male sexuality, social order, ideology and reality to counter invisibility. Each writer acknowledges the primacy of the signifying dependence of the subject on the Other, and is committed to developing ways of re-envisioning the subject in relation to the Other. The Islamic religion and culture closely circumscribes and stereotypes the behaviour of women and defines them only in relation to men (Other). The paradox, however, is that these women conform almost totally to the dictates and conventions of the society even though they silently reject them in their day-to-day lives. Their behaviour sharply contrasts with the public perception of the quiet, obedient, and dependent women. A Muslim woman thus lives in a state of ambiguous social polarisation. Political, economic and educational independence are

proposed as necessary steps to solving the problems of these women, and their liberation requires the free and equal contributions of resources from both men and women in order to achieve an equitable human society.

Historically, the Arab culture has been and remains essentially Islamic which in turn subjects its women to the fundamental tenets of the religion, which also defines the culture. Within this framework, socialization in the society is structured by Islam, which indirectly limits the empowerment and independence of Muslim women. Fatima Mernissi eloquently champions the argument that an understanding of the Middle East tradition as it relates to gender and religion is often associated with the Western interpretation of the social structure and female sexuality which are captured in the political and economic conflicts that define Modern Muslim societies. In other words, women's liberation is directly linked to the forces of modernity and tradition which indirectly impact on male/female relations upon which contemporary interpretations of female sexuality are drawn. The argument is that the Western society is able to influence and dominate the Northern Muslim societies because of their political and economic power. For instance, in Western societies, both men and women have equal opportunities educationally, economically and politically, and are involved in the development of the societies on an equal basis. But in the Muslim world, women are seen as weak and dependent; thus, they are prevented from taking part in the production process because the men are assumed to be endowed with superior intelligence and physical strength, which results in a restricted economy. This indeed misrepresents the Muslim traditional and religious structure or system as it reduces opportunities for Arab women and increases their levels of poverty. These levels of poverty, though absolute or relative, often perpetuate their state of subjection and inequality with men, both in the family

and the community. This is affirmed in Mernissi whose view about the contemporary dichotomy is that:

> [The] issue in Muslim societies is not an ideology of female inferiority, but rather a set of laws and customs that ensures that women's status remains one of subjugation. Prime among these are the family laws based on male authority. (11)

In other words, the laws and customs are configured and interpreted by standards of patriarchy and aimed at reducing women's status to levels of absolute or relative poverty. This is in spite of the *shari'a* law which decrees equality between men and women, especially in the family. The levels of absolute and relative poverty are the results of the modern influence and interpretations of family laws and the post or neo-colonial autonomy of 'independent' Africa. This sexual or social imbalance or disorder is, however, being addressed through a social and personal rather than political approach, even though the consequence may have political effects on the liberation of Muslim societies from modern Western domination.

Religion, particularly Islam, is the rallying point of identification in Northern Africa, where socialisation and sexuality are defined by religious tenets. This is because religion provides a culture with powerful symbols that guide and shape a people's view of the world around them. According to Margaret A. Anderson, the result is a religious belief that is often the basis of cultural and societal identification and conflict. The religious institutions also include power structures characterised by a system of stratification, which are clearly demarcated by gender, sect and class. Invariably, religious belief is particularly an important part of an individual's sexuality, experience or identity (160). Drawing from the strength of religion, Anderson further states that Islamic interpretations, which is a male prerogative, is a powerful source of the

subordination of women (their identity and sexuality), while to the faithful it can be a source of human liberation (160). This is because Islamic tenets advocate equality in the family but the interpretations create grounds for men and women to view one another as enemies. In other words, the ideology behind the interpretations is defined by the traditionalists' doctrine that does not subscribe to female participation in the production and development processes. The state of female sexuality is not an Islamic injunction but a male socialisation process that is defined by a social order imposed by patriarchy. Thus, the female identity is subjected to the position of the Other, while men are empowered to dominate and subdue women through strategies of domination – segregation, incarceration, violence and surveillance.

Undoubtedly, religion is an important integrative force that shapes collective belief and identity. The promotion of identification within a religious group gives members a feeling of belonging; but at the same time, it can also promote what Obioma Nnaemeka calls "feelings of exclusion or 'outsider' status" (82). In this vein, religion acts both as a powerful source of collective identity and a form of social control in human relations. As a social control, it is patriarchal in interpretation and practice – a means of ensuring female submission to male authority and dictating human interactions. The woman in this context is subjected to the status of the Other whose visibility is controlled by the male authority through religion. However, the Other in these novels is the male power pitted against the female vulnerability. Internalised religious beliefs (learned and developed as part of one's self-concept and moral development) influence individual and group beliefs and behaviour. In this way, Anderson asserts that religion, particularly Islam, controls the development of Self and group identity and is an absolute tool or form of social and gender control (162).

The inequality in religious institutions has raised the question of the extent to which religious interpretations contribute to the subjugation of women. Feminist scholars like Hangrove, Schmidt and Davaney have also examined the connection between religion and other oppressive social systems in circumscribing the behavioural patterns or sexuality of women only to define them in relation to men (Other). Religion is clearly one of the foremost instruments a society engages to preserve traditions, conserve the established social order, stabilise the world view, and transmit values through generations. Leila Ahmed also states that the traditional and religious settings assign women to lower positions in the social hierarchy. Such "stereotypes" as mothers, wives and sisters under the jurisdiction of fathers, husbands and sons and their sexuality are geared toward authenticating the patriarchal lineage (153). Mernissi also argues against the male interpretation that the *Holy Qur'an* establishes the fact of male supremacy; that rather, what is contained in the Holy Book and in human civilisation is a complementarity between the sexes. A characteristic of males is the will to conquer. A characteristic of females is the negative will to power. So, Mernissi submits that the complementarity of the sexes, similar to Sigmund Freud's emphasis on the "law of the jungle" resides in their antagonistic wills and desires and aspirations:

> Males in all kinds of animals are given the power – embodied in their biological structure – to compel females to yield to the demands of the instinct (that is, sex).... There is no situation where that power to compel is given to women over men. (33)

Mernissi surmises that women enjoy suffering and that they derive pleasure from their subjugation, that is, their defeat by men. In other words, their ability to experience pleasure in suffering and subjugation is the kernel of femininity, a pleasure that is masochistic (33). Dierdre Lashgari views the arguments on the male-female dynamics in the North from the constituted

division of ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ worlds (the private and public domains) of a Muslim woman, which she sees as a border and boundary tenuously maintained for the purposes of social regulation and control (ix). The ‘differences’ in male/female intellect and male social manipulation and domination have generated discourses among critics like Mahnaz Afkhami, who argues that:

> Patriarchal societies and patriarchal religions are predicated on the correlation of historical, psychological, sociological and biological stress points. (219)

Soraya Altorki further makes clearer this distinction between Islam as a religion and Islam as a culture. Altorki describes the religious aspect of Islam which places women and men on an equal pedestal in contrast to the cultural aspect of social relations which is subject to male intellectual control. Inequality therefore evolved “as an artefact of preferences and actions of patriarchal authorities”, a result of the imbalance in the interpretations of Islamic tenets. Thus, religious injunction by way of interpretation is not vocal about Muslim women’s sexuality, but the cultural aspect (social order) is not silent about them either. On the contrary, culture is quite vocal in the myth, ritual, religious texts, and aphorisms of male perception about female sexuality and power. The woman, in this case, is regarded as a mere biological body without feeling or whose feeling can be manipulated; a cold receiver that is biologically inferior (Anderson 233).

‘Body’ which is also derogatively called ‘awra’ is a referent marker for a Muslim woman’s sex, sexuality, and sensuality in the Muslim community. It is regarded as passive and ‘external’ in cultural and religious inscriptions. The ‘body’ (the Islamic Arab word referring to female sexuality that lacks an individual identity and condemned to subjugation) or ‘awra’ (the female biological composition located in the vagina) is specifically an inept matter; that is, it is seen as

nihilistic to the social order. The female sexuality or identity is thus defined through her body, which is devalued through ideological interpretations in order to protect male sexuality and power. Her sexuality is perceived by the male as concealed in deception, connotes sin and the metaphor of hell or destruction. Significantly, the boundary of the 'body' as well as the distinction between the internal and external value of female sexuality is established through the interpretation of the biological identity by classifying it as a defilement of the Other (male). To protect the Other therefore, measures such as seclusion and the veil are taken to restrict the public visibility of women. The 'body' is further reshaped by male authority with strategic interests in keeping it bounded and constituted by the marker of sex. The act of repressing female visibility is attained through the process of internalization where the women consider their sex as a taboo.

Invariably, the differentiation of sex roles creates binary oppositions between the 'outer' or 'public' and the 'inner' or 'private' worlds of women which are predicated on sex, and are reinforced by internalised religious interpretations. This differentiation has also raised the question of the identity of Muslim women in the literary canons of the Northern African female writers. Indeed, Mernissi observes that there are obvious strains in the male-female relationship in the Arab society from which a positive prescription pattern might have been drawn in line with possible interpretations or revelations. The patriarchal structure of the socio-cultural system based on male interpretations, however, suggests a culture of silent and invisible Muslim women. The Muslim woman and her 'sex' or 'body,' that is identity, are thus described through the cultural language of interpretation of the *Holy Qur'an* called 'surface' (symbolised by the gaze

into subjection) and force or violence spoken through the "single drama" of domination, inscription, and creation that inadvertently weaken and repress the female identity subliminally.

Another form of domination of the female identity is metaphorically constructed through the symbolic 'gaze' which bell hooks refers to as the 'look' (120). The 'gaze' or the 'look' is a form of surveillance by men to either control or possess sexually the female body. The 'gaze' symbolically functions through: domination and desire. On one hand, the gaze of the Other or male dominates the female sexual identity into submission; while on the other hand, it expresses desire. According to Ghazali, the 'gaze' is a function of the eye, which is phallic connotation and is capable of performing base acts that are harmful such as enticement. The 'gaze' or the eye is an erogenous zone in the Muslim word-view; it is able to give pleasure without necessarily engaging in a sexual act. A man can do as much damage to a woman's honour with his eyes or 'gaze' as if he were to seize hold of her with his hands:

> To look at somebody else's wife is a sinful act . . . The look is fornication of the eye, but if the sexual apparatus is not set in motion by it (if the man does not attempt to have sexual intercourse); it is a much more easily pardoned act. (35)

Mernissi also argued that the fear of female sexual identity or power is contained in the gaze and the result is the veil and public restriction or control (124). She further deposits a paradox in the 'gaze' – it heightens the sexual dimension of any interaction between men and women (140).

Women in Islamic North Africa thus struggle to construct a new identity outside the 'gaze.' They challenge the 'gaze' or 'look' by redefining their visibility in order to participate in the definition and resolution of the 'world's problems,' and help to develop an order of priorities and relationships that is different from the patriarchal order. The term identity in the Islamic North

African context is a complex notion that defies a simple definition. Drawing upon Jacques Lacan, the assumption of a sexual identity is accompanied by sacrifice of a libinal energy necessitated by signification itself, which demands that we be one thing, and not another (152). However, Jacqueline Rose observes that the problem is our failure to see the phallus as part of the problem of sexual identity in human identity in general. Consequently, we "lost sight" of the sexual difference which Sigmund Freud argues is constructed at a price because it involves subjection to a law which exceeds any natural division (29). The concept of phallus stands for subjection and the way women are treated under phallic authority through surveillance and seclusion. By this is meant the manner in which women are framed into the configuration of difference, a polar of opposition and subversion rather than a continuum of differences – nature/culture, active/passive, and male/female semiotics.

The politics of identity may refer to forces that organise and appeal to groups defined by specific inscriptive characteristics, and mobilising this group identity as a means to gain power. Within the discourse of identity is the issue of fundamentalism, a common feature in Islamic society, which claims to possess an exclusive 'truth' and seeks state power to impose their version of the 'natural' moral or social order. However, there is a difference between identity politics and identity reformation in the dynamic male-female relationship, even though both may develop simultaneously. The issue of Muslim women being aware of their identity has however not been accidental. It is part of an appropriation process in which men and women attempt to appropriate as much power as possible to define Self, but the strategies are different. Thus, diverse modes of consciousness converge on the idea of human autonomy and personal authenticity. The process of reformulating an identity is by moving from the doctrine of natural law (the condition of

obeying the rules already given) to that of natural right (the condition of participating in making the rules).

In Northern Africa, the bases of female identity politics have been in the intellectual interpretation of Islam. Individual identity – male-female – is subject to internalised interpretation by Islamic intellectuals who define marriage as: "the husband's supremacy ... a religious act ... which gives the man a leading power over the woman for the benefit of humanity" (Mernissi 15). In defining the Muslim women's identity in the developing Middle East, a main issue is the transition process from the Islamic injunction to the individual's right outside male authority without inverting patriarchal structures of social order. This is a complex proposition because it involves every aspect of a woman's personal life – her belief in God, religious rituals, family relations, sexuality, friendships, positions in the society, peer opinion, economic sufficiency – and is directly related to one's idea of self-respect.

The question about Muslim women's identity in North Africa in turn puts them at odds with the social order. Self-search among Arab women therefore is inevitably a moral odyssey in the interpretations of religious fundamentalism. In fact, Mernissi's analyses of Muslim fundamentalism have shown a link between Muslim concepts of female sexuality and the political, social and economic development of Arab nations (14). She indicates that the process of Arab civilisation is interpreted from the sexuality of a woman (44). There are numerous indications that create links between the religious belief and practice, the political system, and the socio-cultural subjugation or control of women through fundamental intellectualism such as marriage, motherhood, domesticity and strict adherence to Islamic *shari'a*. Women's

subordination to men and their control by men may be seen emphatically as a part of the Islamist programme. Consequently, Shirley Ardener with a suggestive insight has proposed that women in Islamic societies be analysed within the spheres of "muted" and "dominant" cultures. To Ardener, however, such 'muted' female culture or society may actually function in a counter-part relation to that of the 'dominant' male model. But this conceptualisation only establishes the existence of a separate value system for "private" and "public" spheres. So the social status or identity and the ambiguous circumstances of Arab women today are not only partly a consequence of the interplay between Islamic injunctions and its internalisation, but also a result of the indigenous Arab way of life which pre-dated Islam. Gender differentiation as described in the North Africa is sanctioned by ideological perception (in this case representing patriarchal authority). According to Sura iv: verse 34, for example:

> Men have authority over women, because Allah has made the one superior to the other and because they spend their wealth to maintain them. Good women are obedient. They guard their unseen parts because Allah has guarded them.

Mahnaz Alkhami explains that the male-dominated society holds that nothing

> Is more ridiculous than a woman who imitates a male activity and is therefore no longer a woman … sexual differentiation must be rigidly upheld by whatever means available, for men can be men only if women are unambiguously women. (Alkhami 225)

In this vein, there is a deposition of the hegemonic myth that Muslim women are traditionally secluded and contented. The religious and patriarchal subjugation of Muslim women simply depicts the social attitudes that males are superior and females are inferior.

Nevertheless, some critics like Barbara Callaway have argued that the very division and the restriction of female participation in public or private spheres according to sex have created a "female power," a form of strategy for defining the female identity. She hypothesised that

women derive prestige and satisfaction from the separation of roles in the society through private networking to the disadvantage of men vis-à-vis the public sphere (429).

The seclusion and segregation of sexes in Muslim societies suggest a polarisation of social roles that sometimes grant the women a dual identity. The culture closely circumscribes and stereotypes the behaviour of women and defines them only in their difference or relation to men, though they have their own social networks with their own inherent values. The paradox is that Muslim women conform to the dictates and conventions of the society while fundamentally rejecting them within their secluded day-to-day lives. Their behaviour sharply diverges from the public perception of the quiet, obedient, dependent wife in North Africa. They seem to live in a state of ambiguous social polarisation. They are physically, religiously and legally subordinate; socially they are almost invisible, but privately they are visible. These role differentiations, Michelle Rosaldo describes in *Women, Culture and Society*, arguing that:

> The very symbolic and social concepts that appear to set women apart or to circumscribe their activities may be used by the women as a basis for solidarity and worth. When men live apart from women, they in fact can not control them, and unwittingly they may provide them with the symbols and social resources on which to build a society of their own. (39)

Thus, Elaine Showalter opines that in the literature of some Muslim women in Northern Africa, feminine values penetrate and undermine the masculine systems, and women have imaginatively fantasised a separate female society (196).

Another conflict that creates ‘female power’ is seduction which is a way of appearing to give of the female Self and procuring great pleasure without actually giving anything. Mernissi describes it as an art of abstaining from everything while playing on the promise of giving (140). Gender

power in this case shifts position to the advantage of women through the veil, an art of seduction that empowers them to manipulate and dominate men

From the on-going analysis, the salient issues of interest are two. One is seclusion in terms of gender relations and identity, and the response of Muslim women to male-female dynamics which manifest in husbands making decision, the control of women by men, religious internalisation, public invisibility, and education. The second focus is women's social, political and economic strategies of participation and authority.

In the discussion of female identity and dynamics of culture in North Africa using a gynocentric framework, Nawal el Sadaawi and Evelyn Accad, through their novels examine and portray the realities of role differentiation according to sex as defined by religious beliefs or internalisation and patriarchal intellectualism; the invisibility and the ambiguous visibility of Muslim women; and the consequences of such visibility on gender, culture, and social and political structures. They represent a femininity of interaction and consciousness. The influences of Islamic programmes on the socio-cultural and political institutions and sexual interaction in the conditions of the Muslim women as well as the advantages and disadvantages of "homosocial" relations as against "heterosexual" relations (Mernissi 12) will be examined.

The main thrust of this chapter is to depict how writers from Northern Africa, through the mode of 'literature of oppression,' radically depict Islamic societies in their willingness (or unwillingness) to accept the emergence of female visibility within a powerful and dynamic social order. Also within the cultural context, Mahnaz Afkhami observes the incongruity that demands such female dynamism:

> Because virtually all existing (countries) are structured by patriarchal mentality, the standard for being human is being male – and female human beings *per se* become "Other", and invisible …. (225)

These two different authors portray 'images of female' dynamism in that region in the 1980s and 1990s. In other words, they give through a literary dialogue, a progressive interpretation of this identity dynamism. One can then safely say that through the different narrative forms, the sexual differences in the Muslim society are depicted. The power of narration of Muslim women writers is directed at refining the 'truth' of the social order regarding women by seeking cultural affinities that minimise the Otherness of the Muslim women.

In summary, the focus of the subsequent section is to examine how the Islamic Arab women writers define identity vis-a-vis invisibility. The issues of concern shall address the following questions: how is a Muslim woman's identity defined or from what perspective of her cultural or religious sphere does she express herself? Is her definition in conformity or in deviance? How have the women writers' literary representations helped to promote or effect a change in the perception of the female identity, and do they also write in conformity or in deviance?

Countering Differentiation: An Ambiguous Identity in *Woman at Point Zero*.

Nawal el Sadaawi is no stranger to modern prose with her novels, plays and short stories, autobiography, prison memoirs, and travel literature. Her pragmatic and theoretical works are about female sexuality, which have threatened and vexed many readers in Arab societies. More than any writer, el Sadaawi has broken the 'censored' or patriarchal literary barriers within the Islamic Arab societies of North Africa. Nawal el Sadaawi, born in 1931 in Egypt and a medical doctor, presents a range of extraordinary work. She explores many topics on women's

oppression at the hands of Islamic fundamentalists to the role of women in African literature, and the sexual politics of development initiatives in a 'post-colonial' age. She explores the nature of cultural identity and the subversive potential of creativity, from the fight against genital mutilation to problems facing the internalisation of a women's movement. Her activities leading to the resurgence of women's rights in the 21st century got her the label 'militant' feminist. She maintains her family values and marriage though she ended up in prison in 1981. el Sadaawi's imprisonment in Qanatir Women's Prison by Egyptian President Anwar Sadat – informs the prison location of the protagonist, Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero* – under the Egyptian "Law for the Protection of Values from Shame" segregate and seclude women from active participation in social change. Her literary corpus recasts and responds to not only the classic male canons, but also represents the reality of the modern day Muslim women in North Africa, particularly in Egypt. Her fictional and autobiographical corpus is provocative and dwells on the cultural-mental structures that bind women under the guise of religion.

Nawal el Sadaawi's *Woman at Point Zero* focuses on the themes of surveillance and ownership, the nature of power and the importance of attaining respect as a woman through the motifs of sexual pleasure, gaze, 'awra' (body), choice and captivity symbolised by the eyes, money, water and books (education). In *Woman at Point Zero*, el Sadaawi describes her experience as a psychiatrist in Egypt as she studies the psychological effects of prison on female inmates. She states in her introduction that when she was conducting these studies, she had no idea that one day she would be imprisoned by the government. On a visit to the Qanatir Prison, she meets a Doctor who tells her about a remarkable prisoner on death row for killing a man. el Sadaawi desperately wants to meet with this woman named Firdaus, but Firdaus refuses until the day

before she is to be executed. Firdaus tells her life story. She was born into a very poor family where her father beat her mother and sometimes her. As a child Firdaus used to play in the field with other children where she got pleasure from her sexual experiments with a boy, Mohammadain in the game 'bride and bridegroom.' One day her mother performed a clitoridectomy on her and soon after, her parents died and she moved to Cairo and lived with her uncle. At first, everything went well for Firdaus in Cairo. She and her uncle shared a bed and were close. She was allowed to go to school which she loved until her uncle married and his wife who did not like her sent her to a boarding school. In school, she did not fantasize about boys and marriage, rather; she spent most of her time in the library and in the courtyard, where she encountered a teacher named Iqbal, with whom she formed friendship. When Firdaus graduated, she was given an award, but she was not present at the ceremony, so Miss Iqbal accepted it on her behalf. Back at home, she was given in marriage to an older man named Sheikh Mahmoud, a selfish and stingy man with a facial deformity. He beat Firdaus always. Firdaus ran away. She met Bayoumi who was kind to her but when she decided to get a job he locked her in and brought men to sleep with her. Again she ran away and met Sherifa by the Nile who introduced her into prostitution. She made money, furthered her education, got a job and fell in love with Ibrahim who deceived her by getting engaged to the boss' daughter. Firdaus became a prostitute again and met an Arab prince who paid her $3,000. She slept with him, tore the money he paid her and slapped him. Firdaus was later arrested for killing a pimp, tried, and sentenced to death.

Nawal el Sadaawi narrates the story of women's oppression by seclusion and segregation using the motif of the 'gaze.' The 'gaze' is the patriarchal look of control or desire to subject or disempower the female sexuality. In *Woman at Point Zero*, the 'gaze' operates in multi-

dimensions by subjectivity and opposition, and protection and possession. Through the telling of her story, Firdaus describes the act of seeing as being akin to an act of possession. The eye, which is represented by the 'gaze', is powerful, pleasurable and destructive. One of Firdaus' earliest memories as a child was her mother's eye or gaze watching her, holding her up when she struggled to learn to walk and 'negotiate' the world. For young Firdaus, being a possession under her mother's gaze was comforting for it protected her. Later, the act of being surveyed took on a different meaning. When Firdaus grew older, she could no longer feel her mother's eyes or gaze supporting her. Rather, she sensed someone's eyes watching her with a gaze that invaded her body as if her body were not her own and making her feel threatened.

In the Muslim society, a woman's gaze must be lowered in submission. This religious or cultural expectation is backed by the Holy Book: "and tell the believing women to lower their gaze and be modest..." (Sura 24 verse 5). In this context, the Muslim woman's gaze connotes male control and possession of the female identity and her submission. el Sadaawi, however, inverts the Islamic interpretation of the gaze by portraying it as men's visual disability. In other words in her narrative, in spite of the religion empowering male gaze, el Sadaawi argues that the male gaze is a visual disability that portrays their lack of control over their desire at the sight of a beautiful woman, whether veiled or not. In this vein, the Muslim woman who is seen as a mere sexual body representing chaos (*fitna*) in the male social order, challenges the gaze by trespassing into men's restricted space. A large portion of el Sadaawi's imaginative writing is thus reframed in the 'gaze' motif, a symbol of the soul in Arab enclaves. The eye or gaze is very dominant in an Islamic society, where the Qur'anic injunction stipulates that:

> Say to the believing women to turn their eyes away and to preserve their chastity, to cover their adornments except such as are normally displayed; to draw their veils over their bosoms and not to reveal their finery except to their husbands …. And let them not stamp their feet in walking so as to reveal their hidden trinkets. (Sura 24:3)

In assigning gender roles to the power imbalance in the 'gaze' as enjoined by the Qur'anic law, Mulvey notes that the "pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female" (16-18):

> In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (Also in Miller 8)

In other words, the woman is displayed for men to gaze at and enjoy as the active controller of the look. The gaze is thus, used as the marker of male control and female submission in power relations. bell hooks distinguishes the functions of the 'gaze' on two levels: one that 'looks' to document (akin to rape), and one that is oppositional (akin to deviance) (120). In many settings, this theory of the "subjective gaze" applies to the male-female power struggle, wherein the woman is the "subordinate" whose experience has taught to decipher the meaning of the gaze.

Nawal el Sadaawi in countering difference in male-female power relations in North Africa focuses heavily on the theme of the oppositional (deviance) gaze to challenge male surveillance. The oppositional gaze in her heroine sets up a silent, radical resistance against a patriarchal religious and oppressive system that strips her of her identity. Through the woman's body and words, her opposition creates a dialectic that questions the social structures that engendered rape by uncles, fathers, brothers, religion and society of women and their sexuality. What this Islamic Arab writer tries to do is to create an oppositional narrative response to male assumption that a Muslim woman's body is a male sexual object. el Sadaawi in order to challenge the sexist and

patriarchal assumptions in Arab literary canon, works through complex social values of the society and even subverts them. Her narrative is plotted through the heroine's sexuality and experience of sexual oppression which are assumed to connote chaos. That is, she creates a heroine (*femme fatale*), who deviates from the social order of female invisibility by moving outside seclusion in order to achieve expression.

More than any other contemporary writer, el Sadaawi's concern with the female's body and sexuality has been tremendous. Her first novel, *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* is a radical womanist response to the male classics like *The Days* by Taha Husayn. The literary dialogue she undertakes with the male texts is articulated through the complex motifs that define differences between male authority and female sexuality. These motifs include blindness, sexuality, and woman's physicality, which are male mental constructions promoted through literary, legal, and theological sources. Her intertextual dialogue with the male presentations of the female identity is concerned with the notion of physical and psychological domination through religious interpretations. In order to present her perspective, she inverts the elements and words of domination that establish difference in men and women.

Physical disability and women's sexual composition draw similar social reactions. They both imply difference or marginality and disorder. Clearly, in the Islamic Arab literary purviews, a Muslim woman and a blind person are relegated to the same physical and psychological seclusion, relative imperfection, and social marginality. The status of sightlessness is explicitly related to women's sexuality and invisibility. In Mary Ann-Doane's view:

> Disease and the woman have something in common – they are socially devalued or undesirable marginalized elements, which constantly threaten to

> infiltrate and contaminate that which is more central, healthy or masculine. (in Malti-Douglas 125)

Within the Islamic Arab culture, Muslim women are regarded as carriers of imperfection, though they are not necessarily physically disabled. In this vein, women and the blind (the physically challenged) become referents for the undesirable. The blind and the sighted woman are classified as social threats in the patriarchal society, but Nawal el Sadaawi challenges this status by ironically depicting men as the ones with physical conditions that circumvent the development of a harmonious social order. In Mernissi's view, because Muslim men are vulnerable to female sexuality, they erect structures to protect their vulnerability while they blame the women for their weakness (57). In *Woman at Point Zero*, el Sadaawi depicts male vulnerability to female sexuality through structures like circumcision, seclusion or the veil that are used to protect men and ensure male control and domination. In addressing these issues, el Sadaawi brings her medical background to bear upon her exploration of the physical and psychological domination of the Muslim woman's identity.

In the Arab culture, physical disability is termed 'awra', which refers to the loss of the eye or the performance of a base act. It is through the eyes that the gaze of subjection and objection are performed. 'Awra' as a disability connotes social disorder or chaos or *fitna*. The classification of 'awra' is multi-dimensional; it includes the blind, the female sexuality and even the female voice. 'Awra' is expressed as a negative term, so a Muslim woman who is not veiled is associated with 'awra' (terror). 'Awra' is therefore pollution; a type of danger to the ordered structure or social defines. A Muslim woman is either a *fitna* (awra) or a polluted person and

must always be kept in seclusion. She is, by Islamic law and social order, differently conditioned by her sexuality, which portends a danger to men.

As has been explained by Mernissi (140), to prevent social interaction between members of the 'umma' and members of the society, seclusion and veiling (a symbolic form of seclusion) were developed as a male control strategy. Ironically, the male gaze seduces the woman while the seclusion entices "the man". That is, in spite of the structures of domination men still find secluded women enticing and use the dominant gaze to seduce them. The Muslim women, who have also realized the mystery and power contained in their invisibility, use their invisibility to their advantage. However, in the contemporary Islamic Arab female writing culture, in spite of the religious injunction that women should always lower their gaze, the female characters use their gaze to oppose the male control, domination and sexual segregation. Paradoxically, sexual segregation strategically heightens the sexual dimension in spite of the restricted interaction between men and women, especially through the practice of "homo-social" relations. The practice of seclusion (homosocial) in itself heightens seduction. In fact, seduction is a conflict strategy, a way of seeming to give of one while procuring a great pleasure without actually giving anything.

el Sadaawi, through her narrative, pragmatically, makes her women characters transcend their bodies by moving them beyond their social, physical and psychological constraints through an oppositional gaze that counters their invisibility. As a medical practitioner, el Sadaawi used medicine – a science of the body – as a catalyst. The social power of the physician is thus used to exorcise the weakness of the female. Nawal el Sadaawi combines science (medicine) and art

to create a text that is indissolubly tied to sexuality and the body. Difference is essentially grounded in and articulated through the body, which is the medicine (the differing area of gender and power) "that allows her to get rid of contradictions and express her ideas, in more than language" (Brian Belton and Clare Dowding 4). The thematic nexus of science and art, elements that pull in opposite directions, pervades the fictional narratives of el Sadaawi and tear her characters apart. In fact, medicine is interpreted by el Sadaawi as science versus art, and coldness versus compassion, directly projecting the male/female division. It is only through this male dominant profession (medicine) that the obsession over women's powerlessness is transcended. In order to challenge patriarchal oppression, she employs the tools of oppression and pollution, that is, the woman's body and the woman's voice (awra) as narrative discourse. In this case, she shifts her role as a healer – the woman physician – and transforms into a mediator in the discourse of gender and power. So, her narrative becomes a source of healing and awareness like her profession (medicine).

These elements have similar applications in both science and art, and are sometimes used pejoratively in religious societies like Egypt to define female identity. The elements include: the female body as a symbol of desire and chaos, mirror, water and the voice (mouth), and the word which is the art that narrates the female's story. In this case, the writer establishes a physician/patient and writer/narrator relationship in the discourse of gender. The physician's science is substituted for social power in the battle between the sexes, and into a discursive authority, the power of comprehension and description that the medical practitioner shares with the writer. For el Sadaawi, science and literary articulation are inextricably tied to the woman's body and to the expressive ability of the woman's literary voice (Malti-Douglas 130). For the

writer, science plays a key mediating role to set creative tensions between control and compassion, culture and nature, and in a reformulation of the idea of the two notions of science and art, where science turns into the literary locus for the discussion of art and gender. So, in a most provocative and innovative style, Nawal el Sadaawi exploits and explores a narrative technique that is most unusual in modern Arab literary writing. This is a technique of embedding or reframing. A female physician acting in her professional capacity becomes the initial narrator; then she reframes a story, eventually told by the patient – the heroine.

In *Woman at Point Zero*, one discovers the effort and success of the literary creation because it represents the most complex of el Saddawi's writing. A psychiatrist working in a women's prison (an external narrator) expresses her interest in a prostitute awaiting execution for murdering a pimp named Marzouk. The bulk of the narration consists of the prostitute's life experience recounted through an embedding narrative style – the initial narrator disappearing into oblivion. But at the end of the novel, the physician realises that she is no better than the prostitute in a society that subjects and dominates its women. This literary technique pervades other el Sadaawi's fictions like *God Dies by the Nile*, *Memoirs of a Woman Doctor and Daughter of Isis*. The story presents, through embedding or reframing, internal (psychological) and external (physical) conflicts and the personal conquest of a woman in a Muslim society. The narrator and the author of *Woman at Point Zero* are the same – Nawal el Sadaawi. As the author, she presents a fictionalised version of two real people: Firdaus and herself. Though the fictional characters closely resemble the two real people, they are distinct. The physician-narrator is a wealthy doctor, who occupies a higher social position, while the other (internal) prostitute-narrator is a victim of 'hisbna' or a representation of shame by the societal code of conduct. The

fictional el Sadaawi struggles with feelings of insignificance, and at the end of the book she is consumed with helpless rage over the condition of women, including herself, in her country. In the text, the protagonist surmounts the obstacles set for her by the society through a successful and personally fulfilling identity representation. The heroine breaks social barriers associated with physical realities defined by her body. Hence, self-determination and education define her significance.

The literary frame of the novel opens with an assertion that "this woman is real of flesh and blood because of her self-determination not to submit to patriarchal norms *(Woman at Point Zero 5*). The 'realness' in her character is her ability to significantly counter the social limitations against women. This 'real' woman whose voice is the marginalised 'awra', and through whom the narrative saga begins is defined first by her body. Her name, Firdaus, means Paradise. Her name ironically connotes pleasure but portends danger (chaos) as a woman and for the men respectively. She is contrasted with the physician narrator's namelessness in terms of significance. The physician narrator is insignificant for her inability to challenge patriarchal laws in spite of her success in male profession.

Succinctly put, the reality of the heroine as a prostitute and murderer tells some story about the conditions of women in North Africa, while the initial narrator's social status depicts an uncertainty couched in the certainty of Firdaus' status and ability as a woman in her society. The condition of female visibility is hinged on the significant and insignificant positions occupied by the narrators respectively. Their positions of objectivity and subjectivity are first initiated by the jailer's voice, like the voices one hears in dreams:

> And her mouth also becomes big and her two large lips move in front of my eyes like two panels of a large door that is opening and closing, then opening and closing. (11)

The jailer's lips or mouth like the panels of a door are metaphors of the oral narrative process that will ensue. Also, the jailer's mouth and voice stand for the woman's 'awra' – the conditions of women or female subjection to the dominant power. el Sadaawi presents the condition of women through Firdaus' sexuality by thrusting the same image of pollution in the face of men through a scientific manipulation of language. The metaphor of vagina (awra) is an example of the scientific manipulation of language for artistic purpose. The female 'vagina' metaphorically captures the metric dimension of Firdaus' empty cell constructed by men to protect social values from shame committed by women: "a womblike structure, whose window and door are closed."

The dreamlike state of uncertainty with the jailer's mouth further captures the internal or psychological conflicts in the heroine. That the psychiatrist sits on the floor of the cell like "someone who moves while asleep" symbolises her insignificance in spite of her profession, in the presence of Firdaus' significant definition of her identity. However, the ground under her is cold, but "with coldness that does not reach her body like the coldness of the ocean in a dream." Firdaus' voice is "like the voices one hears in dream" (7) and becomes the narrator's point of consciousness. The author draws upon science, a profession dominated by men, to make metaphoric references to female conditions and subvert male authority. The dreamlike state of uncertainty further depicts the coldness of science which the author subtly uses to contrast the narrative art of realisation. The heroine's voice becomes a guide to and a source of wisdom from "afar yet so close". Therefore, when Firdaus' narration ends, her voice "stopped suddenly as voices in a dream stop". Though Firdaus' voice disappears, "its echo remains like those voices

one hears in dreams". The element of uncertainty, once again, presented at the level of certainty – a process of wakefulness and sleepiness – the edge of reality and illusion where the truth of women's conditions is revealed.

Countering these dreamlike qualities of uncertainty is the psychiatrist's insistence on unfolding Firdaus' story as 'real'. The significance of this insistence to narrate the story is in the demand for identification – the representation of the subject as different. In the narration, Firdaus' story is shrouded in an "atmosphere of certain uncertainty" to portray the position and conditions of two different women. The first dismembers the desire concealed in the patriarchal 'gaze' of domination through self-determination. The other challenges male domination through her profession as a psychiatrist. Thus, Firdaus' struggle for identification builds up tension and contrasts in the metaphoric distinction between dream and reality in the prologue and the epilogue. The reality is associated with the 'flesh and blood' of Firdaus, but corporeality defines her as a body. This implies that she is an individual that threatens the social order and must be subdued. So her voice belongs to the ethereal or uncertain realm of dreams that is only imagined in the woman's body and must be controlled. Within the Islamic Arab enclave, the woman's body is pitted against the woman's voice. One must not be seen and the other should not be heard. Although both are suspended on the plane of uncertain existence, yet they interact to overturn the conditions of invisibility.

Woman at Point Zero is a searing radical womanist indictment of male-female relations. Firdaus travels in all directions of human endeavour to attain her significance as a woman in a Muslim society. One of the most salient *leitmotivs* in the novel is the woman's body. Who controls it? Do women have a right to it? The Muslim man's eyes subject the Muslim woman's body and in that

act of domination its own frame of reference is transgressed, its field of vision disturbed. In the narrative, the eyes or looks play an important physicality in terms of domination and opposition (*Woman at Point Zero* 3). The desire or demand to control by patriarchy backed by religion is reasoned by Leila Ahmed as an indication of the failure of the "social system" of Islam:

> Islam degraded them (women) and it was this degradation, most evident in the practices of veiling and segregation that the inferiority of Muslim men could be traced… .(153)

Thus, el Sadaawi's narrative saga is a verbal attempt to reclaim the female body by countering the patriarchal visible imposition on her identity. *God Dies by the Nile* is another textual demonstration of the importance of the woman's body as a site of resistance against the oppressor. Deirdre Lashgari also states in a review of *God dies by the Nile* that the angry eyes and closed lips of the peasants signify their protest against a system that strictly censors their voice (148). The woman's femaleness is believed to regulate her behaviour, hence her physical marginality through norms and customs such as veiling and seclusion by the wearing of *hijab* or *galabeya* (14). These symbolic and strategic restrictions are visible markers of difference and the inferiority of Muslim women, "the symbol of the oppression of women and the backwardness of Islam" (in Ahmed 150).

However, Mernissi sees invisibility as paradoxical. That is, a society that opts for sexual segregation impoverishes heterosexual relations, thereby fostering "homo-social" relations (140). In other words, it is the inclination to spend most of one's time, most of one's life, with individuals of the same sex. In order to enforce a "homo-social" activity, the circumcision device is imposed to reduce the potency of the woman, thereby giving her pain instead of pleasure and denying her right to pleasure or personhood both physically and spiritually:

> Sometimes I couldn't distinguish which one of them was my father. He resembled them so closely that it was difficult to tell … How was it that she had given birth to me without a father? … Then she brought a woman who was carrying a small knife or maybe a razor blade. They cut off a piece of flesh from between my thighs. (13)

Circumcision in this culture is used to deny women the experience of sexual pleasure; its intention by the masculine society is to reduce the potency of the woman (the dominated). The result of the denied pleasure is a sacred memory (*Woman at Point Zero* 56). Unfortunately, this homo-social practice only enhances seduction through manipulation (Mernissi 141).

The practice of seclusion in Islam is a paradoxical device to protect the passive male from an active female power, rather than being an instrument of domination and protection in the social order. Hence, in order to ensure male authority through seclusion, early marriage is encouraged. Marriage is another necessary social status, an absolute pre-requisite for a woman to be 'respectable' and remain within her social domain (Callaway 439). The invisibility of the Muslim woman thus is to prevent the trespass of the female from her 'private' sphere into the 'public' domain. The male-female relationship is depicted as being separated by sexual norms. So Firdaus questions her identity, her femaleness, her social status and even her paternity (12-16) by using an oppositional power of the gaze to challenge the disparity. The oppositional gaze that challenges the separation is voiced in Firdaus' concern about her identity:

> But because I am a woman I have never had the courage to lift my hand… Only my make-up, my hair and my expensive shoes were upper class. With my secondary school certificate and suppressed desires I belonged to the middle class. But by birth I was a lower class. (12)

The physicality of the gaze is articulated through the body and it reveals the patriarchal stereotypes in its opposition by the initial-narrator:

> It was as though I died the moment her eyes looked into mine. They were eyes that killed like a knife, probing, cutting deep down inside, their look steady, unwavering. (6)

In the narrative, the gaze is an important symbol. It expresses marginalisation and difference through being dominating, dominated or oppositional between men and women. The dominating 'look' or gaze is reflected in all patriarchal structures, even in the symbolic glare into the mirror which reflects a woman conditioned by the patriarchal society, instead of the female Self (21). The 'look', a reflection of the jaundiced psychology and societal rigidity, is further depicted in the eating habits and relationship between Firdaus and her miserly husband, Sheik Mahmoud: "He kept looking at my plate while I ate … watching as I cooked or washed…" (43, 44).

The dominating eyes or look creates fear for the dominated; it indicates the desire to control and subject, and batters under the camouflage of religious injunctions and obligations. Within the narrative, the gaze cuts sharper than any razor or knife. The relationship of the eyes to sexuality is "scopic", borrowing the notion of Luce Irigaray, that the male sexual gaze is essentially visual-dominant because it clearly objectifies, reduces, and dominates his love or sex object. The visual-domination and its violence are revealed in the narrator's description of their symbolic eyes:

> … I was seeing the eyes that now confronted me for the first time. Two jet black surfaces … (49)

The metaphoric image of the gaze that dominates or opposes and encircles is also represented in women and food, or the activity of eating. The eating and sexual gaze deviant and oppositional in the prostitute-physician relationship is also regarded as 'bisociation' in activity. For example, Firdaus' husband's 'scopic' activity is linked to eating and his physical and sexual invasion of Firdaus. The 'bisociation' is thus the 'scopic' relationship between eating and sexual acts (Malti-

Douglas 55). Another aspect of the 'bisocation' or 'scopic' presence is the waiter's gaze at Firdaus at the restaurant. Her purchasing power, though 'scopic' to the masculine, is a self-actualisation motif to the woman; a reclaiming of individuality in a separatist society. This eating-sexual 'bisociation' is expressed clearer in *Cycling Song*:

> In the first rape, Hamida, the innocent child, is sucking on a sweet, for which she has not paid. In the second, Hamida, the hungry girl in the alien city, is about to bite into a piece of stolen bread. In the third, Hamida, the household servant, has chewed the forbidden piece of meat. In each case, the girl's hunger for food is denied and the rapist hunger for sexual gratification is satisfied. (Multi-Douglas 76)

However, in Firdaus, the triumph over the male gaze rests eventually on her satiation of her physical hunger from the pressure of oppressive patriarchy (66).

In el Sadaawi's fictional corpus, the eye-gaze is equated with science, while art is equated with the voice (nature). Through a scientific observation, which is cold, distant and denotative, various social and political issues in Muslim Northern Africa are examined. Such themes include teen marriage, religious dogmatism, female subjugation, patriarchal and societal domination, circumcision, female education, husband-wife relationship and other prejudices. The observer, the opposing gazer, Firdaus becomes the symbolic mirror that reflects the societal images and unveils the patriarchal domination in order to subvert them. Thus, while one gaze is to document and dominate, another gaze opposes in order to subvert the rules. Due to the desire or demand to subject female potency within a religiously conscious society, the female Self is denied in her identity and voice, that is, never given any choice:

> I tried to reply but my voice failed me. No one had asked me before whether I preferred oranges or tangerines. As a matter of fact, I myself had never thought whether I preferred … (47)

Thus, the Self is subjected by the Other while it yearns for an Otherness. In this case, there is a split between the Self and the Other in which the Muslim woman continues to live the pre-given image of the Other:

> 'Tangerines', I answered. But after he had bought them, I realized that I liked oranges better, but I was ashamed to say so… (47)

However, the imbalance in the gaze of the male/female relationship is reverted and negated by a female oppositional gaze. The opposition of the dominated female gaze is marked by her walking away from the domination of the society, father, uncle, Bayoum, Sheikh Mahmoud (her husband) and marking this identification difference through a symbolic mirror and gaze (40) and discovering a new world, a new awareness through female bonding with Sherifa which gives her a new identity in 'body occupation' – prostitution. In other words, the society has made woman a body as opposed to Self; so the woman decides to sell the body but on her own terms:

> A new world was opening up in front of my eyes, a new world which for me had not existed before…How was it that I had been blind to its existence all these years. Now it seemed as if a third eye had suddenly been slit open in my head… (40)

This new world brings Firdaus a new understanding about the pains and hunger in the eyes of many that reflect dullness, resignation, a certain sadness and worry. This awareness also opens the door to another life for her: a new Self through a consciousness-raising process to depict an Otherness through a combination of both Self and Other. The Otherness is attained through an encounter with Sharifa who leads her to another plane of identity and rebirth from the harsh, pre-given identity of patriarchy. This new identity is metaphorically symbolised through the "cleansing bath" and the confidence to see the Otherness of her identification in the mirror:

> … So I could have a bath, … Everything around me had this smooth softness

> quality about it. I closed my eyes and abandoned myself to the softness of things. I felt my body was now like that of a new-born baby, soft and smooth… When I opened my eyes, and I looked into the mirror I realized that now I was being born again with a new body, smooth and tender as a rose petal…. Even the air was calm …. She was standing close by watching me, her eyes radiating a strong and green light, the colour of the trees and the sky and the waters of the Nile …. (53)

Water in ancient Egyptian mythology becomes a marker of transition from one identity to the next. While covering many cultures in their survey, Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant in *A Dictionary of Symbols* attach to water the image of *materia prima*. According to them, "it [water] is a source of life, a vehicle of cleansing and a center of regeneration" (1081). In the Muslim tradition, the Qur'an says that God's throne stands on water. Similarly, for Muslims water figures in ablution, a small washing activity initiated before starting with the five daily prayers. The dead, too, are prepared for burial by washing them with water. Water can be "[the] astral fluid, universal substance, sub-consciousness, cleansing, emotions, and the reservoir of the cosmic mind stuff that can be stirred into vibration by meditation." Nawal el Sadaawi possibly agrees with the suggestion that "[t]he water habitat symbolizes the fluid nature of female sexuality," an opinion that does not contradict Meri Lao:

> …, the leap into the sea, more than any other physical event, awakens echoes of a dangerous and hostile initiation. It is the only, exact, reasonable image, the only image that can be experienced of a leap into the unknown. It is in the sea, the womb, and the grave, all places of birth, rebirth and regeneration where the enigma of transformation is concealed. The danger and seduction of the sea becomes a metaphor for the womb, the grave, and the dangers of the feminine realm. (34)

Water, both of the sea and the Nile, provides the framework wherein all birth, search and rebirth physically take place. In this context, water (either of the Mediterranean or Nile or any other) bears resemblance to similar watery fluids flowing from the womb at the time of birth, re-birth,

recreation and rising to consciousness from all restrictions. According to Fouad Mami, the end of each stage in life and before moving to the next, water stands as a symbol for the ritual of passage. Water serves as a marker indicating the shift from one identity to another, as man keeps changing constantly, moving with his domestic and public roles in life (62). Open to wider surfaces and freely running, waters refer to the ideas that there are no limitations or restrictions to what a man or woman can be. He or she can shape his or her self in a variety of ways. In this sense, after realizing the need to extend goodness to others, one is open to the option of crossing the limitations of his or her petty self of some unwelcome and unfortunate past. Switching to the more constructive side of one's identity means being *wholly* absorbed in helping others to the extent of being able to initiate similar positive understanding everywhere around. By re-enacting the symbology of water as categorically limitless, Nawal induces the reader to witness an instance when one loses or transcends her individual identity for the purpose of regaining a more collectively productive identity afterward. The initial fear of gazing at the symbolic mirror and seeing the patriarchal pre-given image and ugliness of being female is overcome with the symbolic 'bath'. The mirror now reflects a new identity, a new beauty and a new resolution.

The 'bath' of renewal engineered by Madam Sherifa allows Firdaus to shed her old, subjected and undesirable Self by redefining the nature of power in the male and the female. The female power initially controlled by the male's gaze that sees women as mere objects of desire is challenged when Firdaus meets Sherifa. Sherifa changes Firdaus' traditional notion of male power through the 'bath,' just as expounding her saga to the psychiatrist brings about a rebirth through the narrative. Madam Sherifa's eyes provide security and independence or individuality; she teaches Firdaus to command the power of her physical appearance to her advantage. The new

consciousness creates a personality, Self and consciousness. Firdaus finally learns what it means to have something other people desire. This knowledge creates power just as money empowers her, ambiguously though, because she is still vulnerable to men like the pimp. It is this renewal that leads to the other unfolding story of murder which finally proves that she has control over herself through a strong desire to assert and defend her individuality against the patriarchal invisibility and the pre-given identification. Thus in countering patriarchal subjection in the novel, the male gaze subjects the woman and the female gaze opposes the subjection. The opposition gaze creates a realisation that "… A man does not know a woman's value, Firdaus. She is the one who determines her value" (55).

This discourse transmits and transforms the 'awra' of many subjected women under the veil of religion. Here, Firdaus voices a discovery (in the narrative) of the important value of individuality, especially of women and the pretentiousness of patriarchal intellectualism. The man desires and demands satisfaction even if it were through the subjugation of the female personality in order to boost his ego. Firdaus, thus, learns to value her individuality by taking and giving pleasure on her own terms, and not under servitude to male demands.

> … Then he carried me to the bed ... As I picked up my little bag and started to move towards the door, he slipped a ten pound note between my fingers. It was as if he had lifted a veil from my eyes, and I was seeing for the first time…, tore away the shroud that covered up a truth …. (63, 64)

Awareness of one's monetary or financial value empowers an identity so that one becomes aware that he or she had been under the veil of patriarchal control for many years. Firdaus' accumulation of wealth moves her from the role of the invisible daughter or wife to an independent woman. This consciousness triggers a psychological re-awakening. Such re-awakening includes a stronger oppositional and deviant gaze, change in eating orientation

compared to past experience (65) and the joy of being in control of one's identity. This status alteration challenges the eyes that gaze to condemn the femaleness or body:

> The waiter… The movement of his eyes as they avoided my plate cut like a knife through a veil which hung over my eyes, and I realized this was my first time in my life I was eating without being watched by two gazing eyes… (66)

She further realises that a woman who controls the finances of her identity is like a voice, an awra that is forbidden like a woman's body (67). Her financial power commands respect, in spite of the patriarchal attitude towards female economic empowerment. Firdaus thus negates the *status quo* by walking straight, looking into people's eyes and in fact countering any subjecting gaze, and without a veil for that matter. This contradicts an Islamic injunction, (Sura iv, verse. 26). However, when Di'aa tells her prostitution does not make her respectable, she quits the profession and placed herself in the hands of men for respectability. She enlightens herself and gets a respectable job that she later leaves when she discovers that Ibrahim is using her for sexual pleasure. The quest for respectability thus becomes a trap designed to put women under men.

Firdaus, invariably, through her 'birth' or body regains her voice (identity) (68). However, in reconstructing her identity through the body, she becomes another Self, a woman leaving her previous life of subjection and prostitution to become a secretary, "a respectable woman" through the power of education. In the process she falls in love but the object of her affection marries the boss' daughter. Ironically, the simplicity of her action is negated. So she returns to prostitution and eventually murders an imposing male pimp, an act through which she symbolically shelves the last vestige of virtue and illusion. The act of love between the male and the female is against the doctrines of Islam; such virtue is despised and considered simple-minded. With this disillusionment comes the 'truth' that a successful prostitute is better than a

"misled saint." For men deceive women and punish them for being deceived; they bind them in marriage and then chastise them with menial service or insults or blows for life. The marriage system is built on the cruelty of men and the suffering of women (86). According to Mernissi, marriage is equivalent to slavery for the woman because it places her in a situation in which she has to obey her husband without restrictions, except in cases where what he asks her to do constitutes a flagrant violation of Allah's orders (112).

The power of the gaze favours the male presence which creates gender imbalance, but el Sadaawi's account of Firdaus' saga subverts this situation. Firdaus' oppositional gaze is a resistance to male violence and imbalance. Her gaze penetrates the 'soul' of male subjection to reveal the desire, domination, violence and other imbalances behind the gaze. Firdaus refuses to be an object of the male gaze by rejecting its internalisation and turning the object of the gaze (her sexuality) to her advantage by becoming a highly paid and free prostitute (91). This decision releases the internal-narrator from a physical and psychological imprisonment. She therefore moves away from the imprisoned womanliness of women and the overbearing masculinity of men by reuniting with her emotion, humanity and femininity. She is able to do this by "speaking the truth" and tearing the 'mask' away to expose the face of their ugly reality (100). With this personal freedom and awareness she:

> Walked down the street, [her] head held high to the heavens with pride of having destroyed all masks to reveal what are hidden behind. [Her] footsteps … were the footsteps of a woman who believed in herself, knew where she was going and could see her goal. (78)

Conversely, in spite of the heroine's binary opposition, the novelist's *modus operandi* for redefining Firdaus' identity and sexuality negate the African womanist complementary

philosophy. Nnolim condemns el Sadaawi for shocking the sensibility of her readers by creating heroines with murderous intentions in their attempt to express their significance (52). Adimora-Ezeigbo also admits that el Sadaawi's works leave her readers "shocked and outraged" (119). Charles Nnolim concludes that:

> It must be emphasized that the manner and method by which Mariama Bâ and Nawal el Sadaawi have engaged their protagonists on a destructive and murderous course is a symptom of misplaced aggression that must be condemned, for the real oppressors of women in Muslim society are the religion of Islam, plus patriarchy and class … and as long as the patriarchal characters exist, so will they use the religion of Islam to wreak havoc on the women folk. (in Opara 54)

In other words, el Sadaawi paints a disturbing picture of women who suffer under the domination of religion, patriarchy and class. To eliminate those agents of oppression, el Sadaawi creates women as avengers and as killers of the wickedness of the system in their lives. Nnolim is of the view that feminism should not licence criminality and murder. The heroine's declaration after murdering Marzouk (78), conscious of the Islamic injunction not to steal or kill (7), affirms that Firdaus is aware of the consequences of her struggle to redefine her identity.

Invariably, the male-female relationship is destined to be a battle. A battle that is old and artificial where the woman faces the man alone, but the man stands protected by the tradition, laws, and creeds – backed up by generations, history and men, women, and children, all with sharp tongues extended like the blades of a sword (*Memoirs of a Woman Doctor* 75).

From this point of tension that is psychic, sexual, religious and political, a strategy of subversion emerges. It is a mode of negation that seeks not only to unveil the domination of patriarchy but to manipulate its representation of women as subjects. Or a form of power that exercises at the very limit of identity and authority in the mocking spirit of mask and image (Bhabha 121).

According to Fedwa Malti-Douglas, the "woman" in el Sadaawi's literary construct, is doomed to fight a battle she rarely wins" (208). Firdaus, however, "carries her freedom in her eyes", not on her body which is the site of male power.

Firdaus' identity experience ends as suddenly as it began through the voice that is like a dream, revealing to the psychiatrist-listener, the external narrator, the 'realness' or significance of the woman with "a real voice". It creates awareness of the physician-narrator's own insignificance in spite of her profession, which is clearly connected to patriarchy. The fact that Firdaus remembers her experience and Nawal el Sadaawi remembers the conditions of women affirm Homi Bhabha's view that to remember is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful "re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present" (121). It is a memory of the history of subjection and sexuality, ambiguity and authenticity, and the question of cultural and religious identity. *Woman at Point Zero* thus casts an ambiguity on the profession of the physician that is supposed to embody science, wisdom and superiority, and 'a standing outside' of the patient's personal experience. Firdaus, however, embodies wisdom and her narration is a purgation that art offers through her body and words used to battle patriarchal domination. Paradoxically, the "scientific" aspect of medicine embodies patriarchy. However, in el Sadaawi's fictional corpus, the most important function of medicine and the physician is that of mediation. There is therefore a corporeal shift wherefrom her role as a healer, the woman physician is transformed into a mediator of sexual and social discourse.

El Sadaawi turns the power of medicine to two directions: first, she uses it as a vehicle for women to regain their lost power; second, she makes it the focus of her own call for the

interaction of traditionally male and female qualities. Through the external, first person embedding oral narrative, the literary linkage of science and art reflects the female condition, which reveals that the woman's body is a biological site dominated by male desire. Through art this domination is challenged. Art then becomes a channel through which these rights are expressed. The physician and patient alike are caught in the coils of the sexual conditions of women. Social justice becomes intricately fused with the physician's profession through the narrative process.

From Nawal el Sadaawi's binary opposition of the society, one can deduce the productive significance of the writer in representing women's conditions through the eyes of the heroine. The narrative structure of the text also subjects art and science to the reflection of the female identity. She stipulates that in order to counter female invisibility, the coldness of science, through the narrative process could bring out the repressions in human beings, especially in women.

In order to challenge invisibility, the heroine empowers herself through education and increases her self-worth. Firdaus' uncle gives her the first taste of the power of books when he secretly teaches her to read. Books become a symbol of her uncle's kindness and her own empowerment and self-worth just like the 'bath' and the 'look' in the 'mirror' create a changed person in her self-identity.

It must be noted that Firdaus' efforts at countering invisibility result in a violent disruption of the socio-religious setting and bring about an extreme and severe punishment. However, this movement towards enhancing her individuality is a beginning or rather, a sign of hope for the

silenced voices. It creates self-awareness in the physician-narrator who realises her inadequacy in her profession to improve the conditions and lift the shame of condemned women.

The subversion of the binary strategies of the patriarchal society is further represented in *Love in the Kingdom of oil*. In the novel, women are no longer vengeful in as vicious a manner as represented in *Woman at Point Zero*, rather they simply walk out of an unsettling conjugal situation without second thoughts. It is a more recent work like *Wounding Words* by Evelyn Accad. Their protagonists are more enlightened and independent; their demands are more attuned to compromise and complementarity rather than radicalism. *Walking through the Fire* is another reflection of el Sadaawi's socio-political campaign for women's emancipation in North Africa:

> Words should not seek to please, to hide the wounds in our bodies or the shameful limits in our lives … they may give us pain but they can also provoke us to question what we have accepted for thousands of years. (The blurb)

el Sadaawi explores a hybrid situation highlighting the antagonism between science and art just like the coming together of two opposing forces in her works such as: *Woman at Point Zero, Daughter of Isis* and *Circling Song*. Her hybridity revaluates the status of patriarchal power and its influence on female identity. It portrays the displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination against women, thereby unsettling the mimetic demands of patriarchal power through identifications of strategies to subvert them.

Overall, Nawal el Sadaawi's literary works create a space where difference is represented by the binaries of science and art; where the raw (social) power of science is transmitted into an

acceptable (social) power of art. It is as such the ultimate woman's struggle, but a modern one this time, of linking the individual with collective emancipation (Malti-Douglas 143).

Ambiguous Visibility: Conformity and Deviance in *Wounding Words: A Woman's Journal in Tunisia*

A woman's positive attitude towards changing her life and situation characterises Evelyne Accad's study of women in the Muslim Arab world of Tunisia. Subjugation of the Other in the novel – *Wounding Words* – is predominantly a female condition. It is both physical and psychological, and it transcends race, class, ethnicity and caste; hence, the universality of this cry of a woman subjected through "a rape of identity". Despite the difference among them the author's heroines are champions of change and justice because they inspire other women and people to live and carry on in spite of solitude, marginalisation, humiliation, and other female bickering that bedevilled the feminist movement of the region.

Evelyne Accad's work, like Nawal el Sadaawi's and those of other African female writers, focuses on the sensitivity, vision and courage of women in defining their identity. It is a narrative of female courage infused with humanism, and directed at truly liberating characters like Chinua Achebe's very masculine, wife-beating protagonist, Okonkwo, who is sent to his "mother land" to make him wholly human. In "Women and Resistance in Ngugi's *Devil on the Cross*", Jennifer Evans identifies that sort of courage with Jacinta Waringa and Wanja in *Petals of Blood*, women through whom Ngugi sees the essence of his own personal struggle and the communal struggle of the people of Kenya (*African Literature Today* 15, 138).

The responses of Tunisian women to invisibility and the discourse of Muslim women's identity reflect the condition of female sexuality. Like el Sadaawi, Accad paints a picture of female segregation, abuse, and violence against women who suffer oppressions through religion, patriarchy, and sex. According to her, marriage, the family and other societal mores breed a master-slave relationship where the female sexuality is defined by symbols of the 'gaze', 'body' and 'words'. In order to eliminate these social and religious modes of oppression, Accad creates a vision of visibility for the women; that is, she challenges male dominance just as in Nawal el Sadaawi's literary representation. Her literary exposition is as radically deviant as el Sadaawi's whose heroine is a *femme fatale*, "a killer, and an avenger of the wicked men" (Chioma Opara 52). Accad's novel is a depiction of the female identity, the dynamism of the Muslim woman's sexuality and their visibility as against the principle of invisibility. The work is a representation of female identity without the vicious character of *femme fatale* like a Frankenstein (the monster that also consumes the inventor). Rather, her heroines exhibit an independence that tends towards visibility of modern Western women. This portrayal indicates however that such independence is ambiguous because even within the contemporary dispensation, the society is still governed by the religious-cultural understanding about the Muslim women's identity.

The novel, *Wounding Words: A Woman's Journal in Tunisia*, is a progressive update of the emancipatory drive of women in the Islamic Northern region of Africa. It is an expression of the woman's rights, her acknowledgements and her self-actualisation in modern times. The author, using the epistolary technique, verbalises and dramatises the subordination and separateness of a woman by creating a 'women's sphere' within the mainstream culture, which constitutes the 'standard'. *Wounding Words* is a literary representation of a woman as 'Otherness.' The woman,

however, subverts the pre-given image and develops a new 'social' identity that is personal and outside the male standard. It tries to clarify and present the predicament of women in the social, cultural and religious life as a marginalised group inferior to men. This separation reflects societal attitudes regarding male/female relationships.

The capacity of literature to encode and disseminate images and paradigms makes it a pivotal force in the female identity discourse and struggle. Accad, through the narrative process, creates a female voice in the midst of invisibility and communicates the woman's personality that contradicts the male intellectual interpretation of a woman as docile in the Muslim Arab region. With the use of a third person point of view in a diary form of documentation, whereby each character narrates her personal experience of invisibility, the Islamic Arab Lebanese writer depicts a woman's psychological and physical struggle for identity against the sexual subjection of Muslim women's body and voice as sites of male authority.

The body and voice are common literary markers in female writing, especially in Northern African literary discourse, because socialisation and sexuality are based on religious, social and cultural tenets even though such are defined by aspects of their sexual experience and disposition. Their voice in this text connotes sexual aberration – *fitna* – which implies chaos in the social order where a female voice must not be heard. Religious interpretation in this case enables the exclusion of a particular group by their sex and sexuality in spite of the principle of integration in Islam. The internalisation of the male-female sexual difference makes the female characters in *Wounding Words* rebel against the restrictions of the Islamic interpretations that promote inequalities between men and women.

Sexual difference in Tunisia raises a binary opposition between men and women: the former opposing the women's quest for expression through visibility and the latter opposing male control and the 'fixated' culture of invisibility. Invariably, it opens the 'oeuvres' of strained male-female relationships. The author attempts to document in a diary form the rebellion against invisibility and the development of a female sphere in the Northern African society. Thus, using the symbolic element of Nature as both an aesthetic tool and representation of female vitality and sexuality, she depicts patriarchal destruction of the environment and female presence through religious and cultural domination. In order to express this, the aesthetic qualities of Nature as free, regenerative and uninhibited are portrayed through the nudity of a woman (Aïda) immersed in the glory of the Mediterranean Sea:

> Aida moves in Harmony with nature. ... Her body claims its freedom, breasts uncovered to the wind… in a scored gesture like the goddess expressing her vitality to women. (*Wounding Words* 1)

Nature in this case, offers to women an escape from societal constraints and subjugation of the female body. The visibility of the female Self is expressed through her sexuality (body) by inverting the same object of oppression to their advantage through a symbolic stripping to the bones of any pretentiousness of patriarchal fundamentalism, and the trespassing of the Muslim women into the public space of the male. *Prima facie* purification and redefinition of the Muslim women's identity is captured in her identification with Nature:

> Woman of Tunisia, breasts naked in the waves. Unthinkable ... This woman, though, is present – alive. Borne up by dreams, crying out her burning desire to live, her thirst for freedom. A call for justice, an unmasking of oppression. Her waves generate other waves…. (*Wounding Words* 1)

Nature, according to Chioma Opara and M. P. Eboh, is in the main subordinated to culture which is deemed to have mastered space. Nature is shoved into the mould of primitivity and culture is

linked with the scientific and practical (1). Man and culture signify destruction, while woman and Nature mean creativity:

> Men are destroying the earth with their weapons of war. I wish I could tell them to dive into the sea, without fear and not in a spirit of vengeance and conquest …. If they learned to love Nature they would also love women better … (*W W* 3)

In other words, man is associated with rational culture and women represent irrationality and naturalness; the former connotes virility and dynamism while the latter implies passivity and Otherness that is biologically subordinated. By application, Opara and Eboh argue that the female body being an essential biological site is fore-grounded as a transcendent mechanism of constructive and generative nature (1).

The unrestrained nudity of female sexuality depicted in the novel shows the female desire for a new interpretation and understanding of the female body in Northern Muslim society. Nudity, according to Opara and Eboh, encompasses a wholesomeness which is distinct from the nakedness that signifies exploitation (4). Nudity in the narrative describes the desire of Muslim women for wholesomeness or visibility. The sea in the Muslim society symbolises rebirth, renewal and regeneration. Ritualistically, the sea is a process of washing clean the "old Self" like in ablutions to regain liberty from male dominance. This process causes ripples like waves into other 'fabrics' of female Self. In other words, through the bath, Aïda begins her renewal process as she voices the desire:

> Aïda enters the water and, breathing in deeply, shakes off her fatigue. Her hands, which were stretched skyward ... now breaks the waves, pulling her body towards the horizons. ... This woman, though, is present – alive borne up by her dreams, crying out her burning desire to live, her thirst for freedom . . . (*W W* 1)

Aïda significantly washes off all the dust and worries of Tunis and expresses the desire to be close to Nature because it energises. Nature becomes the ally or strength of the heroine, a kind of talisman that enables her to make her way through socio-religious alienation in order to define her identity.

The diary observations of the writer intimates the readers that the process by which women in Tunisia counter an invisibility has not only created ambiguity, marginalisation and repudiation, but also trauma in defining their identity within the male's public space. Repudiation, in this case, is regarded not only a trap for the man and the woman, it also morally binds all members of the family who feel uncomfortable when they have witnessed a verbal repudiation. If the man repudiates a woman and does not perform a remarriage process, the woman feels that she is living as a fornicator who is committing *zina* (Mernissi 119).

Apart from Nature, other 'muted' themes include the female body as a site of desire and chaos for men, psychological and spiritual subjugation; the issue of women against women; motherhood; single parenthood and partnership, marital abuses, polygamy, and 'hadra' sexual segregation. The 'hadra' is a body-centred religion (63). The 'dominant' concerns include global conflicts, religious fundamentalism and violence of the Zionist states and the chaos of civil war in which women are the worst victims.

With a Western feminist orientation, Accad focuses on the societal structures that brutalise the women and society of Tunisia. Drawing upon the element of specificity in Gynocriticism, she examines the 'muted' and the 'dominant' discourse in women's writing: private/individual and

public/national in the female perception of identity and the male attitude to female visibility. She represents the rigid patriarchal hegemony in every sphere of their Islamic life.

Consequently, the 'muted' concern of the novel is centred on women's presence in male public space. This includes places like cafes, restaurants, work places, schools and theatres. It further explores male norm that defines such female trespassers as foes when unchaperoned by men or unveiled; the common practice of infibulations; the poverty of women; girl-child marriage; enforced child-bearing, and physical molestations by males, like the rape attempt on Hayate (the scholar-observer) by her Landlord because the system often turns the victim to the accused for 'luring' a man to commit *zina*. In an Islamic-Arab society, a female trespasser is a foe, a threat to the social order. In addition to such subjugation, the male power takes advantage of the social order to "do everything to exclude women, erase them, and keep them silent" (*W W* 13), as well as control their sexual power through the veil, and the perverted gaze that either subjects women to exclusion or prevents their expression of sexual desire. The 'dominant' concern focuses on the wars of nations against nations and how these affect societal development and the man and woman psychologically and social relationships in traditional interactions. An example is the violent war of the Zionist States (*W W* 74-80).

In response to this subjugation, there is the need to challenge and subvert the patriarchal intellectual attitude and interpretation through self-affirmation and self-actualisation which involves trespassing into the male domain. By using epistolary narrative technique, the narrator, Hayate, a Lebanese, observes the negotiating efforts of contemporary Muslim Arab women in challenging the notion of difference by entering into the male sphere. These women challenge male control through female-bonding and religious exorcism. The organisation of an

International Day for women also provides an opportunity to challenge publicly the system of invisibility and difference. The organisation gives them room to voice their views and express their creativity in reading and discussing one another's writing, forming a club, and bonding with one another.

Accad empowers women and strengthens their voice: "words break shackles and anguish" (*W W* 54), thereby subverting the male domination of the female body as an object of reproduction and acquisition. It is a medical case of psychosis and neurosis where men are afraid of losing their sexual control over women. In other words, the characteristic of the male power is interpreted as the will to power, the will to conquer. The characteristic of the female is a negative will to power. Invariably, the social and religious orders in Arab societies suggest an active female sexuality and male passiveness. The theory that seclusion (subjugation of female power) in Islam is a device to protect the passive male who cannot control himself sexually in the presence of the lust inducing female is further substantiated by the Qur'an Sura 24 verse 60. This means that women must be invisible, and even when they 'trespass' the public sphere – they must be veiled. Thus, the female who trespasses the male space without the veil is by the Islamic definition, a foe. The social structure of Islamic society creates 'homosocial' relations rather than heterosexual ones. This may somewhat respond to some of the questions of the characters in the text – "Is it the sexuality and procreative power of women that provoke fear and carry with it division and the unleashing of hate and love? Or is it that the custom of hospitality is outside the rite of honour bound up with sexuality, for they do not threaten the structure of the clan? ..." (*W W* 24).

As there are no words to justify the division or separation other than the symbolic genital encounter or superiority and intimidation, the Muslim Arab women in *Wounding Words* express their desire to be free through subtle activities or networking and creative expression of the words that ensure their invisibility: "If we free women, men will also be free ... Through mime and poetry you know how to express the importance of crucial moments in a woman's life, essential moments that have marked you. It is so important for women to put into words what has so long been repressed by society. . . It's also the fear of our sexuality that you bring out with so much finesse" (*W W* 58). It is the desire for freedom through manipulation of words and the fear and consequences of freedom that the novel recounts in defiance of Qur'anic injunctions on women. The female characters, in other words, imitate male activities like smoking, talking back, appearing in public places without the veil and not chaperoned, by imposing their visibility through their own intellectual creativity.

The women of Tunisia re-interpret the image of the female body as a site of male desire and also subvert the perceived view of a religious and social order through creativity. Thus, they desire a complementary relationship or 'relatedness' in an 'unrelatedness' system. It is this state of checks and balances that the Lebanese scholar and feminist, Hayate discovers in Tunisia. Her research grant and sojourn are funded by the United States of America. Through deviant actions (sexual and verbal) of the female characters like Aïda, Sami, Rima, Nayla and Alhame, Hayate narrates 'the desire' for empowerment and visibility. Also through their voices – verbalisation and recounting of their pains – they narrate their rejection and subjugation by the patriarchal society, and their bold and radical moves from the 'private' domain into the 'public' sphere. An instance of the desire to move the 'private' into the 'public' is the Tunisian women's meeting at

restaurants "naked", that is unveiled, signifying their desire and demand for relevance and acknowledgment by the society. The religious and social order of the female presence in the male space is a 'fitna' that can lure a man to commit 'zina', which elicits violence in men:

> She arrives at the International Hotel packed with men who stare at her. Persistent looks that undress her, size her up in detail … Men with insistent gaze, who scrutinize them so closely that women lower their heads. They are measured aggressively, making them feel that…this space is not theirs, that they should return home, or hide under a veil… .(*W W* 11)

Aggression is another strategy men adopt to conceal their fear of *fitna* when a woman trespasses their space. Aggression often comes in the form of the look or gaze that articulates objection and 'zina' or desire. The 'look' also expresses fear through aggression and desire. However, the female gaze challenges the male gaze. But in spite of the obvious challenge in the female's gaze she remains vulnerable to male dominance (aggression). The male dominant gaze undresses the female body and reminds her that she is naked without the veil and must return to invisibility. However, Ahlame and Hayate pay little attention to them. They walk on:

> Inspired by the bond between them that bridges time and space. They walked to give meaning to the darkness that invades the place. They walked carrying hope, scars, dreams ... They are looking for a place far removed from humiliation and meanness… heading towards a point of rupture and reconciliation that they know will lead them further still, into the light. (*W W* 58-59)

The female oppositional 'look' or gaze, as explained by bell hooks, challenges the male aggressive gaze that ensures their subordination (120). *Wounding Words* opens with the statement of a continuing and long-standing conflict over female identity, expressing a desire for females' physical and spiritual freedom. The struggle expressed at this point in the novel even before the narrator becomes conscious of her sexuality, desire and nature, eventually occupies most of her thoughts and sets the stage for other conflicts in male-female relationships.

> Men are destroying the Earth with their weapons of war. I wish I could tell them to dive into the sea, without fear and not in a spirit of vengeance and conquest, so they could see the marvels the sea creates. They would come out transformed and decide to end pollution and destruction. If they learn to love Nature, they would also love women better. They will encourage them to blossom. (*W W* 3)

Nature is presented as a mediating element that offers resolution to the muted and the dominant concerns in the relationships between men and women, and the community in a Muslim society. However, women are closer to Nature as intermediaries between nature and culture, while men represent the fixation of culture. Thus, within the Muslim social order, "the patriarchal system is built on the exploitation of Nature and women for men reinforce their strength by subjugating nature as well as women" (*W W* 3).

So, the narrative expresses awareness about the configuration of the female body as a traditional affixed image of a subordinated figure for social order in the Muslim society. In other words, through a woman's words – the "wounding words" – Hayate observes the female 'opposition' that deviates from the social order set by society. The personal wounding experiences of these women are documented in words. Aida recounts her life as an unfulfilled married woman and life as a single parent burdened by societal and religious disapproval. She expresses her desire to be free and nourished "without fear to assert herself" (*W W* 3). Rima, the enthusiast who conveys optimism and hospitality, shares her "spontaneous expression" (*W W* 13) of a woman's life, her wounds and words and hopes. She combines these experiences to create "systems of reconciliation beyond the shackles and chains" (*W W* 81), while Nayla experiences a spiritual and intellectual division of loyalty. Hers is a case of wanting to be 'oppositional' and yet not wanting to invert the social order. She lives in fear of revealing "the self and the other… (and)

bring(s) to the forefront the foundation of the world's lies" (*W W* 22). Often, she feels a strong sense of duty to justify her action which she mistakes for humanitarianism.

The women characters in one way or the other reflect the prevailing social, political, mental and economic attitudes that always fail to accord dignity and freedom to women in line with emerging contemporary women's consciousness. Nonetheless, the Qur'anic injunction grants a level of equality to both men and women but in traditional society, women are placed under the control of men because of the latter's intellectual role in social construction. This inequality, according to el Sadaawi and Mernissi results from the emergence of patriarchal systems at the advent of colonialism. In traditional African societies before the Western intrusion, women were treated with dignity.

The condition of women in Muslim Arab society is equated with insanity that requires religious exorcism instituted by patriarchy. This exorcism, a body-centred religion, is carried out on the female body through rituals within a structure that keeps men and women apart by space and sex. The religious exorcism is called 'hadra'. It is a trance inducing process whereby the subjected women are regarded as 'demented' and require exorcism. The process admits men and women but are demarcated by space, with the female ritual entailing different forms of abuses, such as, being stripped naked and exposed to male gaze without knowledge. Within the male space of the hadra, the male gaze is fixed on the female enclave, where a kind of hysteria is expressed through "waves of spasm". The religious space allowed the women is another expression of male control and female invisibility vis-a-vis representation of social division between the sexes that feeds the fantasies of male sexuality. In other words, the 'hadra' is a religious strategy to

hypnotise the women, an act orchestrated by men to pull women into a trance-like sexual exorcism and impotency:

> Aïda and Hayate cover their heads to enter the holy place. The women are separated from the men and led into the sanctuary, the holiest of holy places, the tomb of the marabout, the sheikh's ancestor. In this area – the place of the tomb – only women are admitted at this point in the ceremony … Men and women are separated by a cloth – situated near the entrance. The women's place which Hayate enters is formed by two caves. Dark, round, humid and hot, it resembles a mother's breast, the vagina and the womb … She decided to come to the hadra to obtain exorcism of the demon … The effect is bewitching, hypnotizing. Suddenly Hayate is conscious of being dominated, carried along in spite of herself; she is no longer in control of her body and spirit. The rest of the room is filled with men seated on the floor, their gaze fixed on the orchestra and the cloth separating them. Why don't they partake in the trance as well? Is dementia the exclusive right of the women? What do they imagine takes place in that feminine space which they cannot see, that they have created in the image of the social division between the sexes that feeds their fantasies? The men manipulated the hadra and pull women into the trance. The men are the actors in the exorcism. Are they not responsible for the dementia of the women they seek to exorcise? (*W W* 62-68)

Conversely, it is the men as actors who orchestrate the hadra that are also responsible for the dementia of the women through an engendered system of division and hierarchy. The sequestering in the hadra serves the purpose of hiding the female desire and sexuality while she is exposed to male fantasies. The hysteria – a mystical ecstasy or physical ecstasy – is the separation of the body and the spirit from suffering, a renaissance which replaces orgasm, calms the pains through a process that hypnotizes and hallucinates. The French psycho-analyst Luce Irigaray describes it as the expression of the repressed feminine desire or sexuality caught in "a phallogocentric discourse," through her hysterics/mysterics discourse, which mimics the symptoms of his/her body. This hysterical discourse erupts in gaps that upset the hierarchical order and is discredited as mad (247). Thus, 'exorcism' is a strategic means to control any madness or deviant disorder or visibility of Muslim Arab women.

These women, also referred to as "the sick ones", are invariably dispossessed by a patriarchal power that controls society and social relations. However, the women in opposition give vent to their hysterics by refuting the manipulation of their consciousness and draw an objective image of Self through the same subjugated body and words. Their creative works represent their life, how they have been living and how they have been led to imagine themselves, and how their own religious, social, and political understandings have been used to control their identity. Nevertheless, words which are weapons of male prerogative also become the Muslim women's power of expression to counter their invisibility. They reconstruct the female body or identity from a series of exclusions and desires through creative expressions. One way they counter their invisibility is to draw upon the Western feminist movement and the strength in female-bonding.

Through female-bonding between Aïda, Alhame, Halima, Hayate, Nayla, Rima and Samia, the process of individuality was initiated within the patriarchal social order. The creation of a journal further strengthens their voice or word to end the silence of being women in the Muslim Tunisian society. The journal and their bond move them out of the shadows of men and husbands and give them individuality and equivalent rights to new liberation, (and perhaps different) significances and at the same time, the right to choose. These women in the words of Sandra Gilbert:

> Want to decode and demystify all the disguised questions and answers that have always shadowed the connections between textuality and sexuality, genre and gender, psycho-sexual identity and cultural authority. (in *The New Feminist Criticism* 36)

In redressing the grievances and answering the questions, some of the absolutisms of patriarchy are contradicted as in the exorcism (65-67). Moved by violent patriarchal subjugation, the Tunisian women under the group called International Club put into words the long repressed

stories of their conditions and sexuality. Unveiling the body, they narrate its wounds, its scars and its tragedies, and the 'truth' that justice may triumph and "life expressed in its flesh and its speech to reveal a dawn of spectacular light" (53-4).

The physicality of their wounds is expressed in words as either statements of rebellion against a long standing conflict with their femininity which according to Saddeka Arebi is both social and political. They grapple with issues of sequestering through veiling and seclusion, rape, child marriage, sexual debasement, polygamy, fundamentalism, women against women, marital abuses, neurosis, and hysterics, which all inform the author's narrative. It is in one of these situations that Hayate encounters the Landlord's perversion in his attempted rape as the male hierarchical right to the female body (119-120).

As they become conscious of their problems that "the personal is political and the political has become public," the Muslim women with their new journal and the Club become a reflection of the society and a conflation of their experiences. The society, apart from the private sexual war, also experiences the global and ethnocentric war with evidence of religious, political, cultural and racial intolerances (84). In other words, there is a rape of female identity and a rape of ethnographic identity. These rapes of the personal and public, private and communal identities are clearly controlled by the patriarchal gaze that defines difference and demand submission. This is illustrated in the account of the political war of domination and submission between Palestine and Israel (*W W* 74).

The political war also connotes under-currents of religious and racial differences. It is an analogy of the sexual difference between men and women and a dominant concern of the writer. This is

clearly represented in the two young female Lebanese amazons. The first is Imane, a young Shiite who affirms the significance of life or co-existence through peace. The second is Sana who believes life becomes meaningful only if it is expressed in submission to fundamentalism or death (*W W* 74-79). The dominant concern on difference at the national or global levels recalls Okonjo Ogunyemi's ideologically womanist stance that the muted is private or personal and the dominant is public and political. Invariably, most African women writers drawing upon the gynocentric paradigm represent the experiences and expression of women as they affect them and the society, and how the society affects them. This is because an isolated gesture can not have a collective effect in such a society where the polluted becomes the victim who must be punished.

Consequently, in trying to create the awareness of sexual, religious and racial differences in Arab societies, the author unveils the hostility that stems from social or political differences. She shows that repression often leads to rebellion, resistance and self-defence as she narrates the visibility struggle between men and women, and between Israel and Palestine. The case of repression is captured in two images: the hadra and the party. The hadra is the power of patriarchy to purify female pollution, while the party, another form of hadra or an inverted hadra in which the women seek their own release through pleasure, by depicting a reversal of the usual response in hadra through trance or spasm or a guilt reaction, is the remorse of having given oneself over to pleasure. In other words, the hadra reinforces difference in sexes and traditional morality, defines the organisation of society, and controls insubordination and sexual roles, while the party breaks such taboos and norms in deviance or expression of rebellion (113). This situation recalls Luce Irigaray's metaphor of a concave mirror, which reflects the reality of

Muslim women in patriarchal societies in contrast to a flat mirror, the portrait of the real Self. The concave mirror's reflection produces an image of psychological fear, an 'unnameable horror'. The identity of the object and subject is thus attacked and questioned as a patriarchal socio-religious division (240).

Invariably, the psychological and physical conditions of female sexuality drive women like Aïda, Alhame and Nayla to the edge of insanity in their deviance. Alhame on her part, a member of the Club and an advocate on sexual freedom through poetry, negates all forms of religious restriction and social order, especially in sexual freedom. As a woman campaigner, she condemns through poetic renditions the submissive nature of some women to patriarchal absolutism and stereotype or identification. Her medium of resisting invisibility is her poetic rendition expressed in sensual body movement and words which give "life in its flesh and its speech" a new meaning, beauty and strength in the gaze of oppression. She uses words that reflect the experience of subjugation and seeks to break its shackles in order to give strength to their voice and confidence to their words. This woman puts into words that which has so long been repressed by society especially the fear of sexuality. She breaks the silence surrounding her own womanhood in order to end male oppression and censorship. Such censorships are contained in the "perverted gaze" that dominate, subject and punish the victims as in the case of Hayate in *Wounding Words* and Lafifa in *The Forbidden Face*.

In addition, Accad unveils the silence concerning the specificity of female identity, sexuality, desire and personal fantasies in a society where there is no freedom of expression through the individual efforts of the heroines like Alhame, Rima and Aida. These women in their different ways through expressions of deviance seek a dialogue and conciliation between men and women

for the actualisation of development and liberation. However, each woman individually navigates the course of her life in her quest for recognition and identity. She also attempts to correct the notion of universality in issues of female identity through the specificity of their experiences and narratives. She raises questions about the quest for a distinct social status or relevance for women by interrogating and negating the notion of cultural superiority. That is, the women negate the notion of one group's superiority over another. In other words, the agitation for acknowledgement entails cultural specificity and ethnocentric consciousness; however, they espouse their visibility in feminist ideology without being overtly Western.

In spite of the awareness that the definition of female identity differs from culture to culture as well as the inability to reconcile the master/slave relationships between men and women some Tunisian women, particularly Alhame, moved out of the stifling situation that promotes only 'homosocial pleasure' in the hope of finding her Self expression in France. Alhame, in her deviance, fails to understand the ethnographic specificities contained in the definition of selfhood or female identity. Her inability to attain personal regeneration and her disillusionment in her search for the ideal makes her 'mad' or hysterical. Alhame discovers first, that there is a great disparity between feminist notions in France and the interpretation in Tunisia. Second, she is unable to reconstruct and balance Western ideology and her cultural expression. Consequently, this creates a psychological trauma that not only metaphorically throws her off balance and ends up in a hospital with a broken leg but leaves her lonely.

Her relocation to France becomes a significant eye-opener to the differences that exist in the feminist movement. She becomes conscious of the politics of difference in race, culture and

colour in feminism and the barriers erected by the very 'prophetesses' of feminism. These are women who allow their personal experiences and political beliefs to inform and impinge upon the ideals of freedom for women. She becomes disillusioned at realising that there is no world without men: "We have managed to eliminate male dominance by creating our own movement, but we haven't yet found language that doesn't reflect patriarchal domination" (*W W* 91). This awareness is aptly captured in the allegorical story of the relationship between the mouse and the mountain, an allusion to the external factors that define female identity as invisible (*W W* 180, 183). Symbolically, the mountain represents the Western culture and ideology, the disillusionment in France, racism, sexual difference, religious and male control, women's movement, and the world. The mouse represents the women, their lost illusion and their identity. The dominant forces are stronger than the mouse, the female issue. There is a significant realisation that identity should not be presented as a submission to the external forces that subjugate women. Rather, it must be an affirmation of one's place in the mainstream of things, especially in the twentieth century. Zainabe intellectually surmises that:

> It is true she was born into the framework of an Arab-Muslim culture, but she has established her own path and the perception of her own identity through her reading. (*W W* 166)

However, in the view of some critics and scholars of *Wounding Words*, no matter how tenable and engaging her arguments and ideas may be, the novel adopts a "verbal hammer on the head technique" which is rather a "masculine stereotyping" of the feminist ideology. Often, the novel reads like a textbook instead of a fictional work in its depiction of the various stereotypes of Western feminist theories and movements. As a result, most of the characters sound stilted in their verbalisation, while the few male characters are boarded up as enemies. These include the

Landlord, the taxi driver, the religious fanatics who exorcise demons from women, and the domestic help who prepares meals for the feminist Club members in Aida's house. There is no gainsaying that such men do not really exist and that the depiction in such stereotype style of "women without men; men are the enemies" of Katherine Frank (15) merely alienates the women and the society, and subsequently, contradicts the African feminist ideology of complementarity and communality (*Ngambika* by Carole Davies and Anne Graves).

Nonetheless, the narrative offers some hope. Through telling of 'wounding words', there is a purgation of emotion, the promise and hope of individual and collective healing for both in the private and the public and learning to speak the magic word of pardon via a renewal of intelligence that communicates an understanding. These put together, build a bridge of peace and reconciliation to heal the wounds of difference. Invariably, through Hayate's diary, the women individually and collectively "speak with the pains of words, and a balm, an elixir for [their] ills":

> So that other women elsewhere
> In other places
> Will be comforted
> Will no longer feel alone. (149)

In conclusion North Africa writers like Nawal el Sadaawi and Evelyn Accad, through their narratives, paint the disturbing picture of women who suffer under the oppression of religion, patriarchy and sexuality. According to them, female identity is defined by marriage and the family as mechanisms through which women are subjugated and oppressed. To them marriage in Muslim societies breeds master-slave relationships where the woman is defined in terms of her husband. Consequently, the texts are representations of the social order defined by

fundamentalists' views of women. The texts are weapons that communicate, interrogate and reflect, and 'write back' at the conventional literary forms by questioning the multiple oppressive conditions both traditional and specific to their post-colonial heritage, in a constantly changing post-colonial context.

Further, while acknowledging the many ways in which patriarchal institutions oppress women, these writers also present the efforts of their characters to counter their invisibility. The women writers argue that female identity is not only shaped by male control, but by women's religious internalisation which helps to perpetuate their subjectivity. Within the same literary locus, el Sadaawi and Accad present multiple and contradictory identities and subjectivity that are dynamic within specific social locales where most of these characters struggle to redefine their identity within their specific enclaves.

Muslim women are not portrayed by these writers as subservient, unchanging or stagnant and deliberately rebellious characters, instead, they come alive radically as speaking subjects and agents of change, even at a costly price. The ability of these characters, like Firdaus and Alhame in the respective texts, to express their identity through the art of narrative and poetry, or the power of words, becomes an elixir to the wounds of subjugation of Muslim female conditions.

Thus, through the female characters and their stories, the novelists reflect how subtly and tightly the restrictive social and religious orders have bound them through economic dependence and the power of tradition over polygamy, prostitution, veiling, widowhood, confinement and subservient status of motherhood in their own world.

While telling these stories within other stories, which both expose and criticise the subordinate status of women and help us to see Muslim women more accurately in all their multiplicities, el Sadaawi and Accad show that the problems of Muslim women have both 'dominant' and 'muted' concerns and are woven into each other. Hence, Innes and Rodney rightly observe that African women's writing is a multi-voiced discourse:

> When women began publishing their work in the mid-sixties in Africa, they faced the problem not only of speaking for the experience of women in their own right … but also of combating the orthodoxies of colonial and anti-colonial discourse. (11)

In other words, Okonjo Ogunyemi is of the view that these women not only question the subjugation of Muslim women, but also the influence of a Western culture that worsens fear in men and the domination of women. In short, the domination by the men is similar to the Western domination of the Third World, particularly the Muslim Arab society.

In the process of representing the female identity under oppression and domination, the authors of *Woman at Point Zero* and *Wounding Words* merge or replace negative images of Muslim women with positive ones by appropriating the dominant discourse. This inversion challenges not only the 'overt' and 'covert' violence against women and their exclusion from public life, but their poor rewards for the important contributions they make to the family in homes, which are recognised as the building blocks of the society and culture.

In addition, women in this culture have been oppressed by powerful traditions insidious enough to pit women against women as are depicted in the writers' texts. Nawal el Sadaawi in an interview expresses the opinion that it is easy to challenge male domination but a herculean task as a socialist to reject an oppressive religion:

> It is the easiest thing in the world to reject men and say they are the enemy… It is more difficult to live with men (and) transform them into human(e) beings. It is more difficult to live with religion and transform it with a humanist Philosophy. (4)

So, the oppositional gaze sets up a silent resistance against a patriarchal and oppressive system. She opines that there are other invisible forms of oppression like psychological circumcision sanctioned by a religion that ensures the exploitation of Muslim women. Her writing thus reflects on the issues of difference and the willingness to celebrate difference. Invariably, linking the woman's body and word, their works are responses that challenge the complexity of the Arab culture and hope to 'prick' the conscience of the people to call for a complementary relationship between men and women in spite of religious dogmatism. These literary discourses articulate the complex relationship between identities, sexuality, society and the woman's physicality. el Sadaawi and Accad oppose the binaries of the Islamic Arab society in order to redefine notions of the Muslim woman's sexuality, which is the source of the subjection of women in North Africa, even though, it is like "the story of the mouse and the mountain. The mountain was stronger than the mouse … (*Wounding Words* 180).

Accad with her *Wounding Words* picks up where *Woman at Point Zero* stops. The novel creatively presents the conditions of Muslim women and their transformation efforts through female-bonding and the oppositional gaze. Using the epistolary or diary narrative technique, acting and poetry, Accad depicts her characters in their pains, subjection, difference, creative talents and their struggle within the complex religious system.

What these womanist writers have done is to reconstruct subjectivity from the disruptive perspective of religion and sexuality, and reality and ideology. Each writer acknowledges the

primacy of the signifying dependence of the subject on the Other, and is committed to developing ways of re-visioning the subject in relations to the Other's gaze. The culture tightly circumscribes and stereotypes the behaviour of women and defines them only in relation to men (Other). The paradox, however, is that these women conform almost totally to the society's dictates and conventions, while fundamentally rejecting them in their day-to-day lives. Their behaviour sharply diverges from the public's perception of the quiet, obedient, and dependent woman.

Chapter Four

Deconstructing and Redefining the Past in *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *A Question of Power*

Female Identity and Power: Subverting Difference and Reconstructing Human Identity

This section focuses on the narratives of race and gender in relation to human identity in Southern Africa. Until recently, Southern Africa is a region with a history of apartheid that psychologically subdued both men and women. That history has greatly influenced the region's narratives of oppression. The narratives focus on the struggle for survival of both men and women within the historical and psychological conditions of oppression and segregation. As such, resolutions are sought within the cultural region of the narratives. The writers concentrate on thematic interests that border on 'double-displacements' of men and women under racial and sexual discrimination. In other words, apartheid creates male and female characters who are victims of the boundaries of exclusion and inclusion in human relations. This also leads to representation of characters searching for psychological or social transformation that will offer a 'new personality' or identity.

The fictional narratives examined in this chapter – *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *A Question of Power* – are representations of an author's 'vision' (quest) for an 'acceptable' human identity and autonomy from the trauma of apartheid. These texts are the writer's attempt to portray the meaninglessness of a socio-political system that decides that a certain group of people is less human than others. In order to situate the writer's expression within her cultural and historical purviews, the elements of Gynocriticism is incorporated into the analyses to show how the society and women are represented in her novels. The chapter examines the representation of

female identity and the subversion of difference (issues of race and gender) as markers of human identity in the 'oppression' and 'depression' of both men and women. One way to undertake this objective is to situate the novelist's 'expression' within the planes of the 'dominant' and 'muted' spheres. Head's focus on the issue of difference (racial and gender discrimination) is Gynocritically interpreted from group and individual perspectives and public and personal levels. The group identity refers to the people within these narratives and their struggle to reconstruct their battered ego. The individual identity within the narratives is interpreted from the main character's effort to redefine Self (individuality) and how this self-conscious effort affects the group and human identity formulation that enables a platform for a complementary relationship between the individual and the society.

This study basically analyses how Head explores Southern African socio-political situations through personal experiences and the use of archetypes in representing the traumatic conditions of women, the background against which men seek and measure the truth of social relations and indifference of social and cultural structures against individual and societal predicaments. The study further examines Head's resolution of such perilous structures which have necessitated the relocation of her characters for both individual and communal development. These, altogether, inform her representation and reconstruction of the female and human identity.

Bessie Head, born in 1937 to a white mother and a black stable boy father, depicts snippets of her personal history. Her narratives, according to Annette Horn in her "Deconstructing Feminine Sexuality and Madness, Memory-Work and Fictionality in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*," are regarded as works of memory and madness. Yet Okonjo Ogunyemi observes that there is a

metaphysical dimension to the representation of political and cultural statements through a fussion of myth, psychology, politics and ideology. Her prime interest is the folkways, especially discernible in the beliefs associated with fears generated by life's perennial misfortunes or 'unknown forces' otherwise labelled as "witches" (the invisible forces). Her preoccupation with primitive or rural African life becomes a kind of weapon for grappling with present day anomy. In other words, her novels explore the realism and mysticism of the African world. She concentrates on the African disquietude manifested in the fear of the supernatural, which is a reflection of the mentality of a harassed and embattled people. Okonjo Ogunyemi further argues that the unstated and the unexpected are important in this world of mystery, magic and witchcraft (226).

As an exile in Botswana, Head was naturally interested in the plight of the expatriate, the outsider, the outcast, and the underdog. This is why most of her characters are outsiders engaged in a quest for what had eluded them in their places of origin – they constantly yearn to be totally absorbed in their new milieu. Thus, drawing upon her "no frame of reference to anything beyond herself" – someone without any trace of a root or family history or affiliation due to racial difference – Head creates a story of Southern African political and socio-cultural *proletariat*. In order for her characters to rise above the level of proletariats, she moves them from the unconscious to the conscious, from uncertainty to certainty, and from the specific (local concern) to the universal (global concern) in the process of personality transformation (no white rule and apartheid). However, it is suggested that the unconscious process that constructs the subjective identity is the structure through which difference is lived and understood. Also through it, political subjection and rebellion are organized.

Head uses her history of alienation or disconnection from her society and system to explore the supernatural or spiritual, and psychological implications of participation in a society that defines women (and men) as subjects akin to "slaves" within a patriarchal discourse. She shows in her works that an escape from this subordinate status or 'slavery' can not be achieved simply by moving the characters out of their conditions or negating them since this would invert the binary oppositions without solving them. Rather, she believes it is better to keep them within their conditions of personal experience where they will struggle to redefine their new consciousness or growth. So this study demonstrates that the subversion of difference and the simultaneous construction of identity, subjectivity, and sexuality are all interlocking issues.

In the portrayal of women characters in her texts, Bessie Head who writes from Botswana, a non-racial society, seeks to re-construct the subject and object dichotomy that has so often been a determiner in the African socio-cultural context. She portrays in her fiction that victimization is a universal condition irrespective of race or colour. This is also given pre-eminence in Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* and Tsitsi Dangerembga's *Nervous Conditions*:

> This universality of the 'victimization or marginalization of women is not to be simply equated with the universality of women's oppression in the West … Each universality has its stories and histories, its own pauses for self-recognition and for renegotiation. (*Changes* 3)
> The victimization I saw was universal. (*Nervous Condition* 115-6)

Head attempts to characterise the ugly face of victimization and prejudice deeply inscribed in African thought processes and behaviour, and to push for a renegotiation. To renegotiate, she reinterprets by inversion the concept of the Other in the binary division of Self or Other. In this case, the Other in her fiction is not the African as seen and positioned by the West or any other

white man; rather the Other is uncovered and revealed as the woman and the society. On a general level, further division of the Other shows that in the ethnocentric process, an African is treated as the Other, the outsider who also finds the "truth" of his identity in the humanist discourse under the woman's skin. Nietzsche writes that the 'truth' in the play of signification is not something abstract and neutral but coloured by the subject's desire, even though it eludes him (95).

In order to reflect the phallocentric gap without inverting the binary oppositions in the hierarchical classifications of power between white and black, man and woman, Bessie Head uses post-modern elements of metafiction, autobiography, and self-inscription. Also, she uses the archetypal medium to depict a paranoid society that is racial, tribal and engendered within the consigned ethnocentric spaces, which relegates blacks and women as 'slaves' in their 'inscribed' identity. Like her hybrid self – a result of two races (difference) – she builds up a multiple consciousness and varying levels of difference that ground her inversion of the Other. This binary or phallocentric gap sets the tone for the challenges centred on political, racial and ethnic differences that confront these opposing worlds of difference. The salient contrasts of skin colour, white or black (racial difference), rich or poor (economic difference), and organized or neglected (power relations) are all laid out from the onset.

The novelist draws from a personal history of psychological instability akin to paranoia to create a symbolic representation of the instability that characterizes the politics of sex, race and culture in Southern Africa, particularly in South Africa and Botswana. Her novels depict a writer's emotional and mental alienation as an individual and as a woman in a society with a history of

prejudices against race and gender. Such prejudices have created imbalances like blacks being labelled as 'black proletariat' or 'subaltern'. Voiceless, landless and oppressed, their victimization is compounded by their dislocation from tribal ties. Thus, the novels are double-edged representations that foreground the past in order to achieve a socio-cultural and mental transformation. On the one hand, the novels create representations in which the politics of personal history, race and gender intersect to reveal the very complex ways in which the African woman writer can relate to a woman's sphere. On the other hand, they represent how these complex constitutions affect the wider society.

In an attempt to destabilize the fixtures in the larger society, Head explores the historical past or antecedent of the people by questioning the force of 'domination', which actually subjects psychologically and physically. In order to achieve this redefinition of the past without inverting the binaries of the constituted structure (past/present, them/us), the novels depict the mental trauma of an individual character. This belies both the Other and the Self, and the 'dominant' and the 'dominated' (the muted). These concerns mark the textual representations which abound in South Africa, Botswana, and other African nations. Although the power relation operates on a larger scale, in either case the power is an effect of a system which structures even the most personal relations and identity. Thus, the socio-political system is reflected in the positions of authority and in the subservient status which the people assume.

The question then is why is it so difficult to resist such subservience? Is it because women appear to benefit from it? Although authority relies equally on the force of the dominant and the consent of the dominated, do the Southern African women consent to this domination willingly,

or by socio-political pressure? Does their consent enable the formulation of such domination? These questions also probe the larger societal or social classifications in Africa. These challenges inform Head's notion of difference from both the specific (South Africa and Botswana contexts) and the universal (the African and global context). The inequality between white and black, and men and women in that society is perhaps the manifestation of an authoritarian system that not only subverts but subjects, and is derived from a political history of discrimination. This manifestation has led to splits in perceptions between the social self (typical personality) as defined by norms and customs, and what they perceive as the actual self (identity/personality). Invariably, the writer's global concern and vision is of a society that has subsumed its people, particularly its women into ascribed roles of subservience. In searching for a social transformation, she believes that women will be beneficial to the socio-political evolution of the contemporary Southern Africa.

From this prevalent 'dominant' and 'dominated' structure in Southern African society derived from colonialism, Head attempts to relive and redefine the existing binaries. Such binaries that have subjected the people, particularly women, mentally and physically are deconstructed to decipher anomies and attain a sustained revitalization of identity. By reliving the past in the mental state of unconsciousness and alienation, she brings to public awareness the general discrimination and its effects on both men and women. In this manner, the 'vortex' of the struggle for independence is only achieved through a balance of the unconscious and the conscious, the state of mind as it responds to environmental or socio-political issues.

From the general slide of Head's fiction towards the specific and universal 'truth' about the human identity, it may be said that her work is inspired by Frantz Fanon's writing. Like her model, she yearns for the transformation of Man (and Woman) and the society by reviewing the uncertain gap of historical condition, from the area of ambivalence between race and sexuality, the unresolved contradiction between culture and colour, to the struggle of psychic representation and social reality. The familiar alignment of subjects – Black/White, Self/Other – is thus disturbed in their binaries by the traditional ground of individual identity. In order to attain this transformation, Head draws from history through memory work. History, in the view of Arthur Schlesinger Jnr., is as important to a nation just as memory is to an individual. As an individual deprived of memory becomes disoriented and lost, so a nation denied a conception of its past will be disabled in dealing with its present. As a means of defining national identity, history becomes a means of shaping the individual and societal identity, and memory is constitutive of the core of individual identity (20). In other words, history becomes memory through which the 'truth' is learned.

The body of her work may be split into the phenomenological affirmation of Self and Other and the psychoanalytic ambivalence of the Unconscious. Bessie Head, thus, draws upon Homi Bhabha who argues on culture and identity that:

> The struggle against (patriarchal) oppression changes not only the direction of history … but challenges the transparency of social reality, as a pre-given image of human knowledge. (114)

In this case, the nature of humanity becomes estranged in the human condition, and from that state of disconnection it emerges not as an assertion of will nor as an evocation of freedom, but as an enigmatic questioning of "What does a woman desire?" It is an echo of Frantz Fanon's

“What does a black man want” (in Bhabha’s “Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition”). Within the psychoanalytic process, there is recognition of the inherent bisexuality of the human nature (subject), for whom femininity and masculinity are not qualities or attributes but positions in the symbolic processes of (Self) representation, the structures of representation, narrative vision, and the meaning it seeks to analyse, reveal, or bring to light.

For Head, such myth of Man and Society is fundamentally undermined by the human condition where people’s everyday life exhibits what Stuart Hall calls a “constellation of delirium” that mediates the normal social relations of its subject (394). The “constellation of delirium” implies an assemblage of laws that keep a group’s lifestyle rigidly bounded. In a sense, the woman enslaved by her inferiority and the man enslaved by his superiority; the coloured by his inferiority and the white by his superiority all manifest a neurotic conditioning/orientation. This ambivalent identification of a racial, tribal and gender world – moving on the planes of difference and opposition – turns on the idea of Woman or an individual into the Otherness of the Self inscribed in the perverse palimpsest of human or patriarchal identity. Therefore, what is often seen as the woman’s identity is a man’s artifact, an inversion of the figuration of difference. Its split representations are portrayed in the division of ‘body’ and ‘soul’ which enact the artifice of individual and societal “identity”. This is more or less an appropriation of Iris Young, who in her analysis argues that the operation of repulsion can consolidate ‘identities’ founded on the institution of the Other or a set of others through exclusion and domination (133). What constitutes the division of the ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ (body and soul) world of the subject is a border and boundary tenuously maintained by the ‘dominant’ for the purposes of social regulation and control. In other words, the recess of division depends as much on the subject who

conceives or perceives it while standing outside it. So it becomes an ideological experience that is coercive, insofar as it tames and binds a larger field of difference through repression and repressive tactics, and in turn privileges and procures one term at the expense of the other, be it male versus female or unconsciousness versus consciousness.

The issue of identification which is the tension point of demand and desire is seen as a space of splitting. Homi Bhabha describes it as "fantasy", which is the unconscious world of Otherness that is tethered to the shadow of deferral and displacement (117). In his view, the Otherness is the unconscious desire to be superior in the question of identification. That Otherness is the vortex of the Self and the Other, which is a negation of a pre-given identity. The Otherness is, thus, the production of 'images' of identity and the transformation of the subject into assuming that image. The demand of identification – that is, to be 'for' the Other – entails the representation of the subject in the differentiating order of Otherness. Simone de Beauvoir in the "Introduction" to *The Second Sex*, translated by Betty Schmitz, describes the concept of Otherness as a site for objectification of women in a society where men constitute the majority and the standard. It clarifies the predicament of women in their socio-political and cultural lives where they are marginalized and classified as inferiors to males, that is, woman is man's inferior Other. This dichotomous structure of central/marginal and Self/Other is based on the patriarchal standard – the male. The objectification of the 'truth' is measured by the construction of the female image as an inferior reflection of the real. In an attempt to analyse the Otherness, de Beauvoir expressly negates the binary opposition of nature and culture.

So in trying to find the 'truth' about woman's desire in the production of an "image of identification", Bessie Head makes her characters split from that Other position by creating a process of experiences through a polar or configuration of oppositions of Self and Other which depict an "illusion of alternative" between nature and culture, passive and active, male and female and black and white, rather than a continuum of divisions. By so doing, she tries to create a personal identity outside the social reality of humans, one that is in fact free of colonialism and traditional tyranny through the process of opposing 'truth' in the unconscious as illusion of consciousness or reality. The act of creating the Otherness (the inner desire of the subject) from the Other (the pre-given image by the Self) acknowledges that identity is a continuum that keeps transforming based on the condition or desire of the subject. It is a continuous process influenced by the changing socio-cultural conditions in a post-colonial world, and it is dynamic, constituting a progressive formulation of personality. In this case, the 'new' personality includes freedom from the patriarchal psychological subjugation, economic empowerment, and racial and tribal tolerance. Access to this contemporary identity is only possible in the inversion of the binaries, through the creation of displacements and differentiation/redefinition (absence/presence) of characters.

However, Bhabha in his cultural and phallocentric discourse describes this effort at attaining luminal reality as metaphoric substitution, an illusion of presence and by that same token a metonym, a sign of its absence and loss (118). It is precisely from this edge of ambiguity that Head attempts to find meaning and dynamism for her characters within the cultural locus. In the subsequent textual analyses, it becomes clear that she attempts to revert the historical colouration of the coloniser and the colonised by placing both black and white in a singular and similar

cultural environment and allowing them to exist collectively to discover their individual and communal identities and abilities by realizing the unconscious in the conscious. She achieves this through memory transfer, for not all memory come from individual life as some are transferred. However, through memory she recalls history which retells the past with archetypal figures reflecting the (past) reality of the conditioned 'truth'.

In summary, 'truth' in this sense is figured as an individual interpretation of the socio-political condition. The understanding of this is what gives rise to the concept of Otherness. The dynamic identity that emerges from this literary portrayal is conditioned by mobility and hybridity, a combination that leads to the representation of Otherness, which is an identity outside the internalized Self and Other, the ensemble of dynamic factors that enable a new definition of identity.

This chapter examines the concept of Self (individual) and the 'society' through the history and socio-psyche relations of women. It explores identity beyond a mere image into the emotional and spiritual realms of a (woman) being existing within a degenerated, primitive and punitive cultural society. It also examines the dialectics of the mind and body which resolve in the epistemology of 'appearance and reality', that is, to separate appearance from reality. In this manner, the alienation of Self may be seen as the transgression of culture, the essence of man. So, in the cultural definition of woman through the formation of both individual and social authority, the question of what should be considered social virtues of historical rationality, cultural cohesion and the autonomy of individual consciousness assumes an immediate utopian identification. The essence of Head's narratives then is to create an understanding of the

following issues: what causes racial and tribal hierarchy? What is the nature of human kind, whether monolithic or dual in the way each of the major characters helps the others to create change; in the way each character complements another major character; and how an inward action affects the outward society?

Redefining Illusion, Freedom and Identity in *When Rain Clouds Gather*

In *When Rain Clouds Gather* Bessie Head narrates the abdication of power and the 'establishment' of difference and considers at length the psychological and physical consequences, which include poverty, child abuse, racial and sexual differences and economic control. It is summed up by Susan Gordimer as a highly political narrative that expresses an indiscriminate repugnancy for ALL political aspirations in ALL races (114). In representing this repugnancy in the novel, Head creates a utopian world of reassessment and redefinition through compromise, communality and gender co-existence to overcome difference in contemporary Africa (81). The novel re-constructs a landscape of gradual disengagement from political domination and a quest for personal development without corruption and abuse of power, which is a retraction from any form of illusion of freedom to the reality of personal identity or independence. In other words, it is a novel that makes political and cultural statements by fusing myth with psychology, politics, and ideology.

The novel projects the argument about 'difference' being the root of every human social conflict that must be harnessed positively for societal and human advantages. Head's fiction asserts that race, sex or politics is not a disadvantage, and instead every human being – man or woman,

white, coloured or black – has a history of difference. However, this should be channelled toward development in order to achieve a unified human identity.

When Rain Clouds Gather, like Head's other novels, reflects the notion of difference at the level of spirituality through the desire for identity, and to be identified. It is a conciliation of spirituality with reality towards the transformation of man's social and psychological relationship, in which women who have been inordinately subsumed will benefit. Trying to find a middle ground for this ambivalent 'fantasy' of a unified society through the process of identification, Head returns to the historical past of the people (tribal and colonial times) to represent how the past has influenced human orientation. Thereon, she builds a utopia that grants space to communality and compromise. The vision is one that overturns the tribal belief that men are superior to women, and that as long as they believe that the latter are wilting, effeminate shadows of men who in actual sense fear women, things went smoothly (*WRCG* 93).

The novel goes beyond a search or demand and desire for dynamic change to question the age-long perceptions on sorcery (magic), gender, tribalism, corruption, sexual inequalities, and racial distrust. These issues set the tone for the challenges of the difference that confronts the varying world of men and women, black and white in their demand of salient solutions. In this vein, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi declares that Head's novel is a depiction of the African Womanist concept of cooperation, collaboration, complementarity and conciliation between black and white, man and woman, and young and old (127) in order to attain what Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie portends in her definition of African Womanism as a "social transformation for both men and women" (11).

In questioning fixated notions of difference in socio-political relations, Head employs the gynocritical framework of analysis to represent how different women rely on and use specific histories, spaces and locations to define their identities. Through 'fantasy' she presents two levels of issues, the dominant and the muted. The muted ineluctably benefits from the dominant. It is when there is compromise and reconciliation at the dominant level, which is the global issue of the individual and the society, that the muted seen as the relationship between individuals (especially women) can be complementary and beneficial. So, to drive home these issues, Head builds a utopian village of hope with much avarice which human relationship and communality could overcome to make the utopia real for every soul and body that experiences difference in victimization and alienation, both markers of discriminatory identity. One main factor in overcoming the challenges of difference is complementarity, a co-existence and communality of all people (white and black, male and female and leaders and subjects). That is why her characters are hybrids of different cultures, histories and identities.

When Rain Clouds Gather is set in a rural Botswanan community of Golema Mmidi to signify a new conception and depiction of cultural evolution in African life. It is a place that witnesses various facets of human travail in the daily struggle for survival in a society divided against itself in relationships in a "constellation of delirium". Such travails include tribalism, racism, gender and social imbalance, and the tension between good and evil, innocence and experience, individuality and communality, and agricultural experimentation. It is a story about a community of people weighed down by socio-political challenges and who desire change and dynamism from laws that divide them. It is a narrative that yearns for a female voice in the stream of

oppressive voicelessness. It is a search for a universal umbrella for various human identity relations.

It tells the story of a young man, Makhaya Maseko, who runs away from human and political constellations that define life in South Africa to seek asylum in a Botswanan village in search of a new beginning and a new identity. Makhaya, the refugee hero, jumps the fence into Botswana to attain peace of mind rather than fame because he knows he is fragmented and violent inside (9-10, 16). When he jumps the fence and talks to Dinorego (a wise man), he tells him he seeks the road to peace:

> "Well-educated men often come to the crossroads of life," he said. "One road might lead to fame and importance, and another might lead to peace of mind. It's the road of peace of mind I'm seeking." (20)

It is also revealed that he wants a wife and children (32) to calm the trepidation of the 'body' and 'soul'. Using a man as the protagonist indicates Head's gender 'indifference'. Her 'desire' is freedom for the soul and body in a society that is not sane or normal (164). She also aspires for healing for a society traumatized and ravaged by colonialism (apartheid), tribal belief and mental oppression. Through the protagonist, she captures the trail of her life that leads her to Botswana to resettle and the adaptations this change brings along. So on the 'dominant' level in the text, Makhaya represents the entire black race's psychological and historical relations with the 'oppressors' (whites): "He is like Frankenstein monsters, only animated by the white man for his own need" (80, 133). On the 'muted' level which is gender is the character of Paulina, who legitimizes her own lived experience as well as those of other African women with whom she interacts on a daily basis. She creates her own struggles to subvert the endemic discrimination in Golema Mmidi – the land where crops grow. Both characters represent the writer's vision of a

gender and societal process of transformation from subjugation to freedom through relocation. Thus, living up to her vision of purging her society, Head introduces her conflicts (evils) early in the novel; these pervade the entire work until the final expiation with the death of Chief Matenge, the embodiment of perversion.

Ironically, Golema Mmidi symbolizes a settlement (a new haven or re-location) for people of diverse emotional, socio-political and mental travails on the verge of implosion in their search for freedom and tranquillity:

> Golema Mmidi consisted of individuals who had fled there to escape the tragedies of life. Its name too marked it out from the other villages, which were named after important chiefs or important events. Golema Mmidi acquired its name …, which was crop growing. (22)

In this symbolic little village of hardship, refugees or migrants like Makhaya, exiles like Gilbert Balfour, victims of various forms of oppression like Mma-Millipede, Paulina Sebeso and Dinorego converge, all plunged into 'anxieties' and personal struggles from which they emerge regenerated spiritually and psychologically. The village also represents Head's conception of cultural evolution. Her idea is based on a Freudian premise. She depicts a society slowly and painfully awakening from a primordial stage where magic (sorcery) is prevalent. This notion is however imperceptibly merged with Western religion in the process of evolution with Mma-Millipede representing the religious dimension. Each character experiences a "state of delirium or anxiety" like Makhaya's concern about his identity as a black, and his agricultural project; Gilbert's vision over his farm to create a new economic or agricultural world initially controlled by the imperialists; and Paulina's concern over her Self, her loneliness and her survival. Yet, they are the survivors of what Vanik Volkan calls "transgenerational transmission of trauma" (7). This means an inherited oppressive condition that is shared by a group and thus becomes the

identity marker for the affected group. The deliberate oppression of a group by another often leads to shared shame and helplessness. When members of the affected group cannot reverse their condition, they obligate the subsequent generation(s) to complete these unfinished psychological processes. This "transgenerational transmission" is one of the unconscious factors that motivated Makhaya to jump the border fence into Botswana (10). In Volkan, this transgenerational trauma transmission tasks the process of shaping the historical and political future (2).

The novel deals with the search for relevance or meaning from different perspectives as they affect characters from different social backgrounds with different personal problems, for "[Everyman in Southern Africa] ... has a list of grievance ..." (*WRCG* 9). What is common to these characters is that they are all victims of an age-long oppression, the naked display of power by a racist society marked by conflict and the desire for local political ascendancy. This situation is further captured in Vanik Volkan's psycho-political research into traumatized societies and histories. He discovers that the impacts of massive trauma are disorganized personalities and mental conflicts; in fact, the society's "backbone" is broken. He calls this kind of psycho-historical condition a "biosocial degeneration" from which recovery is not possible. A regeneration of this condition could only be limited and sporadic (6). Thus, Head transcends in her fiction the concern for race to explore issues of illusion, freedom and identity as markers of biosocial degeneration. The intention is to create a biosocial regeneration through convergence of characters in Golema Mmidi, a name that symbolizes a regeneration of identity. It projects the traditional roles imposition (stereotypes) on women as objects of economic and sexual gratification: "You mean he gave you money for nothing …I have not yet known man who did

not regard woman as a gift from God! …" (15). The mental shock of the old woman who housed the refugee Makhaya for the night after his refusal to take sexual advantage of the girl-child is a symbolic identity marker in a man/woman relationship inherited from traditional belief. It is a case of biosocial degeneration. It is also a marker of the stereotype of African women as witches, though the author subverts this archetypal belief of the past by representing Chief Matenge, a tribal head, as sorcerer to show that men in Africa are also involved in supernatural practices. However, the author's action is double-edged. There is a rejection of male/female stereotypes, the reversion of superior/inferior structure, and the desire for body/soul equality in all human social relationships, which are explored through love romances amongst the characters. Makhaya's response (detribalisation) is a move towards Volkan's 'biosocial regeneration'. This move is articulated by Makhaya:

> It was the mentality [of the old hag] that ruined the whole continent – some sort of clinging ancestral, tribal belief that man was nothing more than a grovelling sex organ, that there is no such thing as privacy of soul and body… Why men should be brought up with a false sense of superiority over women …? (15-16)

Through the character of Makhaya, Head questions certain transgenerational transmission of images and beliefs because they transgress the limited barriers of race and gender differences into general social conditions of man. One major condition of man is the desire for and abuse of political power, which is captured in the power tussle between the paramount chief Matenge (an evil spirit) and his brother, Sekoto in the village of Golema Mmidi (23). In the micro "world" of the village is the mental image of oppression that sets and tears the world apart even as it houses its victims:

> You are running away from tribalism. But just ahead of you is the worst tribal country in the world. We Barotongs are neighbours of Botswana, but we do not get along with them ... Tribalism is meat and drink to them. (10)

Head represents the psychological orientation of "everyman" in Southern Africa as defined by social, cultural, political, and mental divisions. The divisions and difference are not just between blacks and whites, but also among black people as well as between the body and the soul. Some of the mental and political stereotypical notions that define the state of difference also manifest among children and even set women against women. In another vein, they determine a group's economic value and/or power:

> "My Grandmother won't mind as long as you pay me". Go away, he said, abashed, humiliated. "You are just a child." "Here's the money," he said fiercely. "Now go away." ...You mean he gave you the money for nothing? This is a miracle! I have not yet known a man who did not regard a woman as a gift from God! He must be mad! What a loathsome woman, he thought, yet how naive she was in her evil. He had known many evils in his lifetime. He thought they were created by poverty and oppression ... It was the mentality of the old hag that ruined a whole continent … (15)

Makhaya symbolically represents "everyman" in Southern Africa who carries the wounds of oppression and on a quest for personal fulfilment. Head uses him to attempt a restructuring of an already deluded socio-political society. She explains the situation in a personal letter in Peter Nazareth's "Path of Thunder: Meeting Bessie Head":

> Twenty-seven years of my life was lived in South Africa but I have been unable to record this experience in any direct way as a writer. A very disturbing problem is that we find ourselves born into a situation where people are separated into sharp racial groups. All the people tend to think only in those groups in which they are and one is irked by the artificial barriers. It is as though with all those divisions and signs, you end up as no people at all. The environment completely defeated me as a writer. I just wanted people to be people, so I had no way of welding all the people together into a cohesive whole. I have attempted to solve my problem by at least writing in an environment where all the people are welded together by an ancient order. (225)

Another way of seeing it is that Makhaya, like Head, leaves South Africa because he wants peace of mind, but he wants it in order to re-imagine the world like Maru, and to do it in a way where he would not have to respond to pre-given paradigms and forced to partake in the resistance process that further subjects his individuality. Thus, he would not be compelled to respond to the dictates of *apartheid* resistance in South Africa. He is there instead, to experience "whatever illusion of freedom lay ahead" (7). In other words, he leaves the oppressive socio-political condition of man and society in the hope of a "bisocial regenerational". So, whatever he encounters in his migration challenges the notion of Judith Butler, who "essentialized" identity construction into "feminine" and "masculine" illusions of repeated cultural performances (136). Walking away from the societal illusions of selfhood, he seeks another form of illusion of freedom in another community. It could be said that there really is no freedom or human identity though, there are markers of identity or 'cultural performances' of which Head says: "You are running away from tribalism. But just ahead of you is the worst tribal country in the world" (10). He relocates from South African disillusionment and psycho-subjection to assert his "manhood". He is able to do this, and distinctively too, because of his greater knowledge of evil. Makhaya in a sense epitomizes the transformation from evil to goodness, innocence to experience and from ignominy to a nobility of mind.

Spiritually, for the human body and soul, the "essentialized" of the society that is deprived of meaning and identity, the little village of Golema Mmidi provides the symbolic "inroads" for a new perception of Self, empowerment and peace of mind (20). Makhaya, indeed, metamorphoses in the indigenous Twana setting into an exile and a peaceful revolutionary positively transforming the lives of his newly acquired friends. He also gives of himself both in physical

labour and in the opening of the cell door to his private *sanctum*. His eventual marriage to Paulina Sebeso at the end of the novel reveals that the ghosts of his former "gray graveyard" life are no longer visible (158). This precise relationship between individual freedom and political independence, and between a guarded core of privacy and an unburdened state of openness, may portray a biosocial regeneration. In this idyllic environment where goodness abounds and black and white reciprocate affection facilitated by equality; Head transforms the harsh political realities of Botswana and South Africa into a romance.

The symbolic history of the village that has also witnessed many tragedies, Golema Mmidi – "nature nurturer and soul reviver from 'the wilderness and loneliness' of life," (22, 23) – offers the 'utopia' where Head projects freedom that transcends the concerns of race, tribe and gender in a progressive evolution. Her utopia is equated with the power of Nature through a romantic or semiotic relationship between nature and regeneration. The power of Nature to effect growth is stressed by millet, the cash crop and symbol of tribal division:

> Millet was really a stranger in southern Africa where sorghum and maize are eaten as a daily staple. … the discovery had made no impact on Botswana because certain minority tribes, traditionally considered inferior, had long had a liking for millet … Therefore, other tribes who considered themselves superior would not grow it nor eat it. (41)

Ironically, millet is easily cultivated and is in abundance in Golema Mmidi, where there is a display of tribal superiority. Exploring this rift, Head tries to demystify issues that create conflicts and from within these differences forges compromise, love, tolerance and transformation. Thus, the symbol of discrimination becomes one of the tools of female and societal empowerment to "provide a number of solutions to problems" (43). Nature, in this stead, becomes predominant as a springboard for regeneration and communality between black and

white, men and women, and a harmonious relationship between human beings and their environment as evident in Golema Mmidi. It is for this reason that George Appleby-Smith (the white local officer) will stick "[his] neck out for" Makhaya (61). *When Rain Clouds Gather* has moments of intuition and connections to the earth and the universe that cannot be explained by 'traditional' literary criticism. *Maru*, *Serowe – Village of the Rainwind*, and *Tales of Tenderness and Power* all contain the use of the mystical elements such as nature and mysticism. Drawing upon the pastoral elements of Nature like romantic writers, Head employs the use of symbols like vegetation, agriculture, rain, droughts to express her dominant and muted concerns. The novelist pitches two binaries – Nature (transformation) and culture (devastation). The symbol of transformation is presented through the agricultural experimentation that fosters cooperation, empowerment, complementarity and technological development, overriding elements of evil and tribalism represented by Chief Matenge's sorcery and claims of tribal superiority. The symbolic benefits of the agricultural experimentation are made more apparent by the self-exiled Gilbert Balfour, a foreigner and helper, who idealizes the world in which Makhaya and others in Golema Mmidi live: "This is Utopia, Mack. I've the greatest dreams about it" (23). He hopes these 'dreams' will facilitate an identity change for both individuals and society in terms of economy and personality because "He believed that co-operative organization was similar to communal ownership of land, and he felt that progress could be achieved" (38).

Balfour's economic revolution with the help of Makhaya, Dinorego, Paulina, Mma-Millipede and Maria (180) gives the village a pastoral elegance, creativity and development that fight against the odds and oppressions of droughts, discrimination and poverty. The vegetation experiment becomes a symbolic rain droplet in a cloudy and drought-ravished community

through a process of self-actualization, fulfilment and reconciliation. This is personified in the reference to the goat – a symbol prevalent in all Head's narratives – which eats up dry papers and bits of rubble and then turns it into meat and milk (31). The morality of this analogy is that human beings must accept the rubbles of life that come their way, and these should be processed socially or psychologically to their advantage. Through Gilbert and other characters, Head tries to unfix the difference and stereotypes about the African identity being static by engaging her characters in complementary and cooperative ventures that move them beyond poverty and other conditions of oppression to levels of objectivity and change. The notion of Nature as transformation also becomes an ally in the raising process of female consciousness. Fedwa Malti-Douglas, synchronize Nature with the growth of female identity:

> Nature becomes an ally of the New Woman, keeping her in touch with her selfhood, a kind of talisman that enables her to make her way through the alienation of the male society. (11)

However, outside the mystical adoption of Nature for 'rebirth', *When Rain Clouds Gather* represents Nature as a political statement differently from its use in *Maru* because the latter is more political and depicts predominantly ethnic (tribal) difference at the local and global levels. Nature in *When Rain Clouds Gather* represents life and patterns of ordinary human struggle for an Otherness through creativity, reconstruction of Self and Other without making overt socio-political statements like in *Maru*. Thus, the vegetation experiment is a mere visionary attempt to restructure the damaged individual society into a complementary community.

So, the co-habitation of the oppressors (Gilbert and Appleby-Smith) and the oppressed refugees (Makhaya and Paulina) within the same socio-political setting, depict Head's notion of an 'ideal world'. The 'ideal world' is further captured in Lorato's (Paulina's daughter) design of a micro

farm settlement where man/woman and Nature exist in harmony. This farm settlement represents Makhaya and Gilbert's vision of a 'new world' as they struggle together to overcome the oppressive system and harsh climatic conditions. The symbolic placing of palm trees in the mud village by Makhaya and Gilbert is a form of phallic gesture intended to bring life, hope and peace to the village (107, 117, and 119). The significance of the micro farm model is two-fold: first, the 'truth' of an 'ideal' world is visualized through the eyes of a child. This is also captured in Isaac's carvings done out of love in spite of the hardship (of carrying the economic burden of his family early in life) experienced in his young life, which eventually leads to his death (163). The second significance is that resolutions to conflicts must be approached at the micro level and thereafter transmitted to the global (dominant) level. The implication is that most conflicts emanate from the micro level and changes in identity must emerge from that level and gradually impact on people's lives at the global level:

> … Change, if it was to take place at all would in some way have to follow natural course of people's lives rather than impose itself in a sudden and dramatic way from the top. (30)

This is indicative of a natural process of cause and effect in which characters, events and situations are stripped of tradition and age-long practices (162) to attain a sustained identity as represented in the goat analogy (31).

The utopia is further entrenched and made more relevant by the personality formation of three women: the old sage, Mma-Millipede, Paulina Sebeso who later marries Makhaya; and Maria Dinerego, who also marries Gilbert. Each woman represents an evolution of identity from the traditional to the modern and the Womanist concept of economic empowerment in female personality. However, the female characters desire complementary relationships rather than

radical ones, where women express their dreams and desires just like men (32, 111). They represent the female shift away from stereotype images of "traditional tillers", "backbone of agriculture", "inferior to spineless species (male)", "degraded" and "docile" or "witches", like Mma Boloi who is accused of witchcraft (51). These women try to ensure a new personality for African women outside being "effeminate shadows of men" (93) by providing solutions to communal problems. In addition, the common trend of women against women is overcome by sisterhood through the promotion of economic co-habitation and leadership qualities amongst the women. The female characters dynamically evolve into community leaders, decision-makers, and productive women. Mma-Millipede and Paulina have been victims of the crude and brutal power of disunity between the body and the soul in terms of oppression and freedom, and innocence and experience. They carry specific histories or identity markers of victimization. Head describes Mma-Millipede as:

> One of those rare individuals with a distinct personality at birth. In any event, she was able to grasp the religion of the missionaries and use its message to adorn and enrich her own originality of thought and expand the natural kindness of heart. (68)

Metaphorically, the name Mma-Millipede may be a coinage by the author to mean "millipede", a reptile with many legs and a high reproductive rate. Mma-Millipede as an 'Amazon' of the past is proactive and adaptable with positive thoughts based on her experience with the missionary (colonizers) religion and education. She is described as a commoner, a rejected and degraded woman, yet respected for her religious views (44). Within her specific history of subjection are the issues of women against women and forced marriage among the locals (68-69). The issue of women against women is largely explored by the writer in many instances, especially during the agricultural project where Paulina is the women leader, and she experiences opposition from

other women because of her history of suffering and loneliness. Heads resolved these differences through the revolution against the paramount chief, Matenge. Mma-Millipede emerges from the depth of bitterness and resentment a better, wiser and more generous person. She watches, counsels the young, and participates in communal problem-solving, relieving many like Makhaya of their aches, frustration, and grief (126). This Amazon's ideology is the opposite of Maria, yet they complement each other in the quest for development and human relationships.

The second significant character is Maria Dinorego. She is reserved, clever and unpredictable (28). She "likes all things modern" (27) and is a perfect match for the simple and uncomplicated Gilbert Balfour. There are two sides to her personality: she is soft spoken and meditative but full of ruthless common sense and a dominant personality (101) like "one of those women who had a life of her own" (32). Her demand and desire for the Otherness is depicted in the rules she makes to overcome racial and sexual stereotypes. She refuses Gilbert's marriage proposal based on the differences in their social status and sets out rules:

> She makes all these little rules and you can't budge her from them. When I first came here I asked her to marry me and she said, 'I can't marry you, Gilbert, because I'm not an educated woman. You won't be happy with an uneducated woman.' (33)

Maria's statement about their social difference expresses Bessie Head's position on the need for women to be educated in order to procure partnership in the mainstream of things like communal development and marriage.

Paulina Sebeso on her part stands out in Golema Mmidi, first on her own merit and personality, and ultimately as the wife of Makhaya. For a passionate young woman, she (like Mma-Millipede) has experienced the travails of victimization, injustice, and suffering. So she moves to

live in Golema Mmidi, the "land for growing crops", to start a new life (77). From the start, the author sets her apart in her vision from other women:

> She had been born into their kind of world and fed on the same diet of thin maize porridge by a meek, repressed, dull-eyed mother. But even as a child ... she was so lively and meddles-some. Even her gait was decisive and betrayed a sense of direction… It was all this that really distinguished her from the rest of the women, even though her circumstances and up-bringing were no different from theirs … She had travelled a longer way, too, on the road of life, as unexpected suffering makes a human being do … (94)

Her specific story is no different from those of other personalities who converged in Golema Mmidi as victims seeking regeneration from the divisions between body and soul like truth and reality in the socio-political system.

Paulina represents the history of African women's double-displacement: the victims of racial oppression and traditional male subjugation. One of such patriarchal norms is that education and marriage do not go together, so a woman has to forego learning in order to secure a stable marriage. Bessie Head negates this notion by empowering Maria with education. Maria's educational empowerment is two-dimensional. First, Maria's educational empowerment makes her a more significant presence impacting in the developing society and second, it is also a call to African men to imitate such actions; rather than define their personalities through their subjection of women. Another way of reordering the stereotype is to ensure that a woman is allowed to express her identity, whether she is educated or not. It is one of the reasons why Paulina relocated is to find a man she could get along with (93). Her desire coincides with Makhaya's dream, which implies that "women are not cheap …" (158) neither are they "inferior in every way to a man" (126). "Rather, they have desires and express such in a complementary manner" (111).

In Paulina's character, Head resolves the Womanist issue of women against women:

> They followed the leadership of Paulina because she was daring and different. It would upset them to have Paulina find a man… they were determined to keep her trapped in frustration far greater than their own. (93)

One way of achieving a vibrant female identity is for women to bond together towards personal and public transformation. This is depicted in the agricultural project and the support offered Paulina by a court order that sparks a revolution and commences the process of peace in the "growing crop village". The revolution is punctuated by years of "silence" under the burden of tribal and gender displacements. It is the enactment of a consciousness-raising process of reclaiming economic and individual empowerment from traditional (ethnic) subjection (175).

Paulina is a dominant personality who plays a decisive role in facilitating change – "she helps open the way for new agricultural developments with her leadership quality" (75). Her innate human and woman's gifts set her apart, and in fact equip her successfully to organise an agricultural development exercise for the village women. Her courage and strength of character as an individual are further displayed in her quiet acceptance of her son's death by tuberculosis. The final union in marriage of this resourceful woman with Makhaya marks the end of the refugee's (Makhaya) morbid speculations on the binaries of difference between black and white, true freedom and an illusion of freedom, and oppressor and the oppressed "like a grey graveyard in which he had lived" (158). Makhaya thus moves his body into union with his soul in a journey towards self-discovery, peace and happiness.

With these women, Bessie Head represents the ideal of the identity and dignity of the African woman. She made them all tough, resolute, schooled with suffering and endowed with an innate common sense. Their relationship with men is on an equal basis, a characteristic that makes them

distinct from the other Botswanan women who remain their same old "tribal selves, docile and inferior" (68).

When Rain Clouds Gather narrates the ugliness of oppression and reveals the subjectivity of white and black, and man and woman at the "crossroads of life". Each character's experience of a state of 'anxiety' is portrayed. Makhaya is weighed by socio-political and psychological division. Gilbert is anxious about his 'new world' dream. Paulina struggles for survival over her biological self, the inferior element and desires expression in the Otherness – identity. The concern in the text is to overcome racial and gender stereotypes with representations of the dynamic nature of human beings, particularly women weighed down by socio-political conditions. In order to attain the level of social change at the local and global levels the concept of complementarity, tolerance of difference and tribal cohesion become imperative to development. The transformation of the people is further attained through their interpretation of faith: "faith in God, that is, an understanding of life" (128). They concretised their spirituality or faith by giving it a human face: "The God without shoes…" (186). God at this level is moved outside the realm of the oppressors and contextualised as the God of the oppressed who does not discriminate and who moves miraculously to alter their socio-political condition and empowers them in their struggle. Their interpretation of spirituality is portrayed in the communal relationship that reflects racial tolerance, tribal cohesion and economic development. Symbolically, "the God without shoes" is the God of the oppressed who dispels "clouds" with rain in a land where things grow without rain. So the novel proposes individual and societal changes in socio-political and psychological relations. However, change means subverting human conditions by using what is available to them.

Significantly, in order to represent her concerns and build her utopia, Bessie Head makes use of irony, symbolism, metaphors, and pastoral elements in conceptualising human and woman identity. For instance, Nature and culture are contrasted in the people's economic strategy for survival – vegetation and cattle rearing, and cloud and drought. These binary oppositions signify the thematic focus of the author where the goats' rubbles and agricultural projects create strategies for development and survival, while culture depicts devastation captured in the cloudy and drought ravaged community that depends on cattle rearing as a traditional profession. The traditional cattle rearing occupation is steeped in the inherited culture of discrimination against the growing of millets, which provides significant economic benefits, even though traditionally it connotes ethnic difference. Head subverts these symbols of difference and oppression to the advantages of human and economic developments. "Clouds" ironically represents the conditions of oppression whether positively or negatively.

Apart from the pastoral elements, Head adopts a psychological identification in representing human identity. The notion of body and soul conceptualises the importance of human identity. To the novelist, identity is personal and public; it is also individual and societal. Her narration argues that identity definition begins from the inner Self and simply emits outwardly. It is regarded as a process of internalisation, either inwardly or outwardly.

Normalising Female Hysteria, Sexuality and Identity: *A Question of Power*

A Question of Power is the most laborious of Bessie Head's fiction. In form, she superimposes fantasy upon superficial realism. As such, she portrays the chaos of the modern, fragmented society which produces the psychologically disoriented individual of the twentieth century. The

novel lends itself to several interpretations which include: the depiction of sanity; a metaphor for the South African racial situation; the fantasies of a sexually starved woman inter-twined with her religious growth; a tale of witchcraft; and an allegorical reading of the fight between good and evil.

At a literal level, the story of *A Question of Power* is an account of insanity and hallucinations. It is a continuation of Bessie Head's confrontation with multiple levels of "Otherness" in the spheres of socio-culture, race, and gender; thus, she re-writes the individual and collective selves through memory. To Peter Nazareth, *A Question of Power* is like a descent into a hell of the unconscious (the unconscious of the individual and of humanity as a whole) in order to emerge with the possibility of hope and transformation. Such a novel, like its predecessor, cannot be understood fully through reasoning with the "left brain" because Bessie is "right brain", that is, she is analytical and intuitive (222). Head's intuitiveness may be interpreted via sanity and insanity. Peter Nazareth, in his essay, figures that Bessie Head's insanity is in her life while her sanity is reflected in her work (226). Her insanity intuitively creates imaginative works of memory. This insinuated in a letter featured by Nazareth in his essay:

> God knows, that short bit of literature is so goddam beautiful; it is the best thing I've written so far in adverse circumstances. I mean I wrote it right in hell . . . The major theme is racial oppression and a hard look at it, but it is blended and was written with a real glow. (224)

The essence of this intuitive work of memory is to spark off a social change through transgeneational regeneration which is one of the didactic values of literature. As an outcast and a product of a multi-cultural and pluralistic society, Head uses her protagonist in *A Question of Power*, Elizabeth, to initiate a quest for freedom and identity within the subject or object

binaries. Her desire is for a change that emits from the soul (12). As an outcast whose mother was kept in a sanatorium, the chances are that she too would grow insane like her insane white mother. Her disposition is such that she is preyed upon by more dominant personalities and conditions. In the process, her sense of being an outcast is accentuated by her superior racial classification in Botswana, where she is an exile. The creative text is a hybrid of polarities of consciousness and unconsciousness, certainty and ambiguity, and identification and difference, all as signifiers of defining identity within the cultural setting of Motabeng village in Botswana, referred to as a "place of sand", which though is defined by difference in ethnicity is however communal in nature (19-20). It is from this "place of sand", the private sphere, that public (universal) issues that affect humanity are defined in a postmodernist fashion of foregrounding the "truth" and projecting the paranoia that pervade human and societal relations (26-27).

Elizabeth's insanity is depicted as a metaphor for the tumultuous, loveless world of South Africa. Cruelty, evil, powerlessness, abuse of women, and the emasculation of the African man are prevalent in the novel. Thus, like Milton's Satan and his hell in *Paradise Lost*, Elizabeth is inseparable from hers – whether she is in South Africa or Botswana – even when she withdraws into the world of mental derangement, drugs, isolation or exile. In her daily existence, as in South Africa, a process of mythic possibilities is displayed in the phantasmagoria that unfolds in Elizabeth's unconsciousness where she replays the powers of the rulers of apartheid. The rulers of apartheid like the Verwoerds, Vorsters, and Bothas, the symbols of oppression, play the role of god and devil. These socio-political creations are represented by the images of Sello and Dan in Elizabeth's world of insanity. The replication of the imbalance in South Africa in Elizabeth's mind paints a clearer picture of the question of status and concomitant power. Her reflection of

the truth about oppression in the state of insanity implies that the 'real' world of human beings is defined by insanity caused by politics of difference or discrimination. So Head, through the narrative, presents the platform for psychological reconciliation in Botswana, South Africa and the world.

A Question of Power is a biographical narrative with a universal focus on the inner perceptions of man and contains political undertones played through the motifs of mental trauma and madness. The quest for individual evolution (change) and inner perceptions of mankind justifies the writer's claim that her writing could focus on "just anyone", though it is narrated from the perspectives of her suffering heroine and her antagonists who contribute to the dislocation of others (11). It is a narrative of anyone for anyone and everyone. The biographical narrative is based on her preoccupation with the madness motif that shows a correlation between the author's personal experience and the solitary conditions of her heroine. There is a dominance of solitude and alienation prevalent in all her other novels, especially *Maru.* Margaret Cadmore in *Maru* is also a portrait of solitude like the author, a state that springs from cultural-racial-mental divisions. Bessie Head therefore looks at inner perceptions and identification on the specific level (in the Botswana context) and universal (in the African/global context) through the phantoms created to reflect the insanity in the human society. In the view of Arthur Ravenscroft:

> One wonders again and again whether the phantom world that comes to life whenever Elizabeth is alone in her hut could have been invented by the novelist who had not herself gone through a similar experience; so frighteningly and authentically does it all pass before one's eyes. But there is no confusion of identity between the novelist and the characters, and Bessie Head makes one realize often how close is the similarity between the most fevered creations of the deranged mind and the insanities of deranged societies. (184)

In other words, through the eyes of "a deranged mind," the process of a story about the insanity of the society and man especially harboured within his soul and body is depicted (137). The "truths" of the contemporary African society, of man, and even of the insane character are lived through the roles and actions of other characters. It is in the moments of her insanity that such "truths" about human existence are unveiled.

The focus of the novel is on cultural conflicts and the tussle between good and evil in Botswana, and how these experiences of dispossession and dislocation, which are psychic and social, have conditioned the minds of the marginalised. That is, the condition of marginalization or alienation has caused many to live under an illusion of identity. Issues of poverty, loneliness, colour, class and history suggest their difference and become channels for their oppression and alienation. According to Bhabha in "Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition", the "social" is always the unresolved ensemble of antagonistic interlocutions between positions of power and poverty, knowledge and oppression, history and fantasy, and surveillance and subversion (120). Also, Bhabha ("Interrogating Identity: Frantz Fanon and the Postcolonial Prerogative") claims that the "theoretical innovative" and "politically crucial" investigation of cultures rest on the borderlands of the present. This means that, it is imperative to analyze the "in-between spaces" which yield to "new signs of identity and innovative sights of collaboration and contestation, in the act of defining the notion of society" to understand the complexities of cultural identity (2). The feminist theorist Chandra T. Mohanty locates Third World women in terms of "underdevelopment, oppressive traditions, high illiteracy, rural and urban poverty, religious fanaticism and 'overpopulation'" (6). The fluid, everyday lives of postcolonial women, particularly in the apartheid region, have either been overlooked, unacknowledged or not

explored, and are stereotyped representations circumscribing critical understanding. Rather, binary oppositions between the "modern," "educated," "free Western" and the "oppressed" "poor" Africans are created without a consideration for women living in a racially different society like South Africa. From the interpretations of difference between the Western and the African women and society, Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* interrogates the 'in-between-spaces' of difference in terms of subjectivity. Head uses the heroine's (Elizabeth's) splitting and 'slippage' of identity, a split of her mother's history, and her experience and alternations between fantasies of megalomania and persecution, all in order to yield to 'new signs of identity'.

A Question of Power is an ensemble of the unresolved questions of power and identity interwoven with racism, poverty, history, sensuality and sexuality. Elizabeth is caught in a web of division and the search for self-knowledge and identity within cultural and historical interlocutions, and experiences splits and slippages in terms of memory switches and hero worship to find answers to the questions of human and female identity. It is a narrative that draws from Bessie Head's own experience of schizophrenia according to Eldred Jones (66). The representation is through the madness motif that journeys into the psychology of human perspectives about the difference or "truth" between good and evil, and objectivity and subjectivity bringing out emotions repressed by cultural and historical beliefs.

The novel has been classified as an ambitious work informed by Head's suffering, which she transforms into an art, one that might make one uncomfortable but which approaches the subject from the other end, "a descent into hell" using Nazareth's expression (222). It is a postmodern narrative of megalomania that foregrounds history and religion in the search for "truth" in the

Otherness though it operates at the unconscious level. The contemporary fragmented society is captured in the proliferation of projections of Elizabeth's unconsciousness, which merge and separate randomly. The unconscious thematically projects such binary issues of spirituality and temporality, good and evil, identity and statelessness, use or abuse of power, individual norms and societal codes, past and present, tribalism and racialism, and sanity and insanity. Elizabeth thus becomes the metaphor for merging these random projections through a play on history, myth and religion. *A Question of Power,* like Head's other narratives, explores the relationship between individual and society in an African context – an individual's struggle against societal expectations, the conflict that ensues in the process of survival, and the place of man in the realm of spirituality. Head expands and interprets the notion of identity through the question of power from a global perspective, which is beyond the issue of the female condition. Further, the notion of identity on a global level is taken from the local sphere of personal experiences of men and women racially dislocated from the centre or the mainstream, though it is situated in the power and trauma of a woman caught in-between two worlds. The implication of this is that the resolution of conflicts and sanity in human society rests upon the power of a female personality; though she is a male complement, yet she is powerful in her personality. So, to attain social transformation, the female identity must be reconciled through an objective social justice. To achieve this, Head creates Elizabeth's alter-egos, Medusa, Sello and Dan to project the state of madness and oppression. Elizabeth's ability to overcome the images of oppression personified in the characters of Medusa, Sello and Dan defines her empowerment. Medusa is Elizabeth's sexual alter complement, unleashing in the unconscious the sexual oppression, suffering and darkness on a coloured woman caught between the cross-fire of racial difference:

> It wasn't power that was my doom. It was women; in particular a special woman who formed a creative complement to me … She broke free and unleashed centuries of suffering and darkness. … She was God. (190)

Bessie Head, through the heroine, canvasses for sexual and social justice for all men and women.

In *A Question of Power*, the growing of vegetables by Elizabeth on dry land balances the inner turmoil she is going through, grounds the story in the real world, and also makes credible the purpose of the novel. Elizabeth, who believes in reincarnation, comes to believe that she has been born to what she is as a result of her previous lives, and also that she has her 'dharma', her purpose in life. What is this purpose, given the external and internal conflicts in her world? She sees herself as a prophet designated to suffer on behalf of all humanity as Christ did. She will suffer the way she can suffer – Dan accuses her of being sexless, which is something she can feel as a mulatto (128), like a mule that supposedly cannot reproduce itself even though she has a son. However, her suffering is a representation of a people who have been through holocausts. Is this megalomania or schizophrenia? Yes and no. The 'No' applies to what she learns when she recovers from her journey to hell of insanity (133). Her struggle is for the interpersonal relationships between man and woman and individual and society, and the chance for individual growth, regeneration and recognition. But this struggle is contested where her insanity takes hold of her (hallucination) (62), in the conflict between good and evil, and body and soul.

This postmodern text captures the depth of the author or character's megalomania through hallucination that situates her creation of an alter ego (dual personality) in Sello: living and good; Dan: an ego and evil. Elizabeth's hell or moments of hallucination become the background from which the "truths" of human relations or victimisations are revealed. Such moments of revelation are mockingly enacted by Dan and Sello. The image of Sello with his brown monk outfit

provides goodness and other worldliness. Sello is sometimes negatively portrayed as evil joining Medusa to inflict pains on Elizabeth. This means that in spite of their good intentions, men have evil lurking in their hearts. Thus, Sello combines the positivity of Christianity and Buddhism with the terrible aspects of a bureaucratic world with its unfeeling oppressiveness. Sello alternates in his personality as God and the devil as shown in the statement: "I'm Jesus and the devil too" (175) in Elizabeth's confused mind. Socio-politically in Southern Africa, the system permeates evil and this evil, like apartheid, defines human relationships and society. She also sees Dan as God; during her growth (through her conscious and unconscious moments), she learns about the evil of an omniscient and omnipotent God. She realises "the title God, in its absolute all-powerful form, is a disaster to its holder; the all seeing eye is the greatest temptation" (36-47). The name of God has been used to perpetuate evil throughout civilization and apartheid becomes the reward of such evil. Thus, she substitutes something else for this transcendental God, the prototype of all oppressors – South African racists, the American Ku Klux Klan, or the German Nazis. Through her mental projections, she banishes God to the sky as uncaring, seemingly unconcerned about the sufferings of mankind and replaces him with a personally conceived, immanent God, visible in every human being. In a religious context, Head's thematic project is that God is a personal perception based on an individual condition and experience, not a superimposed image. Christianity in the context of racial, sexual and social differences is classified as a mask of oppression, an illusion and the platform for discrimination. At the end of her mental journey into hell, there is a beneficial reward for a soul-journey that is marked by her going into exile. The emphasis at the end of the "soul-journey" is on the new

gods, the barefoot gods who walk among the people. He is present in life, in the life of nature, in the life of the cosmos, and in the transition of humanity to a higher level of consciousness.

Within the wells of unconsciousness is the identification of the global conflicts of ethnicity, racism, gender and fascism or war that create hysteria because these issues, though they plague humanity, are still within the souls of men (24–27). This hysteria creates an "in and outsider" status, that is, a division of the Self and Other that leads to the Otherness of the other (26). Elizabeth's contestation is not only a possibility of social harmony, but also the uniqueness in each individual who contributes to the achievement of this utopia through an original grasp of the imaginative power explored through a specific literary style. Thus, characters like Kenosi, Eugene Man and Tom are representations of the heroine's higher consciousness and a return from insanity to sanity. These are the reality outside Elizabeth's hallucination which embodies the image of God and goodness. She learns how to appreciate all the good angels (people) around her, the ones who stuck by her even when she gave them trouble – such as her son, Eugene, Kenosi, Mrs. Jones, and Tom. She is of a higher level of consciousness than these people, so she suffers more; but Tom is also of the same level of goodness, so he is able to connect with the images of Sello who harangue Elizabeth's unconsciousness. His ability to hear Sello make a sound informs us that not everything in Elizabeth's head is a figment of her imagination, but that there are others who are conscious of imbalances in the society that Sello, Dan and Medusa represent. The images in her subconsciousness are symbols of evil in a society that torments and subjects men and women. In other words, Sello, Dan and Medusa are embodiments of the social reality in Southern Africa. The 'soul-journey' of unconsciousness provides answers to the question of Elizabeth's identity about her Africanness and her

commitment to social change. The images of flying predominant in the text culminate in her son's poem about flying objects symbolic of Elizabeth's aerial flight into and out of hell as they strengthen her commitment to change in her environment:

> "That's what she felt about people's souls and their powers; that they were like sky birds, aeroplanes, jets, Boeing, fairies and butterflies; that there'd be a kind of liberation in these powers, and a new dawn and a new world" (205).

In this vein, Elizabeth's realization that her son journeys with her just like Tom implies that everyone is defined by the socio-political differences and all desire transformation, which is only imagined in the realms of unconsciousness. At the end of the journey, Elizabeth survives and her identity that had been under question (45) is established when she accepts the Africanness earlier denied her in her subconsciousness:

> She had been forcefully thrown into a state of death, alongside Sello, battered and smashed about, but she instantly sprang to life again, laughed and flung her hands into the air with a bounding sense of liberation. (100)

The liberation of her identity from subjective difference is first battled in the unconscious state, that is, her ability to psychologically change her ascribed image marks her new identity and her acceptance as an African. The process of liberation redefines the image of God which apartheid had distorted. She de-emphasizes God as distant by reconstructing God as being in everyman and in every conscious human relation that projects freedom, love, tenderness, truth, and goodness. She declares that:

> God is the totality of all great souls and their achievements; the achievements are not that of one single, individual soul, but of many souls who worked to make up the soul of God, and this might be called God or Gods. (54)

Pragmatically, the above suggests that any form of achievement that does not harness difference and acknowledge others is not spiritual. In essence, everyone must be involved in the process of

development that allows for equality. There is also the transition of humanity to a higher level of consciousness (tenderness, tolerance and love), which must emit from the soul. It is possible to look back at *Maru* from *A Question of Power*. In her moral vision and crusade Bessie Head is prophetic and visionary, but her project is fundamentally on individual identity, for it encapsulates the central vision of Elizabeth's suffering in the vital issue of power and identity. In her own words in "Biographical Notes: a Search for Historical Continuity and Roots", Head reveals, "All my work is scaled down to this personality need, with the universe itself seen through the eyes of small individual life drama" (23). Head's desire is a warm "embrace of the brotherhood of man, because when a people wanted everyone to be ordinary it was just another way of saying man loved man" (206). In order to achieve this ordinary dream, she foregrounds history and religion in a postmodern style by reversing Mohammed's dramatic statement, "There is only one God and his name is Allah. And Mohammed is his prophet." Instead, she declares that, "there is only one God and his name is Man. And Elizabeth is his prophet" (206). In this order, she subverts the supremacy of maleness in socio-political and religious institutions that subject others including women, with Elizabeth as the prophet. In other words, she shows that men are not the only beings who can play god, but women too because they are also part of the mainstream of human development. In this optimistic vein, she delves into spirituality by drawing on the power of religion and playing God. This process unveils the potentials of women and the power and corruption that coexist with good and evil. But at the end, the spiritual torments of Dan become lessons on self-control for Elizabeth that grants her a precarious mental and emotional stability. Her high level spirituality symbolically reveals the illusion of reality and the hysteria that defines the age-long racial and gender conflicts. But, in order to attain conscious

human change, she expresses her individuality through communality (in the farm projects with Kenosi), thereby redefining the unconscious revelation in the conscious process of development through complementarity.

The interpretation of identity and the question of power are given a global expression. According to Peter Nazareth, the writer references world 'heroes' in art, philosophy, war and economic strategy and literature, such as D. H. Lawrence, Elvis Presley, Adolph Hitler, Mao Tse-tung and Julius Nyerere who have in one way or another influenced the formation of individual and human identities (218-9). However, the universal nature of Head's concern is approached through the individual's journey into the innermost recesses or psychological dictates of their lives. Her setting in Southern Africa (Botswana) typifies the moral and social wasteland of contemporary imperialism in the form of sexual and mental defects and apartheid or racial discrimination. Her characters are refugees, exiles, victims of racism, poverty, sexual oppression and repression who converge in a "place of sand" (symbol of rootlessness or statelessness). They are involved in personal and private psychological struggles for survival from which they come out regenerated: spiritually and physically. The condition of each character is the result of socio-political experience, such as colonialism. Frantz Fanon describes colonialism thus:

> Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and empting the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures and destroys it. (170)

The unconscious conjectures are representations of conflicts of identity and difference in colour, culture and sexuality, all results of colonialism. These conflicts "emit from the evil inherent in man's soul" (135). It is for such reasons that Head's narrative documents her conscious and unconscious moments: the play of emotions and thoughts in the soul and the physical (body)

response. The "perverted logic" of Head's *A Question of Power* is explored in socio-political and economic themes in order to bring out noble ideals of identification. By juxtaposing her concern with difference in sexuality and identity, she expresses a desire for human tolerance at the local context, and hopes this is invariably transported into a universal context. This is aptly expressed in her response to Tom's suggestion about creating an exclusive brotherhood for black people. Head observes that her literary concentration is on:

> Mankind in general, and black people fit in there, not as special freaks and oddities outside the scheme of things, with labels like Black Power or any other rubbish of that kind. (133)

Her vision of identity is embedded in this statement. Through the victims or the oppressed of the micro society, especially women, she explores their limitations, the women's roles, their disadvantages and their bruised Self, and celebrates their quiet successes. Through them, she sees herself as a paradigm of the African woman struggling defiantly against entrenched social and sexual prejudices:

> The social defects of Africa are, first, the African man's loose, carefree sexuality; it hasn't the stopgaps of love and tenderness, personal romantic treasuring of women. It is just sex…. (137)

Self-exiled in Botswana, Head comes to know the realities of alienation, racism, rejection and victimization. In fact, her works particularly *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *A Question of Power* are personal and symbolic depictions and responses to challenges of traditional mores and socio-political hysteria. In spite of these challenges, her characters have constructively overcome their hysteria by normalising the "constellation of anxieties" in conciliatory and complementary relationships. In another sense, her self-exile from South Africa, like Makhaya, to Botswana on a quest for peace of mind, builds bridges of harmony through conscious and unconscious

experiences, and as a writer re-imagine the world, like Maru, in a way that she would not have to respond to pre-given paradigms. In other words, she creates an imaginary ideal society outside apartheid without being militant. Her resistance is defined by her hysteria or anxieties and her new world is imagined through "right reasoning", instead of responding to apartheid with the familiar force of violence.

A Question of Power is a complex novel that merges such random: consciousness with unconsciousness with an intention of attaining individual identity and social transformation. So, Head probes beyond the issues of identity and social change to reveal the complex undercurrents like psychological effects. The emotional and psychological projections of Elizabeth are the most obvious aspects of that complexity. These are depicted in the unconscious projections represented by Dan and Sello (the power tussle between evil and good; body and soul). While Elizabeth represents the individual and the society caught within the web of domination, Sello and Dan represent the inherent spiritual and psychological status of man in his human relations, that is, the innate social and mental structure of man. The narrative, through the interplay of power between Dan and Sello in the unconscious, recounts stories of subjection, difference, power, loneliness, exile, spirituality, and ultimate insanity. Deconstructing the memory and madness motif with post-modern elements of foregrounding history and voyeurism, the 'truths' and 'pains' of domination, subjection, alienation, and isolation are unveiled: "Because of what I see inside ... Because of what I'm learning, internally" (133). The novel deconstructs the behavioural patterns of the characters in order to redefine their identity. Thus the subjection of Elizabeth to mental and sexual degradation and molestations by Medusa, Sello and Dan is a symbolic exposé of stereotypes of female identity or hysteria. The heroine faces many battles on

different fronts – racial inferiority (colour), sexual subjectivity, social, mental and psychological discrimination (body and soul).

Elizabeth is thus a victim of two axes; a victim of a racial attitude unable to comprehend the difference between good and evil (84), and a victim of female subjectivity. These two axes deal with the unconscious processes of subjective identity through which human experience is lived and understood. However, the author's position is revealed in an authorial intrusion where the two axes are subverted to the advantage of the victim. Thus she outlives her subjective identity as a victim of the ugly process of imposed identity by the manipulator or oppressor, who is constantly in fear within the patterned structures of oppression:

> It's like two separate minds at work. The victim is really the most flexible, the most free person on earth. He doesn't have to think of endless laws and endless falsehoods. His jailer does that. His jailer creates the chains and the oppression. He is merely presented with it … The faces of the oppressed people are not ugly. They are scared with suffering. But the torturers become more hideous day by day. There are no limits to the excesses of evil they indulge in. There's no end to the darkness and death of the soul. The victim who sits in the jail always sees a bit of the sunlight shining through ... who is the great man – the man who cries, broken by anguish, or his scoffing, mocking, jeering oppressor? (84)

The opposing binaries of good and evil, body and soul, inferiority and superiority, and white and black are hybridised between being white and being black in order to actualise the heroine's utopia of a profound world:

> It was the total de-mystifying of all illusions. The human soul is alone in the battle of life. It is helped, I think, by profoundly moral social orders ... But at best they can only be outer guide-lines, outer reminders. The questions of tenderness, love, appeal, compassion, truth, still lie within … (86)

Head insinuates therefore, that the instruments of moral and psychological subjection are used to denigrate a whole culture, race and gender in order to de-emphasize the political importance of the psychic Self, which is subject primarily to social imbalances. The female psyche, which is often seen as being essentially identical to the male's is distorted through a vicious and systematic dominant inscription, which buries the 'truths' of female sexuality and sensuality in the distinction between good and evil.

Unfortunately in *A Question of Power*, the position is that a lot of things have fallen over the edge. On one edge is where the sun comes up, and on the other is where it goes down (as is also depicted in *Maru*). In the state of anomy that characterises the Southern African socio-political condition, the victim is not taken into account; in fact, Africans are the worst victims of the humiliation of colonialism and domination by fellow Africans in the manner Camilla treated the young African farm students as she embodies racism.

The question of female identity and power is framed by the binaries of oppression: the vectors of difference and similarity, and continuity and rupture. Power and identity are considered along these binaries. One depicts foregrounding in the process of continuity with the past. The other reminds one that what entails is precisely the experience of a profound discontinuity or rupture of the people's experience of victimization, domination, colonialism, subjection, and the paradoxical 'truth' of a continental or global development.

In essence, the conditions that create difference are prevalent in the complex novel. How then can one describe "difference" within identity? The inscription of difference is not only specific and universal, it is also critical. Its complexity exceeds the binaries of "past/present", "them/us",

"object/subject", and "dominant/dominated". It is possible then that the author has tried to rethink the position of and reposition human and woman identity differences within the constituency of specific and universal divisions. In order to understand the complexity of the notion of "difference" and "subjection", she creates diversity in human relationships and yet tries to hybridise metaphorically the sacredness of human understanding of love, tenderness, development, ethnicity and religion. In other words, she creates a reactionary process of interrogation and resistance to the assumption about social hierarchy and female subjectivity. It could be said that she creates in the narrative of displacement the traditional space for the exploration of gender relations and sexual difference, as well as imagines a new dawn and a new world. So her creative effort may be summed up thus: "May I never contribute to creating dead worlds, only new worlds" (100). This re-echoes *Maru* where she declares that in: "Pull(ing) down the old structure and creating a new one (society where), one would be free and no one the slave of another (68-69). It is possible to look back at *Maru* from *A Question of Power*, as Head seems to be doing when in a letter to Randolph Vigne (6 December 1971), she says:

> But the struggle with the third book threw me back to the 2nd book. There are things there that are *valid* and *solid* goodness. There is a *strong* control over the people of Dikeledi by Maru and Moleka. I dominate them mentally and that was my power. I was right on top and dictated the terms of generosity which makes the evil in Maru and Moleka *nearly* impotent. But they had a dark stream of evil and my unease about them clearly comes through. (157)

Head is surely talking about Sello in the brown suit and Dan rather than Maru and Moleka! It may seem to be a form of wishful thinking that she sees herself as dominating her characters even while Elizabeth is being dominated by Sello and Dan till the very end. Thus in her effort to recreate balances in a new world, she sets up guiding principles between moments of sanity and insanity. Such principles include sisterhood – female bonding – as found between Elizabeth and

Brigitte (84), and Elizabeth and Kenosi (88). She enacts a new social order and nobleness of the Soul (86) through friendship and female-bonding which give meaning to female identity.

The new world principle is symbolically represented by the farm (nature) development project. It gives an economic and a symbolic mental growth to the farmers, especially the women, and also brings together a communal relationship between the black farm students and the white teachers like Eugene Man and Tom, whose human essence is based on his belief in "black power." The farm symbolises the call of Nature that runs in all her writing. Nature is a symbol of regeneration, while spirituality gives a new outlook on God, not as remorseless but humanistic with an iron integrity on human conduct. The 'black power' which is often regarded as an exclusive global brotherhood is corrected by Elizabeth as not being the answer to the Blackman's horrors, but is rather another form of racial subjection (133-136). However, the struggle for and the power to define identity belongs to all mankind which all must share because there is more friendship and bonding to be shared between white and black. So the issue of social change is not an exclusive responsibility of women, rather it is a complementarity that includes all men, black or white (135). That is to say that the socio-political, sexual, and religious imbalances in the society emit from the soul (soil) of the African society, not from the body (66). The agricultural projects offer the opportunity for a redefinition of the conflicts of "body" and "soul" in relation to addressing some socio-political imbalances. It also empowers the women economically and exposes them to Western knowledge that will alleviate and probably eradicate the social, sexual and psychological injustices against them. The agricultural projects empower the characters to know the evil and the good around them and the need for an inward regeneration through identification to subdue their natural habitat for development. Awareness and empowerment

created by knowledge become instrumental to identity; and in this process Man becomes a creator. By implication, the novelist believes that the development of Man (male/female) lies in his/her hands (as each character is responsible for defining his/her individuality and effecting social change). This is because the mystical world of God is the people, and everything is down here with the people to contradict the patriarchal (dominant) viewpoint that allows for one group to dominate another.

Elizabeth's hysteria, to Irigaray, is directed at her subjection and her resistance to the female sexual stereotype (247). The patriarchal domination psychologically stereotypes and baits Elizabeth into subjection, enslavement and humiliation; thus, the parade and projection of sexually active and exploited women like Body Beautiful, Madam Make-Love-On-The-Floor, Miss Wriggly-Bottom, Miss Sewing-Machine and others, who all represent the projections of dominant male desire that ensnare and enslave women into dependent and degenerate conditions. They are products of the heroine's hallucinations which border on sado-masochistic eroticism. They are paradoxes of her sexual repression, morbidity, and the subjectivity of a woman's identity within a patriarchal domination (128). Sex assumes prime importance in Elizabeth's mind because of her unfortunate past. The Medusa figure is conjured as an African superwoman. Elizabeth, akin to the wretched homosexual coloured, engages herself in a lesbian relation with Medusa to prevent her from repeating her mother's mistake with her black father in producing an "unwanted child". The numerous thunderbolts that Medusa explodes in her head are orgasmic. After each experience, she is left tired and helpless. One of such orgasmic experience is described clearly:

> It was about her (Medusa's) vagina. Without any bother for decencies she sprawled her long black legs in the air, and the most exquisite sensation travelled out of her towards Elizabeth. It enveloped Elizabeth from head to toe like a slow, deep, sensuous bomb … and resting in a heaven of bliss. (44)

But Medusa is an ambivalent figure. Regardless of the intimacy between them, Medusa hates Elizabeth. The feeling reflects a racial prejudice. The black Medusa excludes Elizabeth from an African haven on grounds that she is coloured. Medusa is thus tribal; and so to Head, that African spirit must be wiped out because it is as repressive as *apartheid*. It is destroyed symbolically when Medusa is reduced to cinders in a resolution which employs myth for a social-political end.

The use of memory-work and religious references especially during her unconscious moments enables Elizabeth to confront the discrimination in Southern Africa and to explore new possibilities of pleasure without domination. Critics like Haug et al presuppose a transferring of one's own experience into different contexts and reversing them while trying to invert them (61). Therefore, in Head's narrative, memory-work not only explores the women's subjection to patriarchal domination specifically and universally, but reveals certain patterns of feminine behaviour in an African society through the alienating device of insanity. In other words, through metafiction or meta-narratives and historicity drawing from memory-experience of insanity, she reflects objective reality/truths about the conditions of being different in a multi-racial society. She recalls forgotten history through the unconscious power of memory to recreate past events in the present situation to establish the reality/truth of the female and individual identity. Thus, she initiates the present truth through an objective imitation of reality. However, reality is an imagined truth which is conceived in the memory of history. So history becomes an identity just

as the past is turned into present. Invariably, Elizabeth Cadmore is a hybrid of the historical past of her mother, who had a history of mental trauma as a result of her failed relationship with a black stable boy. This experience which produced Elizabeth becomes the history that is 'worn' as an identity. So to purge herself of this victimization and tear down the mask of historical identity, she relives her past through the memory-work (the power of the unconscious) to create an escape.

Escape from societal norms and historical identities cannot, however, be achieved simply by negating them as this would invert the binaries without dissolving them. In the context of the novel, the memory-work enables Head to explore the limits of her perceptions and to see new connections. To Haug et al:

> [It] slashes through the horizontal seams that traditionally keep domains of experience separate and parallel, allowing us to forge collectively connections between separate elements. (60)

In this process, the woman can form another image of herself which does not necessarily follow the perverted logic of Otherness of the Other self. The image replaces the real by shattering the heroine's madness and replacing her Self with an anonymous "it", which is in accord with the logic of patriarchal discourse. This is manifested in the mirror scene where Elizabeth identifies herself with the logic of patriarchal discourse:

> She washed and dressed, then had to comb her hair in the mirror. She flinched and looked away. There was an unnameable horror there. She could not endure to look at it … How could someone run away from their own mind? (46)

Bessie Head superimposes a curved mirror on the flat mirror, which is a model of the reflection of masculine representation to reflect the unmentionable horrors of the society. This allows her to follow a non-linear causal logic where one term does not exclude its opposite. Annette Horn

concludes that the heroine hollows and burns out the conventions and clichés of patriarchal discourse (4). To Teresa Dovey, Head's work "is an attempt to create a viable identity" (33). Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi interprets the work as an allegorical struggle between the powers of good and evil, with Elizabeth as Everywoman (237). Arthur Ravenscroft notes that "Her private sufferings re-enact the sufferings of all the despised, rejected and oppressed of human history, and Sello as God remains ambivalent, passive, at times overwhelmed by the evil that strangely seems to be a function of himself (184).

At the end of the novel, Elizabeth overpowers her social and psychological oppression and oppressors. She ascends into a mystical state, battles with the forces of evil represented by Medusa and Dan, overcomes insanity and the mental history of her mother's past "with a bounding sense of liberation" (100). She finally understands that an idyllic life must not be confused with an inordinate thirst for power or excessive human passion (Okonjo Ogunyemi 237). So, to achieve freedom from suffering, poverty, and pain, there must be an "awakening love of mankind" (35). At the end, the power of sisterhood as affirmed by Kenosi (142), acknowledges the brotherhood of man as the warm beginning of a feeling of belonging, "As she fell asleep, she placed one soft hand over her land (the land of regeneration). It was a gesture of belonging" (206). The land – Nature – offers the heroine a new identification through a regeneration process (the world of plants breathes life and freshness or healing into an insane mind) (142). Nature, in this case, gives her the voice and selfhood to revert the "perverted logic" of patriarchy to a rebirth in the struggle between identity and power, and sanity and insanity.

Consequently, by entering into a subconscious dialogue with her images, Elizabeth invents not only her mother's 'real' self, but also her own self. As a result, she closes up the split that characterized femininity, the split between reason and desire, autonomy and dependent security, and psychic and social identity.

Many critics have tried in one form or another to categorize their observations about Bessie Head's fiction, particularly the character of Elizabeth in *A Question of Power*, with a medical compartmentalization. Such scholars like Elizabeth Evasdaughter seem to agree with Lilian Feder's classification that concludes that Elizabeth, and inexplicably Bessie Head too be classified as paranoid Schizophrenic (80).

Annette Horn, however, questions such categorization that are as oppressive as race, class and gender, all are used to designate blacks, workers and women as inferior (7). To her, Head attempts through fictional realism to change our perceptions of normality and madness just as much as those of blacks and women. Fundamentally, she is concerned with why people inflict pain and evil on one another physically and psychologically. Through the process of questioning, challenging and re-ordering, she returns us, especially the women, to the reality of truths and brings in the gesture of belonging through the creative imagination. It could then be said in support of Evasdaughter that at the heart of an identity crossroad is fiction, with the exception that most of our fictions are endorsed by society as what we only do is to deconstruct and define the narratives as Bessie Head has done through her creation of a site of resistance and liberation. Susan Gardner, however, critiques Head's works especially *A Question of Power* as introspective in nature and lacking an African flavour:

> Head received a Westernized education, acknowledged Brecht and Lawrence as significant literary influences, lived in exile and never spoke an African Language. What distinguishes her is how she attempted to become an African writer through decades of living in a Botswana village… (*Womanism and the African Consciousness* 169)

Gardner's view is invalid as many of Head's themes like madness, hallucinations, homosexuality and guilt are reflections of the African conditions of class, tribal and gender discrimination. Though Head's status as an African writer is ambiguous, nonetheless, the issues raised and her portrayal of women is expressive of African values and critical of the multiple levels of oppression faced by African women. From a Gynocritical perspective, Head writes from dominant and muted angles of superiority and marginality. Thus, her novels are often mis-interpreted from stereotyped and sub-cultured perspectives, which make Gardner's view far-fetched.

In conclusion, Bessie Head's fiction intertwines the issues of racial identity with gender identity in the discourse on female identity. Permeating her novels is her concern for racial, class and gender disparity and difference. To her, the dominant and muted concerns are nearly inseparable, for if one separates gender identity from class and race, then the latter only needs peripheral attention. Critics are of the view that Head's discourse on race, class and gender issues, if combined, cannot accurately represent the major concern of female identity. This means that race and class must be separated from gender since women's issues within the feminist theory are common across the globe. But is gender inquiry really common considering historical, religious, psychological, social and political contexts?

Head's female identity inquiry is based on the need to talk about race and class without deflecting the concern for gender identity. What she has done is to create a muted story from a

dominant concern using the gynocritical framework. By so doing, the attention on race and class in fact helps our understanding of gender, which is a concept of the inner self. In this sense, she seems to be saying that it is only when attention is given to how people are different or contextually defined that an understanding of areas of similarity can be forged.

Head's fiction like *A Question of Power*, *Maru*, *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *Tales of Tenderness and Power*, represents a generation of cultural hybridity of the Western and the African. These cultural realities are laid bare in their racial, social, gender and historical differences, juxtaposing colonial confusion and postcolonial reality. In answering the question of identity, she projects protagonists who emerge from this cultural subversion to dignified status.

The exposé on cultural hybridity further enables an assessment, through gynocritical models, of how female solidarity and communal relationships in Africa have challenged the separatist ideology of the West by stressing equality and restructuring the human value system to accommodate interests of all women inside and outside different cultural milieu. From this dialectics of communality or complementarity of female identity, the novels of Head stand out as symbolic representations of human equality in spite of the cultural and historical differences.

In addition, Head's works are sources of self-actualization, though they are more or less biographical. In trying to self-inscribe, she uses a metafictional approach, which shows overtly a direct correlation between the fictional process and the writer's experience. This metafiction of self-expression unveils "how the meanings and values of the world have been constructed and how, therefore, they can be challenged or changed" (Modupe Kolawole in *Womanism and African Consciousness* 169). In other words, it enhances memory-work, which prevents history

from becoming dormant as in Head's novels, where the highlights of struggles and the painful process of re-creating oneself are presented and negotiated.

An element that runs in all her narratives is the unrestrained physicality of Nature which brings about a rebirth. This process of recreation is seen in the context of other characters in the narratives as the catalyst in the process of resolution. It unveils the inner turmoil of the protagonists, their society, as well as their regeneration process. In other words, Nature as the mediator in the artist's utopia permits the full resolution of the personal and social conflicts provoked by the margins between the protagonists and the society. Nature is a common element in African fiction. The physical difference is not only conquered but redefined in such a way that provides that path to superiority rather than inferiority.

Finally, through the techniques of third and first person narrators in *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *A Question of Power* respectively, the in-roads to physical and spiritual freedom and identity are sited. These are sets of images that reinforce the author's vision, like the symbolic depiction of the mini village of Paulina Sebeso's child and the use of "hole" in *A Question of Power* is of great relevance. The mini village represents the author's vision and the 'hole' indicates the gap or difference – in its depth as well as being a derogatory reference to a woman's vagina. The patriarchal interpretation indicates that the 'hole' is dualistic of sexual submission and destruction or captivity. But in Head's fiction, the hole symbolically indicates difference between superiority and inferiority, and desire and destruction.

In all, the novels of Bessie Head are fraught with the loneliness and despair of exile, but the resilience of the exiled characters is most remarkable. They are symbolic representations of a

systematic study of women's roles and handicaps in the society, especially in politically, sexually, and historically subjective Southern Africa. Head reflects their emotional, psychological and spiritual endowments in the context of a human society that is sane and accommodating. Her women are thrusted into a hostile landscape from which they must grow and realize their identity using Nature. These women are pictured by their degree of inner strength, individuality, and drive with which each is able to rise above the brutalizing and restrictive roles assigned her by an "unimaginative" society. The degree of humility and sincerity with which they adapt to their situations and bring out positive aspects contributes to the harmonious co-existence of all in their environment. This gesture of belonging brings about an understanding of 'power' and the interpretation and acceptance of identity.

Chapter Five

Beyond Today: Redefining Self and Difference in *The Promised Land* and *The Sacred Seed*

This chapter focuses on themes concerning traditional, historical, political, religious, colonial, post-colonial, and socio-cultural challenges of men and women in East Africa. Many literary works from that region represent the female narrative search for space in a society that is highly patriarchal and politically tribalised. An understanding of the prevailing culture and practice in East Africa reveals that the cultural elements depicted by the selected East African female writers – Grace Ogot and Rebeka Njau – converge in a completely new way to redefine Self and the inscription of difference through compromise, complementarity, spirituality and Nature as transformative elements.

The identities of most Africans have been shaped by various inscriptions of difference. The early feminists' approach to identity is in terms of difference and its binary stance about the male and female or self and other. This approach, also adopted by critics like Homi Bhabha and Frantz Fanon, reconciles difference in terms of the colonizer and the colonized with little regard for sexual, age, class, historical, or ethnic specificity as they define identities. In addition, these critics also fail to address the fact that Africans and most post-colonial women were represented as Other inferior to the colonizers. African women writers have out of necessity, sought to correct the erroneous inscription of the female identity as defined by Western influence and patriarchy. That is the female Self is a victim of double subjugation: she is the Other of Western imperialism and the subject of patriarchal 'imagination.'

The process that defines the African woman as Other involves multiple interpretations. They are the Other of men, the Other of Western women, and sometimes, the Other of African-American women. The inscription of the African woman is further defined by other politics of difference within a given African enclave. For instance, within the context of East Africa, like other African regions, specific histories, spaces, politics and locations inform the experiences of women as writers and members of a community and their continuous attempts to redefine difference and selfhood.

The works of the Kenyan writers, Grace Ogot and Rebeka Njau, problematise identity and attempt to redefine difference. They narrate the complex levels of difference in their societies using conflicts over land, religion, patriarchy, tradition, illiteracy, gender etc. These writers transgress the limited barriers of tradition and gender difference through the portrayal of their characters in a "dominant" and "muted" gynocritical framework. Women are further pitted against post-independent binaries of male/female, tradition/modern, similarity/dissimilarity, land ownership/serfdom, and culture/nature. These binaries indicate that the Other, according to Trinh Minh-ha, oftentimes does not oppose Self (the dominant male authority). That is, the perception of the Other is for it to be subsumed or remain in the "shadow" of the Self, while working at being equals (71).

The politics of land, gender, and cultural difference also confront each sex. The binary divisions of sensuality and sex, male/female, rich and poor, dominant and dominated, and objective/subjective became sharper and more visible after colonialism. Most times, women fall under the disadvantaged and the dispossessed side of the binary. They are the "black proletariat"

as tillers of land, mothers, wives, and domestic helps. They are voiceless and landless, and their victimization is compounded by their dislocation from any group identification of sisterhood. Due to their upbringing, they lack any form of female-bonding and support. This dislocation is aptly depicted in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (237). Sex, sexuality and sensuality thus become markers of their difference, and these facilitate other issues of difference. The sexual marker of difference along male/female lines is an age-long one just like land conflicts.

The possession of land is vital to the identity of the average East African. Land is central to their existence because it provides food and other means of livelihood like security and wealth. More importantly, the East African has a strong spiritual attachment to land because it is from the earth that he/she is made and to it he/she would return; in other words, it defines their world view and socialisation. According to a tribal legend recorded in Jomo Kenyetta's *Facing Mount Kenya*, land was handed over to Gikuyu and Mumbi by the creator to rule and till. Scholars and commentators like Ngugi wa Thiong'o have romanticised the "cross of history" and legend in various ways. Ngugi often repeats this story in his novels. In *Weep Not Child*, he writes:

> In this darkness at the foot of Kerinyaga, a tree rose... This was Mukuyu, God's tree. Now, you know that at the beginning of things there was only one man (Gikuyu) and one woman (Mumbi). It was under this tree that he first put them... And the creator who is also called Murunga took them to the country of ridges near Siriana... But he had shown them all the land – yes, children, God showed Gukuyu and Mumbi all the land and told them, 'This land I hand over to you. O man and woman. It is yours to rule and till in serenity sacrificing only to me, your God, under my sacred tree'. (24)

Apart from social and economic identity that land confers on the people, it also symbolises the root of conflicts and differences, including that of gender. The quest for political and cultural

power motivated the patriarchal usurpation of the existing matriarchal system. Thus, land as it defines identity in East Africa (that is, the possession of land implies freedom) and matriarchy as a system became issues of conflict. But identity and the system are shrouded in myth, legend and the colonial presence. The situation, particularly as it affected the matriarchal system, is narrated in *A Grain Wheat*:

> It was many, many years ago. Then women ruled the land of Agikuyu. Men had no property they were only there to serve the whims and needs of the women. Those were hard years. So they waited for women to go to war, they plotted a revolt, taking an oath of secrecy to keep them bound each to each in the common pursuit of freedom. They would sleep with all the women at once... Fate did the rest; women were pregnant; the takeover met with little resistance. (11)

The takeover by men established their sexual, political and social control over women over the centuries. Interestingly, a substantial portion of East African history and legends ascribe the region's origin to the creativity and resourcefulness of women. However, patriarchy, to consolidate its position subsumed the female identity, including names of women under the "dominant illusions of reality" of the object, the men. The object (Self/male) controls the subject (Other/female) and creates an exclusionary system that enslaves and alienates the latter, leaving it steeped in what Ojo-Ade calls "the traditions of the land..." (xi). The new social system transformed East African women into an agrarian, traditionally submissive, and "uneducated" lot, who are superfluous and unfortunate by-products of some inexorable natural process. Ayi Kweh Armah attributes the myth of women's inferiority in Africa to men who were anxious to subjugate and oppress women after coming into contact with Arab invaders, the white predators:

> In the suppression of women first, in the reduction of all females to things – things of pleasure, things for use, and things in the hands of men – these

> admirers of the white predators' road saw a potent source of strength for men. (*Two Thousand Seasons*, 59)

According to Armah, women were conditioned to abandon all intellectual activities and devote their time to tilling the ground and caring for their husbands and children. Illiteracy, polygamy and motherhood became major markers of women's identity. In their subjugation and domestication, women became objects of a "vindictive slavery" in the hands of men and became economical to one another in their bid to please men (60). Armah's analysis situates the myth of "cross of history" or legend in the takeover of female potency and their relegation to the position of "subject" of the "object", a creation of difference completely accepted by women in the traditional context. This position, however, creates unresolved conflicts and struggles for redefinition of difference among contemporary women, who seek realignment in the role of women in socio-political dynamics that mark the era of post-independence in East Africa.

Another marker of conflict and struggle that is as historical as the gender takeover is land ownership. Women in the region have no claims to land, even though they till it. In the traditional Igbo culture of Nigeria as reflected in Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* and Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, women are restricted to milder physical tasks with certain female privileges and ceremonial functions. The fictions of East Africans reveal that despite the takeover, labour remains predominantly a female affair. However, though women perform secondary roles in certain respects they are compensated with the revered status of motherhood. Jomo Kenyatta explains how significant motherhood is to the Gikuyu:

> The term 'mother' is considered an honourable form of address and one which is desired by every woman in Gikuyu society... To maintain her prestige she must be hospitable to visitors and render assistance to her neighbour ... (9)

Within the notion of Self or identity is the complex link to nationalism and narration embedded in the patriarchal 'takeover'. Indeed, identity of any sort – national, cultural, ethnic, religious and gender – implies a human being's imaginary relations to his/her condition of existence. The word 'imaginary' indicates fluidity and the shifting reality of identity. The conception of identity invariably stresses its variability, its imagined and performative aspects and its enunciation of subjectivity and selfhood in relation to a mythical past, a distant event. Hence, the connection between national identities as they inform East African writers and their fiction is established, featuring what Homi Bhabha calls "in-between spaces" (2). The "in-between spaces" include the conflict and struggle for, or challenges of land. The history of gender invasion in East Africa cannot be separated from the complex history and narratives connecting land and the "in-between spaces", and the heritage of Gikuyu and Mumbi held in trust by all the generations that succeeded them. It is therefore natural that there is a series of confrontations between the Gikuyu and those early Europeans before the final subjugation which resulted from a resistance weakened by a series of natural disasters. The land struggle becomes the symbol of conflict and the core form of fragmentation and overall breakdown of all social processes attending the era of post-colonialism. This includes the complex and political disputes between the Europeans and the Gikuyu, and the betrayals among the people. These conflicts, with all the complexities inherent in them, also affect and define women. The definition of gender cannot be separated from other "in-between spaces" of difference that connote a 'takeover' because the colonial presence and the discriminatory difference in identity are replicated in the postcolonial period as

strategies for further subversions. Thus, the nationalist struggle gradually overwhelmed the cultural history, turning it into a cultural resistance, a political force creating a dynamic synthesis to resolve conflicts.

Religion was also a powerful tool used by the Europeans to carry out the political subjugation of Africans. It depicted the universalist attitudes that the white settlers employed in their civilizing mission to deal with the "barbaric" and quaint manifestations of paganism such as polygamy, female circumcision, and "pagan" songs and dances. However, the colonised challenged the Christian tenets and attempted to justify their cultural predilections and cultural preoccupations. One way the people validated that faith was by a syncretism of Christianity (the Old Testament) with important aspects of their tradition and culture. For example, evidence has it that there is a similarity between the Gikuyu creation myth of Gikuyu and Mumbi and the Christian myth of Adam and Eve. This similarity in the mythical vision of the people keeps them focused on the struggle to secure and retrieve the land from the white Settlers and their agents.

The land issue is a defining characteristic of the historical, economic and political conflicts in East Africa, and the resolution of these conflicts has also attracted the intervention of "guerrilla" militancy (the Mau Mau), and a torrent of literary responses. Land, an identity of most East Africans, informs their spiritual, economic, political and social relations. The dispossession of land from them created a number of conflicts and armed struggles that spanned many decades. The white settlers occupied the rich and fertile parts of the land, securing by the "sword" and the Bible, and many local leaders allied with the white oppressors for personal gains; so in response, the "natives" or the oppressed, took up arms to resist the double oppression.

The “Mau Mau” uprising or revolution left the pattern and trend of stratification, which had preceded it, largely intact. The Mau Mau struggle therefore became a symbol of identity after independence, and further divided East Africans into the underprivileged and the privileged natives. The “Uhuru Sasa” (Freedom now!) slogan signified the hope of restoring the land to the children of Gikuyu and Mumbi, the land expropriated by the white settlers. The achievement of political independence and nominal control, issues that were at the forefront of political and human rights activities in the colonial period have remained unattainable even in the present. These issues preoccupy the post-Uhuru East Africa writing which examines the meaning of liberation through the sacrifices and plight of the ordinary people, including women, who are often caught in the nationalist struggle.

The notion of individualism and socialised difference at the economic, political, sexual, and religious levels fosters a literature that is preoccupied with the Self and culture. Writers thus explore the problems in the narratives. This act reinforces the notion that individuals do participate in shaping their own destiny; and women are important in the historical actions and moments of self-definition. This search for self-definition encouraged the emergence of a literature that reflects a new interest; that is, the conflict between tradition and modernity as it affects identity and the aspirations of women in the contemporary East African society.

Ngugi supports the female aspirations for self-actualisation and desires that women writers challenge the present status quo for “greater facilities” as a way of “consolidating independence,” just as the Mau Mau rebellion and violence were necessary to secure independence (Nwankwo 28).

This call to challenge the *status quo* has received many responses from women writers within the region. Many writers including women have thus adopted literature to portray and capture "the moving spirit of an era" in relation to the socio-political struggle in East Africa. Ngugi in *Writers in Politics* declares that literature provides:

> "... Sharper insights into the moving spirit of an era than all the historical and political documents treating the same moments in a society's development. The novel...: it pulls apart and it puts together, it is both analytic and synthetic. (72)

Women's writing springs from the "spirit of the era" representing the desire for freedom. Grace Ogot's and Rebeka Njau's literary contributions are imaginative representations of the challenges of human freedom. These writers explore history, culture, and memory through their narratives or thoughts, what Stuart Hall calls "representation." This they do through the narrative or representation of their identity, an act of imaginative "recovery" grounded in a *re-telling* of the past, *something* with an objective experience is created in truth, and is historical with specific symbolic effects. Narrative becomes the articulation of their identities. It expresses experience and social knowledge and tells stories that bring order to the past that situates the present, and gives direction for the future (394). To Gayle Greene, "...There is something in the impulse to narrate that is related to the impulse to liberate... Narrative recollects providing an escape [route] from repression in order for there to be change or progress" (in *Womanism and the African Consciousness* 136).

These writers variously attempt to examine the past in order to situate the present and direct the future as they define the female presence by constructing new identity schemas that comprise of traditional African values and inherited European modes. Their works are metaphorical, that is,

they are narratives drawn from the specific experience of historiography. In the act of articulating their identities for national and individual liberation/struggle, culture according to Amilcar Cabral becomes instrumental, an insight into the dynamic synthesis to resolve the conflict of difference (53-65). Frantz Fanon recognises "Culture" as the homogenization and interpretation of concrete behavioural patterns and customs. Fanon particularly sees culture as "the whole body of efforts made by a people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence" (188). On another plane according to Homi Bhabha, Fanon recognizes that this "body of efforts" can never be stable and fixed, and it is from this "instability of cultural signification that the national culture (individual identity) comes to be articulated as dialectic of various temporalities – modern, colonial, postcolonial, nature" (152).

Importantly, women's struggle for identity and agency (productivity) are part of the revolutionary history of the anti-colonial struggle or argument. Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie, though frequently overshadowed by the dominant theories of Fanon and Cabral, challenges the assumption that the history of women's identity or agency should be separated from the liberation discourse of the national struggle. Thus, the works of Grace Ogot and Rebeka Njau relate these transformative possibilities to the complexities, contradictions and ambiguities of women's histories, by illustrating how women in East Africa are located differently within nationalist struggles. By exploring the relation between identity and culture through the interstices of histories from the perspective of women's narratives, these women disrupt the very foundations of traditional cultures. They contest the conventional divisions between public and domestic spaces, and their identity discourse is inextricably woven into the politics of culture,

history and nationalism. They explore women's ambiguous position in the public and private spheres as well as repudiate maladministration and dubious manipulation of politics towards female subjugation in the contemporary East African society. Njau presents models of the female presence and identity through spirituality in order to reshape their traditional roles and aspirations.

Ogot, in her works, provokes questions of anguish not only about the current socio-political situation in East Africa, but also about men and women, their humanity and the degree of deterioration that tend to subsume women's identity within the framework of national survival. Relating social and political realities of the post-independence era in which the colonisers have been replaced by patriarchy, Ogot's works like Ngugi's depict the exploitation of the masses and the women they had promised to uplift. Their works carefully affirm the gloomy reawakening of the (neo) colonial past, where the colonialists spearheaded the socio-political, economic and cultural degradation that led to the migration of many East Africans from their region plundered by aristocrats and autocrats who subordinated women and neglected the social welfare of their people for selfish and political aggrandizement, and made the people metaphorically "beggars on the sloop step of the rich."

Contrary to the criticism of womanism on issues of African women, these writers are optimistic about the future of African women's identity, difference and productivity through their narratives. Their stories make things happen because no event happens in itself; it is the act of telling that makes it happen.

Search for Individuality and National Identity in Grace Ogot's *The Promised Land*

The narrative art of Grace Ogot in *The Promised Land* focuses on the dawn of post-colonialism, the threshold of neo-colonialism and a new individual identity through 'dominant' and ''muted' issues of public and private/domestic spheres. *The Promised Land* is a narrative of the Self at the personal and collective levels. The Self is constituted through symbolic resources of what David Wood calls "a relation to another being" (197). The Self (Same) is constituted by another (Other) because only "an original entanglement with something outside of (the self) would transcend the despair of immediacy" (197). The possibility of conditioning Self and self-identification as "transcendental" requirement for identity is, plainly speaking, narration. Narrative connects personal identity (a sense of what one is) with a horizon of continuity and possibility, namely the capacity or the deep desire to imagine and project (re-tell), possibilities, admit the past (to re-call, re-image it) and the self's relation to the world.

This is the sense in which narrative and narration in general provide the Self with a symbolic resource for the formation, negotiation and reformation of identity. It allows the Self/subject to draw on the collective or shared identity; what Wood calls "public meaning":

> Self-identity is constituted rather than given and our capacity to construct it depends on all sorts of openness to and being sustained by the 'horizon of continuity'... (199)

The "horizon of continuity" is synonymous with narrative for it provides the (symbolic) conditions for self-project and self-esteem, which is the accumulation of identity. Wood argues further that even the "lived-identity" is dependent on the survival of the "horizon of continuity" and predictability, and any disruption results in crisis. Gayle Greene opines further that narrative

provides an escape route from repression and offers in-roads to identity change or socio-political progress, which justifies the cultural revivalism through literature in the post-independence nations in Africa. The narratives of writers in post-colonial Africa address issues of culture conflicts, post-independence disillusionment and a continuing tradition of protest. According to Claude Wauthier:

> After the achievement of independence, African literature reflected ... the conflict between African tradition and a technical civilization, which culminated in the rebellion against colonial domination... (352)

Berrian Perry explains that within the struggle, African women are often subjected to stereotype status without any actual understanding of their social situation. Rather, visual images and theoretical arguments continue to recreate binary divisions between the modern and "free", the educated Western and the traditional, "poor" and oppressed East African women. The protest element in African literature could be deployed to address the contemporary social situations of women in the Luo settlement of Kenya, who are fraught with contradictions. Grace Ogot's narration captures the perspective of these African women as they respond to conflicts with a sense of initiative. Her novel explores individual and community reactions to changing conditions. Its plot is about power struggles, dilemmas of modernization, and the remembrance of the past. It also examines the issues of marriage and male/female relationships and their responses to the changing social sphere of patriarchy.

The involvement of women, particularly the Luo women, in the changing patriarchal society suggests an attempt to reclaim, reorder and unite against patriarchal representation to exorcise the Other. Trinh Minh-ha in *Woman, Native Other* posits that "writing as a social function – as

differentiated from the ideal of 'art for art's sake' – is the aim that Third World writers, in defining their roles, highly esteem and claim" (10). According to Minh-ha, Third World writers consciously address political issues by writing against the grain of Western imperialism and patriarchy.

Apart from her gender concern, Ogot, as Minh-ha and Wauthier suggest, writes to resist the dominance of the West and issues of leadership, corruption and betrayal in East Africa. But to say conclusively that Ogot's fiction acts as a "resistant" postcolonial text is to miss the complexities of her narration and to contradict her interpretation of the African woman's marital identity in Kenya. Rather, it is vital to appreciate how she weaves a narrative of a tottering female agency in which Nyapol (her heroine) struggles within her marriage to confront the complexities of post-colonial challenges. If literature is, among other things, the exploration of human identity in its historical, social, psychological, and spiritual facets, then interpreting the issues of marriage and post-colonial problems through the lens of history and economic relations, can render only a partial view of the dynamism of identity. Even though Ogot represents her characters with ample dramatic insights, the psychological, economical and marital complexities of the female presence within the framework of the marriage institution in a budding post-independent Kenya must be taken into account.

The Promised Land is a literary experiment to transform the traditional image of Kenyan women. It draws upon the recurring motif of a reformist striving to recapture the mythic history of creation to interrogate patriarchal/gender relations, especially gender inequality and the socio-economic disillusionment in politics, while insinuating a transformation of these circumstances.

The Promised Land, narrated in the Luo story-telling fantasy form, is about the quiet female productive transformation outside the obstinate nature of man in his quest for political, social and economic power using the motif of migration. To Florence Stratton, it is a dialogic response to the male narrative perspective of male heroism. Within the context of gynocriticism, Stratton's argument may be regarded as an extreme feminist argument of appropriating the female image. The narrative depicts a disconnection in the "horizon of continuity" of the Luo pioneers after independence leading to a search for happiness and prosperity in the wake of post-colonial disillusionment. Within the disconnection of "horizon of continuity" is the journey motif from one point to another in order to achieve a transformation and reconnection. Importantly, the novel focuses on the female character as the agent of culture, transformation and continuity in the face of patriarchal subjectivity and irrationality. Ogot's primary concern is to challenge sexual stereotypes and promote gender as a social and literary issue.

Narrated against the backdrop of the Luo traditional socio-sexual structure of female subjectivity and male dominance, the novel presents the search for individual and national identity in the wake of independence (Uhuru Sasa). The main character is a male, Ochola, a living reality of his generation in relation to the marital stance on gender. His quest is Self identification and the gradual emergence of the female presence towards productive contributions to development. The male quest and female emergence and development are portrayed through the theme of migration, which symbolically creates the road for a reconnection to the "horizon of continuity" in independent Kenya. It is the female point of view of "horizon of discontinuity" in the society. The story of migration is presented through a meta-narrative – a process of true experience. The story simply justifies the assertion that narrative is an expression of experience that is unique to

the writer. In exploring the issues of migration and female subjectivity, the novel moves beyond the complexity of post-independent disillusionment of the Luo in East Africa by problematizing gender, motherhood, female submissiveness, culture and the wind of change as they define the complexities of the identity of a nation and an individual.

The title of the novel sets an ironic undertone that highlights its main theme; which is the old problem of being torn away from one's root or land and the result of the cultural conflicts between colonial and post-colonial identity. Within the new political dispensation is the search for an economic identity to reconnect the "horizon of continuity". So, part of the conditions of independence rejuvenates a modern "Mau Mau" consciousness to challenge the power abuse of African leaders. "Mau Mau" in this context is "contemporarized" or "post-colonialised" as a personal resistance to new subjectivity of the individual and the society by African leaders:

> ...He was getting tired of living in Nyanza, with its unscrupulous tax collectors, its petty tyrants and its land feuds.... Sub-chiefs regularly recruited forced labour to work on public projects. Why were people made to pay taxes as well then? (*The Promised Land* 14)

The story basically focuses on the male vulnerability to the challenges of post-independence that include economic and socio-political constraints in the wake of contemporary colonialism (Uhuru Sasa). The nature and impact of these conflicts are symbolically captured in the novel through the literary representation of the harsh condition of Nature, which predicates the disconnection, through the wind of change:

> The fierce tropical thunderstorm was over... It was bitterly cold... The wind blew furiously, as if it wanted to shake the little huts free from the earth ...Nyapol suddenly felt frightened and lonely...(7)

Symbolically, the wind blows on various issues and sets off the conflicts that are presented metaphorically. The issues include: the traditional African woman in a male/female relationship, social-economic oppression, the search for identity, and female productivity. These issues are resolved through the representation and notion of migration. The process of "rotating the wind" with its negative effect is embedded in the colonizer/colonized dichotomy, but its psychological impact on colonial and post-colonial subjects is, however, strongly criticized by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*. There, Fanon insists that the colonial encounter is a fertile ground for a destructive psychopathology, one that can not be explained away by a universal Freudian Oedipus complex. The notion of migration, meaning abandoning one's own root for another, is ironically pre-empted in the Wolof proverb used by Dorothy Blair: "Kou wathie sa tound' eu bao yeck mou tasse" (Ka 134). (Meaning) "When one abandons one's own hillock, any hillock one climbs will crumble" (139).

Migration, often connected with exile, is a common theme in East African literature. According to David Kerr, migration expresses flexibility or mobility between two worlds (the known and the unknown), and these worlds are woven into the concept of the "road" which is interpreted to be bumpy. It is sometimes a devourer and at other times a form of alienation from a "fixed" experience of reality, leading to a dialogue with alternative social structures. This dialogue changes both ends of the road if the journey inhibits the space of exile. Migration into exile is a result of changing relationships among individuals within social groups and contexts like religion, race, culture and gender. Migration in this context is exile and symbolically connotes the annihilation of the female presence from the centre of cultural expressions through alienation, dislocation and displacement (13). Accordingly, the notion of migration, meaning "abandoning

one's hillock" – traditions, culture and people – is represented as a failure in *The Promised Land*. It creates a dichotomy between individuals and their roots, an "outsider" personality within the context of an "insider" locale, which creates another form of "outsider"/disconnection through difference. However, contrary to Bessie Head's vision in *When Rain Clouds Gather*, where the main character Makhaya (a male) finds peace in the process of migration, Ogot depicts failure. Ogot's ideological view is that abandoning one's hillock is no resolution to the challenges of existence for men and women in East Africa. However, the process of that failure enables the transformation and formation of the female Self. The female Self (image) and productivity (agency) are represented in the solidity of Nature contrary to her dependence on the power of culture. Thus, two characters with different ideologies are pitted against each other where the male is propelled by a colonial psychology of fantasy, and the female character in her solidity clings to familiarity. The novel enunciates this conflict thus:

> ...These visitors told us of the heart and wealth of that land... I wasn't thinking of starting trade. I've been thinking we might migrate there... How could anyone think of leaving this land? Our ancestors died fighting for this land. (22-23)

The notion of migration and the sacredness of the land symbiotically connote individual and national identity; however, they are interpreted at different levels of commitment. In the text, a propelling psychology about the land with its myth of inheritance steeped in biblical references and justification is explored in the context of the coloniser's appropriation of the colonised and their land. In addition, it expands the legendary patriarchal appropriation of female productivity. Symbolically, it indicates the law of justice. The fantasy over land in its mythical or religious

relevance as a 'promised land' does not yield "milk and honey," and this failure thus justifies the migration into fantasy:

> ...When He created this land, He must have had a better purpose for it. He must have said that this land, like the land of Canaan would flow with milk and honey so that its inhabitants could have plenty to eat and drink and live a better life. Yet, Seme was no Canaan ... (17)

This masculine meditation on individual and national relevance in the society raises questions that are pertinent in the text. Where is the promised land? Is the "Uhuru Sasa" actualised by the contemporary Mau Mau? Could there be fear of the myth of female power of the past returning in the present context? What impact is the definition of female dynamism to the woman's sphere, and the individual and national responses to this dynamism? Does migration symbolize any psychological or physical transformation? Is there any meaning or morality represented in the migration or journey fantasy? Or is the "promised land" a symbolic representation of issues that concern both men and women, and their ability to define identity through the possession of land?

Adopting the epistolary technique, Grace Ogot finds answers to the questions raised by blending fantasy, politics and economics with ecofeminism in a symbolic manner. She explores the dynamism of the eco-psychology of the characters in order to portray the conflicts in the land as they refashion new male and female identities. Significantly, land is a major national and individual identity. According to Arthur Scheleizer Jnr., the individual identity cannot be separated from the national identity (20). The individual internalizes the social norms or assemblages of the society as they define his identity, and thus Ochola and Nyapol are traditional stereotypes living their individual and societal identities. The harsh reality of the land defines

Ochola's relevance and quantifies his worth (eco-psychology). To Marion Kilson, an author is often shaped by his or her personal experience within the society (161). This also justifies women's writing from the point of view of their histories, experiences and expressions. Ogot (in an interview with Bernth Lindfors, also insists that a person's background is important (62). So, she represents Luo women in their quiet non-militant attitude of expressing sexual identity without subverting the *status quo*. The heroine, in spite of male dominance, never manifests any revolutionary standpoints or politicized attitudes. Rather, she simply "raised the dust" of objection in moments of conflicts generated by male irrationality.

Considering the significance of land to an individual's personality, Bren Hughes argues that it is an essential traditional reality driven towards growth and an individual sense of identity (5-8). In comparing Ngugi and Ogot, Hughes states that while in Ngugi, the inner vitality of belief in land is made to affect the present as well as man's response to it, Ogot merely adopts a documentary approach. Presenting the characters within the traditional stereotyped setting, Ochola symbolises the masculine head of the family, obstinacy, inordinate ambition in the present-day economic condition in Kenya and patriarchal control of the female partner impervious to reasons and threats. On the other hand, Nyapol symbolizes the idealised African model of a traditional wife who accepts her marital expectations with deep conviction. Her famed beauty and industry ensure that she is not only successful socially, but accepted as an ideal traditional wife:

> Nyapol was a good wife! Many people in this new land had remarked how strong she was in the fields and how well she cultivated the land. Her hands were light during weeding time; she had also proven herself fertile in giving birth to a son. If she was able to brew beer, then her qualities as an ideal wife would be complete. (*The Promised Land* 101)

Apart from the qualities that ensure her success and acceptability, Nyapol is also endowed with a superior intellect, conspicuous humanity and a formidable strength of character that contrasts with the husband's (Ochola) patriarchal ambition. This description validates Kamene Okonjo, Ifi Amadiume and Niara Sudarkasa submissions that an African woman possesses an inner strength and spirit of emancipation or agency vital to the socio-political structure of the society. She does have her own sphere of inner self. However, male critics like Lloyd Brown have often stereotyped her representation of male and female relationships and the symbolic implications of their differences in their critical analyses.

Brown fails to acknowledge the distinction between the assigned roles of the man and the woman in the traditional society, despite admitting that Ochola is a passive character. In the view of Kolawole, Nyapol is presented as an agent of productivity not only of culture but also of active socio-political change (153). The agency is documented as she calls upon post-independent communal attitudes to the land as well as family responsibility in her protest against male rejection of the land. Nyapol dynamically swaps roles with the traditional male power by expressing thoughts and concerns about the well-being of the society:

> How could anyone think of leaving this land? Our ancestors died fighting for this land. The Nnandi lived in these valleys and on these hills and they drank from the river below. The land was fertile... Our grandfathers declared war on them because they did not know the value of the land... (they) were driven away to the mountains. (23-24)

Her rationalisation about the male's appearance, desire and acquisition of power through force or violence is indicated. Also, the historical perspective of her thoughts reinforces the sacredness of the land and the people's mythical bond to it because their ancestors sacrificed themselves for it.

Although the possession of land is a male prerogative, Nyapol's awareness exposes Ochola's (patriarchal) irresponsibility, passivity and non-commitment. Male commitment is portrayed in his attitude to the socio-political conditions and the "horizon of continuity". There is a dislocation and a displacement by this attitude which affects the woman though she tries to correct or redirect it through her dynamism.

The land in this context becomes a symbol of conflict in socio-political and marital institutions. In the colonial era, land was a point of conflict between the foreign imperialists and the proletarian indigenes. It still is in post-independence East Africa. Symbolically, the migration process from one land to another establishes the motif for the assertive and agentic manifestations of Nyapol towards transformation. So on one hand, the land that should provide economic empowerment or transformation to Ochola destroys him psychologically. On the other hand, the land (migration) symbolically enables Nyapol's shift from a stereotyped image of docility to an agent of cultural and individual transformation. This shift is expressed when she challenges Ochola's decision to migrate:

> ...All I've been telling you since last night is that we're going to move to Tanganyika ... "Who are we?" she eyed her husband from head to toe ... We are rich as we are and we've enough land. Instead of working hard on the land which belongs to us, you make arrangements behind my back to move me from my people ... (26)

The land metaphorically positions the attitudes of males and females towards cultural heritage and identity in their commitment to socio-political reformation, definition of identity at individual and societal levels, as well as defines the difference between culture and Nature. Land

is tied to Nature through migration in the novel and establishes an identification process for the woman; but for the man, it is cultural in terms of its economic and psychological advantages.

At this point, the irony embedded in the title of the novel is portrayed in the binaries of depth and shallowness characterised by the male and the female respective sexuality and sensibility. The element of irony defines the conflict and accentuates the female personality as she interrogates the rationale behind migration and the inordinate ambition or greed in patriarchal desire (26-27). However, she is limited by the traditional norms that define her. Placing Nyapol against Ochola, who depicts the psychological defection or weakness of contemporary Uhuru, captures the antithesis in each character. In Ngugi and Farah, traditional women are loyally rooted to the land and are made the source of inspiration for the development of the society. They are agrarian, nurturers and upholders of cultural history. These qualities which define the identity of an East African woman imply that they are economically and politically visible and this is articulated by Ochola:

> He was very excited and restless, but something stopped him from showing his feelings. There was no need to show Nyapol that he, a man who had taken her as his wife, did not like his own motherland. Already some of Nyapol's remarks had made him feel as though he was a shallow-minded person without roots ... There's nothing to be proud of leaving your inheritance to go and live as a refugee ... (47)

This confirms the presence and relevance of a female voice within the cultural setting. Yet, in spite of this awareness, her identity is limited by the space that tradition permits the woman: "... Once a woman was married she swore to stay with her husband's people for better or for worse, no one would have her back at home" (20, 101).

The inner strength and acute awareness of the society are revealed by the woman's suspicions and fears about the isolation of the land. Fear of isolation undergirds the values of African traditional communalism (46). Ogot in this narrative presents the rapid upsurge in urban settlements, a direct opposite to rural communalism, as a consequence of migration. Her notion is that colonialism creates a series of conflicts or what is called "horizon of discontinuity" in areas of the economy, politics, traditional beliefs, family ties, and marriage. Ironically, the traditional and colonial systems which subordinate Nyapol also empower her to challenge Ochola's excesses and inversion. Nyapol is thus not only the voice of conscience or caution and encouragement, but also the hub of culture and historical events that foreshadows events and represents positive and negative responses to societal values and expectations. She anticipates or warns about the consequence of isolation in a society that is communal, and decries the evil effect of dislocation as captured in the disagreeable nature of the old man of Nyariwezi (72).

> Ochola, is it wise for us to stay here after all those things that Aziza told me about this place? I am sure that the old man hates you, and might harm you one day... he has harmed many people who have settled here before us. ... (116)

Nyapol's voice of caution predicated in a premonitory dream questions Ochola's adoption of the Western culture of isolation in his drive for the possession of land against the African communal relationship (83). Communalism and adaptability, in other words, inform an East African woman's image. The issue of adaptability is recorded in the accommodating brevity of Nyapol, despite the wisdom of living in the lonely "promised land" of Musoma. Her sense of adaptability and family responsibility through which she rejects the notion of separation from communal ties also underlies her support of Ochola in Musoma. Although she questions the wisdom of living a

lonely and dangerous life in the wilderness of Musoma, she nevertheless accepts her duty as a wife. Indeed, her adaptability grants her social success, fruitfulness of marriage and agrarian productivity. However, as a voice of reason and prophecy, Nyapol provides the antithesis to Ochola's narrow, inordinate ambition and attachment to material success which he reaffirms: "Yes, this is my Canaan; this is my 'Promised Land.' There will never be another land like this for me" (67).

Apart from contrasting the male and female innate responses to their physical environments, the author through the character of Nyapol also tests the Black and the White responses to marital relationships. She tries to question the Eurocentric notion of an African woman as overburdened by communal mores by antithetically representing the consequence of Western individualism in the marital relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Thomson. Unethically African, Mrs. Annabel Thomson is an antithesis of Nyapol in her acceptance of her colonial responsibility and her response to orthodox Christian tenets, thus valorising Nyapol (the African woman):

> Well, he said, "I was just going to ask you to lend us a hand while Sister Moore is down with fever..." At last she said, "I think you must be mad, Roy, completely mad. What have the Africans done for you?" ...She spat out the last word in disgust. (173-174)

The injection of Mrs Thomson's character into the narrative is a deliberate attempt to highlight the multiple oppressions of African women by African men, Western women, and the general racial perception of the West about Africans as passive, mysterious and traditional. Her later vision of conversion to assist Dr. Thomson cure Ochola's ailment acts as a form of moral

justification for the religious conflict shrouded in the myth of land ownership. In Gloria Chukwukere's view in *Gender Voices and Choices*:

> Mrs. Thomson's dilemma is really that of an outsider who is blinded by her culture and religion, and who fails to appreciate the finer points of Nyapol's world-views. (256)

This view further affirms Bhabha's psychoanalysis of the colonialists and the proletariat (the colonised). He points out that the mainstream stance of many colonialists as "outsider" fail to view the historical world-view and personal perceptions of the writers and their characters:

> The power of the "imaginary" blinds the narcissistic colonialist's superiority Self which is based on the desire to impose the Self on another and to be recognised in the Other. The colonialist conscious superiority imposition of Self on the Other is intended unconsciously to destroy without qualms the effectiveness of indigenous economic, social, practical, cultural and moral systems and to compel the Other's recognition of the Self. (45)

The enforced recognition of the Other amounts to the European's narcissistic self-recognition because the native, who is degraded and inhuman, is more than a recipient of the negative elements of the Self that the colonialist projects onto him, thus creating gaps and distrust. This coloniser/colonised and Self/Other dichotomy is projected in Dr. Roy Thomson's "symbolic" allusion and his unrelenting search for Ochola's cure where he refers to him as "the half-man-half-animal" in isolation ward (168) when Ochola is plagued by a strange disease. Obviously, finding a cure will actually redeem the bartered image of Western religion and medicine:

> Africans are not like our people. They have no sense of vocation, like you and I have. We are serving our Master, Jesus Christ. They have no Master to serve. (172)

The colonial situation which exhibits a "constellation of delirium" that fragments the normal social relation where the white man enslaved by his superiority also propels the Negro to behave alike in accordance with a neurotic orientation. In Frantz Fanon's view, there is a deep hunger for humanism, the dark side of Man within the binaries of difference; of black/white, coloniser/colonised; and object/subject, a consciousness or "dual narcissism" (in Homi Bhabha, 15). The Negro knows there is a difference. The former slave needs to assert his humanity. In the absence of a challenge, Fanon argues, the colonised can only imitate where the coloniser is humbly caught in the ambivalence of paranoiac identification, alternating between fantasies of megalomania and persecution. In this context, it is only justifiable to say that the colonised subject (the Other) tethers in the margin of the Otherness that displays identification (119-120). With reference to Dr. Thomson's depersonalization of the colonised man (Ochola) in terms of difference in intellectual and spiritual competence, one finds Ochola an imitation caught in the ambivalence of paranoiac identification.

Firstly, he is paradoxically driven by the "desire" or "demand" strategy of subversion to possess (colonise) a land in Tanganyika just like the coloniser, thus replaying the past in the present representation and being aggressively antagonised. Secondly, outside the Hegelianism of Fanon is the acknowledgement that the disavowal of the Other always exacerbates the "edge" of identification, and reveals that dangerous place where identity and aggression are entwined. Ochola depicts a desire for Otherness in the significance placed on land possession and this is portrayed in his "recognition of superiority" over the female as a subject. His quest for Otherness in the possession of land negates the colonizer's perception about his passivity. The negation of the colonizer's superiority is exhibited in Ochola's Otherness through the manipulation and

subjection of the female identity, presence and the land. “Yes this is my Canaan; this is my ‘Promise Land’” (61).

Ogot, focusing on the agrarian life of her characters, discredits the patriarchal superiority in Ochola by representing Luo migration as a form of colonisation analogous to the European invasion in its underlying ideology and consequence on indigenous people. That is, Ochola in claiming land in Tanganyika, indicates that he is guilty of displacing other people. This is manifested in the dream he had just before he fell ill where his Tanganyika neighbour hurled accusations at him:

> You Luo people, you Luo people, what kind of people are you? I hate all of you. You cheat yourselves that you were born to rule others. You cheat yourselves that you are the only good farmers. That you know how to make money and keep cattle. You let your land fall into the hands of the white man. The white man will steal away all your land from you... Return to your land all of you!! (128)

Florence Stratton, voicing Gerald Moore’s view, describes Ochola is a “tragic figure” due to his accursed illness (67). Ironically in his greed, he becomes a man who is consumed by his own passion. For his refusal to leave Tanganyika, he endangers not only his own life but that of all he loves including his children. At the end, he emerges as a pathetic if not patently ridiculous figure that loses his authority as a human, husband, father, brother and member of his society. Intertextually, this recalls Okonkwo’s tragedy recounted in *Things Fall Apart* by Obierika who cried, “one of the greatest men in Umuahia ... will be buried like a dog” (187). Ochola’s story ends where he looks forward to being reunited in death with Nyilaji, a mad dog. In another view, Florence Stratton asserts that Ogot’s novel may be read as a dialogic interrogation of *Things Fall Apart* (70). Ochola, the “conventionally masculine figure” shares a personal history and other

characteristics with Okonkwo. Like Okonkwo, he is obsessed with wealth and status because his "ambition in life is to be rich, richer than those whom he had known" (87). Also like Okonkwo and Eugene in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, Ochola spends his childhood years in poverty and then rises to considerable prominence. Blinded by this passionate ambition, he loses all that he had struggled to obtain. But unlike Okonkwo and Eugene, his life is spared by a narrative twist.

Contrastively, the diminished status of Ochola reinforces Nyapol's female presence and relevance as a woman and an African. It is from this point of agency that other contemporary women writers take up the dynamic evolution of defining the female identity.

In addition, the ability of the man to handle the effects of migration is juxtaposed with the woman's inner strength and agentic nature in dealing with a similar condition. While Nyapol positively managed the loneliness of relocation as a result of marriage and migration, Ochola falls apart. For instance, when Ochola first arrives in Tanganyika, he knows they will be living in a Luo settlement, but he experiences the displacement and isolation that Nyapol initially experienced in his village after their marriage (64). Just like Nyapol had been in his village, he is also "almost paralysed... with fear" when he is left to spend the night alone in their new hut (82). The author's intention is to unveil the vulnerability of patriarchy in spite of its avowed strength. Contrasting him to Nyapol who, despite her double displacement and alienation, remains sound in body and mind, Ochola falls apart both physically and psychologically from repatriation.

The Promised Land in actualising the female image further reduces the conventional masculine figure of Ochola by equating him with various animals and lowering him to a non-human level. The nature of his illness is revealing. He develops "thorn-like warts all over his body" (134) which makes him look like "a human porcupine" (145) or a "half-man-half-animal" creature (168). When his dog and children fall ill, he weeps over the dog and prays for its recovery while he appears indifferent to the fate of his family. The indifference to the emotional state of other people also reinforces his adamant refusal to leave Tanganyika. Finally, when he is forced to leave, he wants to take "his dog, his brother, his friend" with him (203). Although, the dog is now as mad as he is, "he believes he would meet him in the next world" (203).

Ogot's representation of Ochola is a strategic subversion of the dominant male subject and an inversion of the gender stereotypes manifested in patriarchal ideology. In this manner, she questions the Machiavellian allegory of gender. By discrediting patriarchal dominance, she creates a new narrative space for the representation of women as individuals and partakers in national identity. In addition, the narrative examines the issue of individual and national identity within the constraints of post-independence. Thus, Ochola's failure as a settler vindicates Nyapol's commitment to serve; her value prevails over his and her voice is granted authority.

Apart from the thematic and character representations in the narrative, the structural representation is also symbolic of the female space. The narrative opens at the beginning, initiating a conflict of difference in defining identity that runs through to the end and vindicating the female traditional agency. This is representative of the female *bildungsroman* (the road of progress or gradual development of an individual) that subverts the gender construction of

patriarchy, where maleness is socially esteemed and femaleness culturally and biologically valued as a vehicle of continuity. In addition, the text indicates traditional female relationships and the female modes of articulation that either conforms to or deviates from the set standard of patriarchy. Ochola exhibits his maleness in his relationship with Nyapol through his silences, the secret plan of migration and the exercises of male rights, only occasionally including her in his plan and displaying his affection by calling her the "daughter of the lake". An instance of male cultural or identity perception of women is seen in his reaction to Nyapol's threats to him by pointing her finger at him in their argument about the issue of migration:

> ...Sit down and stop pointing at your husband with your finger. Do your women do that in your home? And remember, I hate being interrupted when I'm talking. There can only be one husband in the house... When I do it without informing you, you weep because you are not consulted. Women! Useless the world over! (26-27)

The above citation summarises the male perception and dominant relationship with the female. However, in an attempt to represent the woman's traditional response to this dominance, Nyapol adopts strategies that subvert the Machiavellian allegory by moving out of a confined space into an assertive, even though subtle, personhood. Her threat with her finger and objections about the migration plans of Ochola are instances of her identity change (26). Another strategy is weeping and burying her pains, fears and tears in her agricultural and familial responsibility (28).

The transformation of her nature is further asserted in her stern objection to migration and her commitment to the family and the land. This objection is strategically represented in her convening a family gathering to dissuade Ochola from migrating. Her refusal to migrate further

affirms the notion of the African woman's belief that today's solidity of land under their feet is more secured than the wet, rich unsure ground of tomorrow. (29-31)

The transformation of Nyapol's identity through the national discourse on migration is further established through another female character Aziza, the old man's wife. While one is assertive, the other is complacent and docile. While one accepts her condition as traditional and natural, the other challenges without necessarily subverting tradition or culture. It is in this vein that Nyapol challenges Ochola after her meeting with Aziza:

> Why didn't you tell me that you visited the old man's home when we first moved here? Why didn't you want me to know?" she said, refusing to answer his question. (114-115)

In order to control the assertiveness of this traditional woman, Ochola often lashes out violently to cover his shortcoming. But he could also be endearing, appreciative and protective. The patriarchal perception of the female space is also indicated in his unjust expressions which reduces the female to her position of subjection:

> When they had quarrelled some nights ago, Nyapol had spat on the floor and told him, "There's nothing to be proud of, leaving your inheritance to go and live as a refugee amongst strangers... It's time you swallowed your pride and accepted the fact that you're a lost man.
>
> Ochola was annoyed beyond words by Nyapol's speeches. No woman had ever spoken to him like that ... He had slapped her on the face twice because he was provoked beyond control. But Nyapol did not cry. She sat where she was as stubborn as a mule, as though nothing had happened. Perhaps Nyapol was right, Ochola thought bitterly, *but how long it was taking her to learn that it was not correct to speak to a husband in that way* [Emphasis mine]. (47-48)

Two issues are observed here. First, Nyapol affirms her right to reason by speaking boldly, which is contrary to tradition. Second, when Ochola slapped her, she refused to cry. At this level, she moves away from the stereotyped image of a weepy and weak character, negating the use of presumptuous feminine guiles to charm her husband. Rather, she uses the male strategic quality of reason, ancestral belief and family connection. This is the second time the author represents this emotional condition. Ogot's representation of Nyapol's positive identity growth contradicts Lloyd Brown's interpretation of African women as docile and passive.

During the house-warming party in Tanganyika, the "praise" names by the harpist show the patriarchal perception and traditional definition of women as upstarts:

> Listen to me, he said. I am a female mosquito, a female mosquito which lands on the skin first before biting. (107)

The female mosquito in this context symbolically suggests pain and displeasure. But the female singer counters this symbolic disparagement of female identity:

> I am Atai, the daughter of Odera-Nanga. I am a mechanic who has made herself new and beautiful teeth which are too good to be used for eating vegetables. (110)

The female singer negates the male metaphoric reference to women as insignificant as a mosquito by asserting that the New African woman is sharp, strong and daring. The 'new' female image transforms from fragility (a pest or mosquito) to empowerment (a female mechanic), who can do what a man can do: transformed from being an insignificant "subject" to a new improved "object" of relevance with the right tools. This accentuated presentation of female power and significance is further shored up in the constant appearance of the spiritual

image or ghost of Ochola's mother who is ever watching and interceding. The female identity agency goes beyond the physical to the spiritual in this case, thus extending the need to revere the female ancestral past whereby they are presented as an additional source of inspiration and courage for Nyapol.

In conclusion, Ogot's fiction undermines patriarchal ideology by means of an inversion of the initial terms of the sexual allegory. In the view of Florence Stratton, such an inversion – female and male, good and evil, subject and object – does not resolve the problems of gender, but it is nonetheless a subversive manoeuvre. For it exposes the sexist bias of the male literary tradition and creates space for the female discourse. This inversion is effected in part in the designation of the national subject as explicitly female, which counters the African male representations of women as passive and ahistorical.

The narrative language further subverts the male gender-based verbalisation. For example, in the party dialogue, the songs depict object/subject views of female identity. The author presents the male perception in the traditional masculine expressions of the subject, the women, while the female language is respectful, obedient yet objective, and sometimes obstinate and passionate. Grace Ogot draws upon symbolism, metaphor, myth, songs, and proverbs to capture her themes of tribal/racial discrimination, post-independent issues of migration, religion and male/female relationship.

Illuminating Optimism: Transcendentalism in Rebeka Njau's *The Sacred Seed*

Rebeka Njau's narrative is an artistic inquiry into the cultural change in women's conditions of subjugation. Her fiction is an examination of identity at the intersection of Self and culture, and her narrative an articulation of identity or self-esteem that uncovers the histories of silenced and subjugated women in East Africa. Njau's work may not necessarily be a cohesive narrative of the lives of her female characters, but it presents pieces of a larger social narrative in the post-independent African society. In this light, it may further be regarded as what David Wood calls "horizon of continuity" through symbolic "nervous conditions" of men and women in Kenya in anticipation of survival. Her narrative connects the personal experiences of her characters (a sense of what one is) with the "horizon of continuity" (illumination of hope) and possibility; that is, the capacity to *imagine* and *re-tell* events or possibilities of the past and the self's relation to the world. The narrative process is geared towards rewriting patriarchal representations of the woman as passive, ahistorical, subjective and as a trope for male authority. It is a narrative of the realities of female situation, dreams and aspirations that clamour for her "space", yet allowing complementarity or collaboration and celebrating Nature.

There is no doubt that Rebeka Njau's spiritual and mythical novel, *The Sacred Seed* is experimentation on the ray of optimism espoused in her earlier work, *Ripples in the Pool* where she asserts that, "Our hope lies in the young" (31). This narrative experimentation illuminates the dynamism of postcolonial women in enabling change by breaking the silence of victimization and the shackles of post-colonial challenges that condition women and the society. It is the depiction of the act of self-perception and motivation as the agency of change not only of

culture, but also of the active yet subjective and violated socio-political structure. Its direction is aimed at restructuring the "nervous conditions" of contemporary Kenya. In addition, it is a representation of the struggle between the powers of good and evil; Christianity and African spirituality; and an exploration of generational trauma which creates contemporary conflicts, women's communality, and the male-female relationship.

Njau, like other East African writers, expresses concern about the humiliation and exploitation of African societies (like Kenya). The narration, however, is a re-echo of the Mau Mau freedom or land struggle in which women played important roles. Thus, from the fringe of the cultural zone outside the main culture dominated by patriarchy, according to Elaine Showalter, women Amazons creatively seek redefinition of identity by transcending nakedness (culture or patriarchal norms) through nudity (the virtue of Nature). The spiritual and creative campaign enables the young female protagonist Tesa in *The Sacred Seed* to extirpate the emblems of graft and veniality in post-independence Kenya.

The Sacred Seed inquires into the binaries of opposites: change/stagnancy, nature/culture, male/female, tradition/modernity, liberation/enslavement, good/evil, and Christianity/traditional religion. It opens with the impulse to escape and retell the veniality and "nervous conditions" of women in a society subjugated by postcolonial insensibilities such as the abuse of power, violation of human rights, rape of the women and the land, violence and victimization of citizens of the society, and religious indoctrination and manipulation. Within these insensibilities are depicted difference and fragmentations in the socio-political, religious and moral ethics of human existence. Against the backdrop of insensibility, there is a significant representation of

Nature as a mythical element of sensibility and channel of hope, renewal or transformation. The focus thus is on the examination of the binaries that pit people, culture, religious beliefs and political ideologies against one another, isolating one in order to accommodate the other.

Based on the intention of the author to liberate the society by energising the younger generation through a process of "continuity", the narrative opens on a note of "declivity of anxieties," precipitating a traumatic condition or conflict that is mythically structured on past experience or history, a case Vanik Volkan terms "transgenerational trauma". Tesa, the heroine, a victim of sexual violation (rape), seeks an escape and a new direction from the violation of the spirit and society by walking briskly away from socio-political entrapment and victimization:

> One day around noon, an elegantly dressed woman of about thirty was seen walking briskly out of a large mansion nicknamed the castle, heading towards the gate. She looked terrified, agitated and in tears. Her name is Tesa, a well known music teacher ... She dashed through the gate immediately and ran like one possessed, without looking back. She felt physically and spiritually humiliated ... She felt worthless. Feelings of guilt and shame nagged her, making her regret her naivety; her lack of judgement. (*The Sacred Seed* 5)

The opening page of the novel sets the conflict and intimates the readers on the traumatic conditions of women in the era of "new" colonialism. The narrative creates a metaphoric image of displacement and disorientation through an epistemic violation of the female body and mind. The mind has an important mythical implication in the novel and to East Africans and is used by Ngugi to mean "the soul, spirit, conscience, mind, inner man, essence..." (49). Female body in Njau's representation metaphorically portrays Kenya; thus, Tesa symbolises the land violated by colonialism and the challenges of post-colonial experience from which she attempts to find new meaning and direction.

The text is thus an exploration of the condition of humanity and "womanity" that have created an estrangement in post-colonial interactions, and from which comes an evocative quest for freedom. The evocation is pitted against the backdrop of the male presence that breaks up the female body. In this act of epistemic violence, the male frame of reference and relevance as a man is transgressed; his field of vision is disturbed, resulting in psychological ambivalence.

As a narrative seeking change (agency), individually and communally, it builds up "naked declivities" (conditions) of trauma that enables a spiritual and physical resistance to violence. Rebeka Njau, through her young and dynamic characters – initiated in *Ripples in the Pool* – challenges the violence and oppression of the 'new' colonial presence, which creates fragmentation, disorientation and underdevelopment in individual and communal structures. At this point, Ngugi's argument from his socialist standpoint that violence is a result of a lack of direction and commitment from the neo-colonialist elites who merely repeat the cultural annihilation of colonialism becomes relevant. The novel examines and repudiates such violence against women as individuals and against the society. Such violence includes clitoridectomy, genocide and derogatory references to the genitalia using words like whore (*The Sacred Seed* 94) and other physical abuse and societal violence (21). These create fear or "nervous condition" for Africans, especially women who are often ridiculed and then discarded.

"Transgenerational transmitted trauma" drawing upon spirituality, myth and psychology, implies violation, fear and humiliation that is generational. Tesa, the heroine walking out of 'the castle', which is a symbolic den of patriarchal violation and humiliation (the subversion and subjection of female Self), is humiliated in a continuum of abuse of female identity. So to Chinusi and

many other men "women are just sexual objects" (13). The novel focuses on the restrictive perception and definition of the female sex, sexuality and sensuality as they create trauma in the psyche of African women. Tesa, a metaphorical image of the society and women, is a victim of transgenerational trauma that springs from pre-colonial women to the post (contemporary) colonial female image.

Transgenerational transmitted trauma, according to Vanik Volkan, is multidimensional. There are individual, group and massive trauma. Volkan attempts to categorise massive trauma into five major types; however, it is often difficult to fully differentiate types of "massive shared trauma" for an event may fall into several of his categorisations. Transgenerational transmitted trauma, also called massive shared trauma, is a psychological task, which in turn plays a crucial role in shaping historical and political processes. It is a memory work that is inherited and which sometimes forms an individual or a large-group identity through a massive mental representation of a past disaster that threatens a large-group or individual identity and fuels an ethnic, national, religious or individual conflict. The symptoms are societal or individual grief, fear and change in the internal psychological processes of individuals who experience different types of massive trauma.

The transgenerational transmitted trauma (massive trauma) evident in *The Sacred Seed*, is a representation of the history of the violation of woman's rights by both patriarchal society and the individual. Every character has a history of generational transmission of trauma or victimization. Mumbi, Tesa, Kanoni and Kibwara on the one hand and on the other, are President Chinusi and Pastor Jonah and even Ellen Johnson, in spite of her religious "garb" and Western

superiority. The story is about Tesa's physical violation by the post-colonial President Chinusi, whose "main wish is to conquer women of talent, intelligence and strength and destroy their self-esteem. He uses sex to humiliate and subdue women... He believes that by going to bed with such women, their talent will... be absorbed into his own bloodstream, making him the strongest and the cleverest man in the land" (12). This statement captures the extremity of patriarchal subjugation of the female Self, identity and the body as an absorbable entity, enabling a total control of the female identity. This 'eden' vision of patriarchy dates back to the literary creation of Christopher Marlowe in *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus* in the 16th century Dr. Faustus wagers his soul to the devil for a higher human capability and knowledge. So it is with President Chinusi whose patriarchal libido is only charged by the rape of the land and women.

In addition to this individual massive psychological subjugation and trauma, Tesa also has a history of transmitted trauma marked by symptoms of fear and anxiety in the symbolic narration of the spider and its web. It is a metaphor of male ensnarement, violent brutality and destruction. The spider is ominous and its destruction is symbolic of an impending destruction of the antagonist (Chinusi) by the heroine. So, "as it dawned on her that there had been a killer all this time lurking in the wardrobe, she smashed and dismantled the web, then removed her clothes from the wardrobe and cleared it thoroughly" (11). This symbolic action initialises the conflict and establishes the subject matter of the narrative. Firstly, the spider lurking symbolises patriarchal domination and brutality. Secondly, Tesa's "smashing" the spider and "clearing" the wardrobe is metaphorical. Her actions buttress her determination to redefine her identity: "I shall not let him destroy me..." (12). It also suggests a process of healing or optimism which Volkan

calls “bisocial regeneration”. Biosocial regeneration is the process of overcoming massive trauma (6).

“Bisocial regeneration” is an adaptive process by which a traumatised individual or large-group overcomes its psychological condition. In *The Sacred Seed*, Tesa Kenga begins her bisocial regeneration through migration (10) to the grove created by Mumbi as a sanctuary of hope and courage. Traumatisation within the text is a shared large-group psychology that is illustrated in the main character (Tesa). The trauma is as a result of the religious indoctrination, political corruption, the intolerance of traditional religion by the orthodox faith, the rape of individual and spiritual identity and the natural environment, ethnic cleansing (genocide), female subjugation and genital mutilation. All these are pitted against the background of positivity in traditional faith and practices that promote tolerance, regeneration, overcoming evil with good, restoration of desecrated natural resources, and hope or love in the disillusioned people.

Disillusionment, corruption, religion and rape, the focus of the text, are drawn from Kenyan political history during the regime of KANU. The author, through symbolism, portrays the postcolonial traumatic political situation in Kenya under the rule of Chinusi who uses Christianity to psychologically control his subjects. Identifying the weakness of the people and offering succour in religion, Chinusi perverts the hopes and aspirations of the people through Pastor Jonah, who exploits their faith for personal gains. Chinusi is represented as a pervert and a psychologically depraved creation of Western upbringing. Pastor Jonah Kigira of Kiambatu Church similarly is a result of such Western creation whose Christian religion is intolerant of

divergent religious practices. Through these laid out conditions, Rebeka Njau creates a society desecrated by patriarchal domination, struggle to possess land and religious intolerance:

> Mumbi took the path that led to the most feared place ... an old tall tree with a thick trunk, which was covered with knobs. Its branches were long and its roots spread deeply into the earth, making the nearby spring lose most of its water. She was disgusted to notice that the area... was a sacred place, polluted with filth and animal droppings. To her, the place looked like the abode of snakes and a hide-out for evil spirits. (38)

The novel creates a process of bisocial regeneration through religious belief and relief for people, particularly women after the old (patriarchal) belief and condemnation (*TSS*, 40). The narrative of optimism is woven around a process of regeneration that takes the form of returning to the past and recalling the mythical history of female power and land inheritance. Located on a sacred grove or land also being contested for political purpose by President Chinusi through Pastor Jonah, the grove (before Mumbi's take over) is symbolic of the pollution created by men via the "evil spirits and venom that lurk and consume every fabric of the society"(43). Ironically, the grove becomes the core and centre of regeneration for women. The contemporary Mumbi represents a new structure and link to the past: a ray of optimism amidst degeneration which is inspired by the legendary young girl, Kanoni, who rejects the patriarchal means of domination, "venom" – circumcision – and pays the price for such a rejection with her life. Kanoni becomes a sacred model of hope and courage for abused women (66). Kanoni's tragedy is also similar to Firdaus' in *Woman at Point Zero* by Nawal el Sadaawi. Kanoni is a symbol of courage and liberation, and an inspiration where pains and curses are turned into blessing and dedication (43). Mumbi, the elderly potter and healer establishes "Kanoni's Sanctuary" for abused and talented women in the primeval grove. She challenges patriarchal injustice and stagnation of social

growth and individual identity formation by having the huge tree (the symbol of patriarchal oppression and postcolonial degeneration) "uprooted and stripped naked", and then replacing the "ugly effigy" with Kanoni's statute of courage, as recorded in the song: "Only the deadly scorpions have been seen gliding over human waste; nothing of value sprouts here ..." (43).

Kanoni's sanctuary located in the Kimina forest is a biosocial regeneration symbol for overcoming psychological, physical and societal trauma, serves both "dominant" and "muted" concerns especially for Tesa, the victimised school teacher. In order to overcome the trauma of oppression, she turns to Mumbi and Kanoni for help. In this case, Tesa and the society at large are defined by the shared traumatic historical or political subjection evolving into a "chosen trauma" (Volkan). A "chosen trauma", applicable in the subsequent generations after a massive trauma, refers to the "memories," perceptions, expectations, wishes, fears, and other emotions related to shared images of the historical or political catastrophe and the defences against these emotions. In other words, it is the *mental representation* of the shared event (199). The mental representation becomes an important identity marker of the unconscious "choice" to add a past mental representation to an individual or existing identity ("chosen trauma"). Tesa is thus a victim of a past (memory) and post-colonial male subjugation, while recalling a history of trauma in the spider sting episode that killed her mother. In other words, there is a transgenerational transmission of trauma from Mumbi of the Gikuyu mythical history of creation, to Mumbi the potter and healer of contemporary time; from Tesa's mother to Tesa; from Kwabira to Chinusi; from Pastor Jonah's father to Jonah; and from colonial mentality to post-colonial challenges.

The transgenerational transmission is the end result of unconscious psychological tasks (processes) by which survivors "deposit" into their progeny's mental organisation their injured self-images from the traumatic event. Relating Volkan's interpretation of trauma to the female characters and their history of oppression, a correlation may be established. For instance, Tesa shares the massive trauma of Waema's (her mother) trauma (20-22) in the spider sting that killed her mother. It is a symbol of the patriarchal domination vested with religious manipulation, societal and female violation, victimization, and corruption. Tesa Kenga and Mumbi also share in the traumatic history with Kanoni, the legendary young girl who died for defiantly defiling the age-long tradition of circumcision. Together, they become the progeny of the "deposited" unconscious mental processes of trauma. The web of interrelationship also expands to include Mariamu, the murdered wife of Pastor Jonah, whose interpretation of faith contradicts Jonah's misrepresentation. She is ancestrally transgenerated in Mumbi and Tesa. Within the narrative, however, the management of the shared trauma is positive, resulting in adaptive bisocial regeneration.

The search for bisocial regeneration spurs the author and her characters on an odyssey into the "grove," a world of women that allows space for men like Muturi and Dr. Mwera, as well as people of other histories and cultural perceptions like Ellen, the American missionary. Njau, in order to attain a bisocial "optimism", establishes two political worlds defined by two religious practices and different ideologies: dominant and muted; nationhood against womanhood; male against female; women against women; traditional religion versus orthodox religion; tradition (wisdom of old) versus modernity (spontaneity of the contemporary); and agrarian versus urbanisation. However, one transcends the other in the illumination of optimism in the face of

adversities. It will not be far-fetched to assume that the author, in the process of regeneration, refashions the Kenyan myth of creation and the patriarchal takeover (usurpation and abuse of power and privileges). Her perception is that the patriarchal world has only left the society and its people violated as victims of a power tussle. Man is referred to as a "wild dog" (14), a common reference in narratives by women to describe the desecration by patriarchal domination. *The Sacred Seed* thus narrates the conflicts, the ripples and tussle to reclaim the land, a symbol of defining East African identity by creating "progenies deposited with the unconscious mental task" of healing the injured self-images of generations through the "grove", a "chosen trauma". The psychological tasks pertaining to the unfinished psychological processes of the ancestors is visualised in Mumbi (the potter and healer) and Tesa (the teacher).

Mumbi symbolically represents the mythical history of the Gikuyu creation myth recounted by Jomo Kenyatta. She symbolises the traditional image of a "messiah", but is feminized since male transforming agency has been corrupted by patriarchy. In fact, by a twist of narrative, the novelist recreates and relocates the sceptre of rejuvenation and emancipation in the hands of a woman, whom she also deliberately names Mumbi. Obviously, Njau seems to say that a woman is as functional as a man. As such, God creates a woman like Mumbi to fight injustice, since men have abdicated their role in defending society from evil. Mumbi may at this juncture, based on her spiritual or mythical attributes, be a reincarnate who is sent to encourage and aid the process of healing of an ailing society.

In this narrative, Njau subverts the narrative of oppression with the machinery of resistance placed in the hands of women. This process of resistance and liberation is a common

methodology in many African women writers like Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's Ezenwanyi in *House of Symbols*. Mumbi and Ezenwanyi's mythical powers create ripples in the social order and their traditional practices of accommodating orthodox religion and creeds. The practises of Mumbi in the grove with its herbs draw a correlation with the prophetic writing of Ezekiel chapter 47: 10-12 on harvesting the herbs for healing (see *The Sacred Seed* 37). Mumbi, acting through Tesa, depicts positivity as against the destructiveness of the patriarchal age-long dominance:

> I will uproot that tree and plant something new. I have dreamt many times of a new sacred haven for women; a safe and holy place where the women will pour out their thoughts, their cries and their joy ... Now we want to lift curse and turn them into blessing and dedicate to the brave woman who stood for what she believed was right. (40, 43)

This vision is connotative of the dichotomy between male/female, evil/good, negative/positive, destruction/renewal, disunity/unity, etc. The tree symbolises male destruction while the grove symbolises women's creative nature – a vision of a new world.

The symbolic connection in the characters of Mumbi and Tesa to the past (tradition), and Tesa to modernity respectively, depicts the importance of reverence to and relevance of the past or tradition in order to overcome the "nervous condition" of the present. The connection in this triangle of human existence is the grove, a fusion of old/new, past/sacred and the "collective consciousness" of each individual recollected through memories of "subjected knowledge" of subjugated identity and victimization. It is the memories of Mumbi's vision that impels the establishment of a grove and it is the re-telling of experiences through memories that heal Tesa

and many other women, transforming their identities and empowering them as creators and builders.

In the process of traumatic regeneration, memory is important to preserving one's natural and cultural history and identity. According to Arthur Schlesinger Jr., memory is invoked through history which establishes individuation. To him, "history is to a nation as memory is to an individual" (20). This means that through remembering and retelling their histories, characters are able to transcend their subjugated and victimized Self and illuminate new individual and national identities. Thus, characters like Tesa (131), Nini, Muturi and Lina retell their ordeals while Mumbi charges them to "continue telling your daughters the stories of our ancestors; how they dug deep beneath their feet and got rooted firmly in their beliefs" (104). The transfer of historical and cultural memories involves the effort to make the past present in the process of reconstructing an identity. However, since the experience of trauma is a personal memory that cannot be transmitted, a deposition of self-image is possible in negotiating a new identity. This "deposition" element is what Tesa adopts in the sculpturing of Kanoni's statute as a site of emulation – "These are the people we should emulate" (104).

The element in this narrative of retelling is the power of transcendental illumination. The concept of transcendence is an existentialist term that embraces reality in the struggle for survival or existence. Njau's all-female characters reconstruct identity – individual and national existence by rejecting immanence – inactivity to oppression, thereby transcending themselves and engaging in projects which are freely chosen, not prescribed by patriarchy. In order to achieve these self-actualisations, inspiring symbols of strength are created – Kanoni, the sanctuary and the small

gourd seed. *The Sacred Seed* becomes the rallying point of vision from which other visions of actualisation sprout through solidarity. The spirit of solidarity is drawn from the tradition of African women's past that is defined by solidarity and communality. The strength of female solidarity is captured in the "sacred seed" gourd. Mumbi and Tesa inspire the "women of the grove" through folk narratives of female bravery for courage and commitment to nurture the "sacred seed" gourd. The inspiration to bravery is focused on redressing Christian religious interpretation of conflicts in Africa and the contradictions in its religious or ethical roles of restoring peace and human co-existence.

The restoration of peace and co-existence is buried within the gourd via the "sacred seed". Symbolically, the gourd represents inspiration, purity, solidarity, communal and individual development and commitment to the ethics of human relations. Literally, the nurturing process of the seed requires hard labour and tenacity in the face of scathing opposition. The nature and nurture of the "sacred seed" is similar to the "purple hibiscus" in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*. It is a flower that flourishes with tenacity in weeds and arid patches symbolising personal identity, royalty, courage, freedom and communal bonds, which inspires characters like Jaja, Kambili, Aunty Ifeoma and Beatrice. Mythically, there is a connection between the symbolic seed and the woman's soul. The nurturing process requires a commitment borne out of love, solidarity, creativity, and communalism. Contrastively, an impure soul without any transforming experience or quality produces worms or rottenness like the experience with President Chinusi and Jonah, who steal the "sacred seed" for oppressive and personal purposes. Spiritually, *The Sacred Seed* is the core of strength, hope and transformation to another phase of identity. Within the narrative and through creativity, women attempt to rescue their society from

post-independence ambivalence, corruption and abuse. Female-bonding through the "sacred seed" drives, directs and draws the vehicle of development in Kenya and Africa as a whole. The gourd of seed and the grove inspire hope of transcendence. The moral implication is that tranquillity for men and women can only be achieved through consolidation and co-existence initiated by an appreciation and preservation of Nature.

Nature, as a narrative symbol, connotes transcendence of transformation or renewal as it is portrayed in Tesa and Muturi, who visited the grove. In another light; it is a literary representation of the clarion call to issues of global warming and to end the conflicts in Africa that retard development. This is represented in Chinusi and Pastor Jonah's attempt to destroy the Kanoni's Santuary. The struggle for land is multi-dimensional. Firstly, there is the scramble for Africa and the destruction and preservation of African tradition; and secondly, it symbolises the contest for power between the male and female identity.

The African nation, analogous to the battered female body and land, is a focus of both the first and second generations of African writers. The freedom of women connotes development for the African nation. Woman, in the novel, is represented as an embodied subject of culture ascribed nurturing roles of motherhood, nurturer and nature, who undergoes a cultural mutilation, identity ambiguity and patriarchal anachronistic desires. The image of Mother Africa transcends nationalistic or spiritual representation of pre-independence into ontological status as a feminised abstract projection of the African female body. This body thus aligns with the metaphysical in the representation of Nature as well as encapsulates the turbulent continent on a historical

trajectory. The alignment of the female body with Nature against the male culture of domination in post-colonial expression justifies Tesa's fears that:

> The same evil force that had violated the innocence of her body, was now threatening to destroy the sanctuary of her life and the bond of unity with other women and the land. The beautiful forest with its virgin scented wood and its springs is in danger of being raped and destroyed by those with uncontrollable desire to rape, not only innocent women, but nature's heritage. (164)

The tussle between the church, the castle and the community of women is not divorced from the land issue (the Sacred Land/grove), the communal identity and the empowerment of women. The narrative of women's identity and communal survival is woven in "a simple loom" around the robbery and violation of land and women.

Land is the source of the people's belief and the productivity that sustains them; occasional aberrations such as natural disasters would spell deprivation. Associated with the land are its physical features, the source of myth and spiritual substance, and the basis of belief. It is portrayed in all its magnificence when Tesa, the heroine seeks asylum in the grove, a prehistoric sacred natural landscape. The land accentuates the conflict of violation and robbery of identity of both individuals and community. Tesa and all the other women including Mumbi and the ancestral model, Kanoni, seek spiritual and psychological renewal in the land (the grove) just as Pastor Jonah and President Chinusi seek self-aggradations through the land. The land provides artefacts of the past and accentuates traditional links, bonds and unity through the recurring symbol of the gourd with its sacred seed.

Robbery not only violates the innocence of a woman's body but threatens the sanctuary of life and the bond of women. The land, which the women laboured on picking coffee for years to enrich the violators, is now sold with "Judas'' thirty pieces of silver (betrayal); and the dream of owing it is shattered (99):

> Nothing good will ever turn up for the poor folks. Anything good coming our way is always grabbed by people like you; people whose bellies are full... (100). A secret deal has been made between Pastor Jonah and Chinusi concerning their land... the plan is for the church to annex the land, including the sanctuary, on the pretext that it would be used to put up the church institution. The land will finally go to Chinusi. (100, 162)

The violation of the land is symbolised by Chinusi's violation of the female identity and body by his desire to conquer women of talent, intelligence and strength. They are ridiculed like Sabina (90), bought over with money like many women plagued by hunger (16) or murdered like Jonah's wife, Mariamu for fear of opposition (153), and scandalised like Mumbi regarded as an adulteress and a witch (97). The violation of the verdant biotic and exodus community evokes the violation of an undefiled female body (164). It is Jonah's utmost plan to acquire the Kimina forest and destroy the illuminating sanctuary that threatens the foundation of his Kiambatu church under the guise of building a home for the community.

In *The Sacred Seed*, Njau questions the practice of religion in the newly independent society and provides new meanings to religion through the spirituality of African women. Spirituality in this context is metaphysically illuminating and vibrant while religion is inept. Chioma Opara argues that there is an implicit link between politics and spirituality, but maintains that spirituality is the "radical change in the way we think, perceive, experience and act. It is an inclusive way of

looking at and moving in the world. Spirituality is central to the women's movement because it is a struggle to deal with reality as it is, without imposed limitations" (76).

The women's expression of spirituality nurtures the reality of their creativity. It does not discriminate and that is why Ellen, the American woman with a tragic past, is able to find refuge in the grove after being thrown out by Jonah. She is nurtured and in turn nurtures others in the art of creativity by teaching the women her own culture of weaving with "a single loom" – a mythical and symbolic act that implies a single bond like an "umbilical cord" among the women (female-bonding). The sacred grove is a spiritual sanctuary of "the mysteries and beauties of God's world" and yields spiritual fruits. The women mediate and sink into "the unexplored primeval forest of her inner self" (165) in regenerative reflection of transcendental illumination. The generation of transcendental illumination brings about a melodramatic occurrence that ends the confrontation between patriarchal religion and female spirituality. The moribund Pastor handed over the title deed of the contested sacred grove to Mumbi (224) – the powerful female leader of the exodus community – whom Jonah accused of witchcraft (218). The image defamation of being called a witch is a patriarchal effort to justify and probably dismiss the mystical processes of women they cannot comprehend. Bessie Head's *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *A Question of Power* also feature the existence of witchcraft in her portrayal of an age-long belief about women being with mystical powers or gifts.

Tesa is in the patriarchal view a witch and described as a contemporary Amazon from Ethaga clan where curses are deadly (195). The spiritual dimension of the narrative also depicts "The

Beatitude Sermon" or "Sermon on the Mount" in the Gospel of St. Matthew (Chapter 5) which Njau adopts to contextualise her social background (221).

Rebeka Njau, through Mumbi and Tesa, the one who "no man could win her heart (11) eliminates the evil forces of Chinusi and Jonah, and like the fallen crooked tree behind Ellen's home, Jonah (and Chinusi) succumbs (231) to Tesa's metaphysical pronouncement. Biblically, there is a correlation between Tesa's pronouncement and Jesus' curse on the Fig tree in the Gospel of St. Mark (11:20-26). The violation of nature and the spiritual well-being of the people by Chinusi and Jonah by the stealing of the sacred gourd precipitated their destruction. For Chinusi, destruction is two-pronged. He pays dearly for raping a female celibate from Ethaga clan where curses are deadly. The repercussions for his actions are symbolised by his fall and injury on his ostentatious chariot which foreshadows his traumatic downfall (89). By uprooting the dominant forces of evil in the society, the dynamic Tesa sets out to actualise her optimism of leading other women out of their abysmal hopelessness. This optimism becomes a vision actualised in the repossession of the land. Mumbi's dream is a community of young men and women full of energy, hope and pride: "I want young boys and girls to sing in union and express their joy, sorrow, fear and hopelessness" (128).

Mumbi and Tesa look forward to a social change based on an equal relationship between men and women. Tesa's dynamic optimism echoes Nancy Chodorow's resolution to psychoanalytic conflict in gender reproduction and motherhood which says parenting should be a joint effort in order to cover gender difference in identity (87). In the end, Tesa liberates herself from the

darkness of ignorance and fear, into the "celestial freshness" of the illuminating sanctuary which has been groomed to be a pilgrimage site for hearts that seek healing, courage, love and freedom.

The novel is a symbolic presentation of transcendence of regeneration for the society, both spiritual and physical. The process of "uprooting and stripping naked the huge tree" (41) that stagnate nature and human development is attained through the physical and spiritual journey motif. Every character in *The Sacred Seed* is on a journey of discovery either running away from a memory or moving towards self-actualisation, the result of "trials of the heart". Mumbi and Tesa symbolically travel the "road" of trauma where Mumbi journeys towards giving meaning to her mystical talent and Tesa travels the road to gain "strength to confront her fears" (53). Tesa asserts that she is "on a new spiritual journey" (134) that produces creativity and inspiration through inner power, the power of the soul (111) expressed through the medium of music and art (sculpturing) (136). Lina nurses the memories of sexual abuse, kidnapping and rape (126-128), while Nini's journey is to forget suffering due to the death of her children (32). Muturi's journey motif is an escape from a domineering and unperceptive religious father (Pastor Jonah). Ellen travels to Africa and the grove to forget the memory of the past and to overcome her vulnerability (158). Each character "walks the road of forgetting" (Vera's *Nehanda*) in order to attain a biosocial regeneration. The process of mobility becomes a motif of redefining characters' identity, because relocation entails adaptation or renewal, depending on the condition. In the case of African women writers on female identity, mobility becomes ground for redefinition or regeneration as demonstrated in *The Sacred Seed*. Their relocation creates freedom, creative inspiration, inner strength and physical growth to make both individuals and society classless:

> ...the mountains of ignorance and hate
> Come tumbling down
> And the tyrants of our Land
> Like the dead leaves of a cursed tree
> Drop off and sink into the grave of their making. (131)

President Chinusi travels the "road of forgetting", a neurotic sample of Freudian Oedipal psychoanalytic postulations (*The Sacred Seed* 116-121) as he "inherited some of his father's eccentric behaviour (personality disorder) just like Pastor Jonah (92). The journey motif is structured to depict liberation, identity change and the burning commitment in the heart and utterance of East African writers.

The heart in Gikuyu tradition carries several meanings but is hinged on the Mau Mau struggle for psychological, political and economic or social independence. Njau calls it "the essence of her body and soul" (14) which Chinusi violates: it is the matrix of the moral stature of man and society. Ngugi defines a good heart as the heart built by a class of producers. This is diametrically opposed to the evil heart, which is built by the clan of parasites (53-54). In this order, parallels may be drawn between Tesa and Ngugi's Waringa in *Devil on the Cross*. "Like Waringa, Tesa is beset with the trials of the heart" (Opara in *Her Mother's Daugther: The African Writer as Woman* 79). She desperately attempts to escape from the spider's web of rottenness or corruption and oppression spun by President Chinusi, who like the spider's web that stung and swallowed her mother due to the depravity of socio-political structure that emit darkness, is a leader with an evil heart, declaring "I'm no longer living in darkness; I feel self-contained" (73).

Through a good heart, moral essence, intuitive power, prophetic vision and creative talent, the element of women's communality is depicted. Tesa's female creativity is placed outside the circle of darkness where women like Sabina are trapped. Sabina, however, "drugged" by Chinusi's stolen money and evil power lost her sense of communality, sorority, heart and conscience by her acts of aiding and abetting the President in his violation of women, the land and the incarceration of Tesa. She acknowledges her predicament when she observes: "I trapped myself when I accepted to work for Chinusi. He has given me money and property. I am a rich woman, but I am a slave. I have accepted my fate ..." (13). In her "heart of darkness," she is similar to Kimani who abandons his friend Gikere for Kefa Munene's money in *Ripples in the Pool*. The outsider in the spin of darkness, Tesa, becomes alienated even in the sacred grove among women like Meni, Thoya and Waitha in the materialistic society. This archetypal outsider is defined by Opara as:

> A character whose sensibilities tower above those of the average members of his society. A man ahead of his times, he is involved in a selfless and corrective crusade for social redirection. He has a voice that refuses to be muffled... The society in which he finds himself is immersed in corruption and unethical values. As a result, the society is either adrift or directionless, or is heading towards anarchy, having been freed of its moorings by bad leadership. (71)

As the rumour of her fight with Maiko spreads and is used as a cover-up in the society, the outsider, Tesa, holds on to the truth. Njau also contends that light, spirit and truth live on forever (*Ripples in the Pool* 152), while falsehood, which eats up a corrupt society, is as ephemeral as truth is eternal.

It is only with a good heart and truthful disposition that one can plant a good gourd seed that symbolises light, truth, hope, unity and courage. Mumbi thus appoints Tesa as the custodian of the sacred seed gourd (truth) by virtue of her inner power. Her responsibility is to plant and nurture the symbolic seed of truth, which is also described in the novel as the seed of "wisdom, hope and courage, the seed of freedom, justice and peace, the seed that grows in the midst of weeds and thorn bushes, the sacred seed from which the dreams of love and hope are created" (105).

Tesa, the archetypal outsider and custodian of the gourd of truth, wisdom, strength and hope, is also endowed with mystical powers of the "arcane Ethaga clan" (54) by virtue of the deadly birthmarks around her navel and "they were predestined to live celibate lives" (54). The celibate status of Tesa may be regarded as passivity, but Njau, whose narrative is steeped in transcendence, metaphorically and pragmatically translates Tesa's celibacy to creative and artistic mothering: "The productivity in creative arts is in effect, viewed as a vehicle to freedom" (Opara, 78). These enigmatic women with special gifts – "healers... Men who married such women or engaged in sexual relations with them, died within one year of marriage" (54-55) – are those whom Amadiume (31-34) describes as "male daughters, female husbands." They are women who "married other women and hand them over to men they had chosen to bear children for them" (*The Sacred Seed* 55). Also to Opara, Tesa's ignorance of her celibate predestination had embraced Freud's concept of sublimation (72). She had, in adolescence vowed "to live as a celibate and devote all her energy and passion in developing intuitive wisdom and skills in music, arts, and poetry" (71) in order to sharpen her gift of intuitive knowledge and foresight.

As shown above, healing and creativity are linked with celibacy and mysticism. Tesa also sharpens her creative talents during her sojourn in Kanoni's sanctuary, sketching, and sculpturing Kanoni's image "to inspire women to stand firm with dignity and pride." She also uses her talent in music to propagate spiritual nourishment and expressions of hope, courage and unity (135-136). This is also redolent in Ayi Kwei Armah's celibate creative healers in *The Healers*. These powerful creative artists and healers exclude the expression of sexual relationship from transcendence dynamics. This could symbolically explain the sculptured bird named Imani (faith) that falls and cracks in the middle when Tesa and Muturi yearn for a sexual relationship. Another strange phenomenon surrounding Tesa's celibacy is the string of waist beads Mumbi gives her. The gift is an heirloom from Mumbi's grandmother and contains mystical power. The mystical power in Tesa's status is noted in the beads and her experience of involuntary contractions around her navel. Whenever she recalls Chinusi's violation of her "body and soul," she would feel nauseous and eventually vomit bitter fluids, which symbolises her view of the bitter traumatic experience (72). The vomit constitutes the abject, which haunts the subject (Opara 73). In line with Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, the abject – vomitus – has to be continually expelled in the course of Tesa's identity struggle, in order that she may fully regain her spotless stature (Opara 73).

Therefore, the protagonist, Tesa along with Mumbi is a transcendence of illumination. The illumination of transcendence is to build "a bridge that links her Christian values and Mumbi's traditional and spiritual belief" (69). The novelist, through Mumbi and Tesa's transcendence of regeneration, pits the dominant (Western) religion against the muted (traditional) women's religion. Pastor Jonah Kigira of Kiambutu Evangelical Church embodies the insincerity of

Church leaders, just as Ellen the American missionary is portrayed as an imperialist whose mission is to help plunder the African heritage. Another incongruity in the Christian faith is the practice of capitalism through religion (99). The intolerance in Christianity of any divergent view or value is voiced by Jonah's condemnation of the women's creative expressions at the sanctuary as paganism, occultism and witchcraft (74). This view also corroborates an African patriarchal structure that condemns as witches dynamic women who do not internalise the 'allowable' structure. But the driving force behind Njau's binary is her explicit portrayal of African women's spirituality as a representation of identity that is vibrant, curative and transcendental, unlike the passivity of the Christian religion. The spirituality of these women is expressed in oral narratives in chants, stories, songs, prayers and creation of integrative artistic pieces. In line with the gynocritical concerns that interpret women's literary identity from a complementary context, men are not excluded from the sacred grove of positive social change. Thus, Muturi, the son of Pastor Jonah, finds solace and freedom of artistic expression in the sanctuary (73) and Dr. Mwera, a medical doctor and political activist (162), becomes an ally in the revolutionary struggle for change through spirituality.

In conclusion, the representation of the female identity in East Africa is an interrogation of colonial and post-colonial challenges as well as the traditional image of women as voiceless. Narrated in a "doubled-edged" discourse, female writers in East Africa present contemporary "nervous conditions" of being women in that region. However, their interrogation is presented in a subtle form of negotiation with occasional confrontation, but their attempt to subvert the male perception of female identity thematically employs the strategy of inversion in the process of "horizon of continuity."

Inversion often works in conjunction with appropriation. Thus, the process of discrediting the male characters like Ochola in *The Promised Land* and President Chinusi and Pastor Jonah in *The Sacred Seed*, and the heroine's representation of positive images appropriated from the dominant discourse, legitimizes female power or identity. This involves replacing negative representations of women with positive ones taken from the established literary order. These women writers redefine the female identity by harnessing the concept of being different from the conventional perception and also proffer solutions to post-colonial challenges. Their concern is to deconstruct the male/female relationship by inversion and expose the post-colonial failures regarding governance and the land issue.

Their thematic focus includes marriage, womanhood, motherhood, emotional and economic independence, women's creativity, migration, resistance to oppression and role in the nation state, an emergence of a female tradition in African literature that transcends the Machiavellian allegory of gender. The narratives explore the traumatic impact of post-colonial challenges on women in East Africa and offer optimism through a regeneration process.

Thus, for Grace Ogot, who grew up in the period of colonialism and the resistance to it, it is not surprising that she combines her gender relations with a critique of colonialism, "the cancer that had eaten up all the land, and milked the blood from our people's veins" (*The Graduate* 18). Her concern is not mainly with a fundamental transformation of gender relations, but with partial changes or improvements in the condition of women. To her, women should observe their traditional roles, but in addition, they should also be given new rights and responsibilities. She exposes the traditional roles of women, especially the tensions encountered in the pursuit of the

goals relating to marital stability. Although her narrative does not fare well structurally – plot and character development – her vision encourages belief in the sanctity of marriage and the need for women to function positively within its confines.

Njau, however, moves beyond the traditional vision of Ogot into the spheres of politics, spirituality and creativity. Her concerns are about the conflicts between good and evil, male and female relationship, and religion and spirituality. Adopting symbolism, she portrays human virtues and vices in a simple style interspersed with an epistolary form. She blends the elements of nature, nurture and creativity with dreams, myth, magic and healing in her narrative of optimism. She employs the oral mode to narrate the various stories of women about the land, rape, infection, battering and mutilation. The omniscient narrator depicts stories of women's spirituality and communality rooted in ancestral heritage, as against post-colonial individualism and oppression.

Njau's narrative of African women draws inspiration from the 'oral foremothers'. In other words, the heroines are contemporary "amazons" and this is indeed reflected in the lyrics, panegyric, oratory, and anecdotes. The anecdote about the hare and the leopard is used to underscore unity among women. The novelist reflects her concerns through songs and poetry. The ancient symbol of "good heart" is captured in songs and poetry, overturning the traditional land inhabited by scorpions and human pollution and waste. It, thus, becomes a place

> Where women will shed tears of joy
> Blowing their horns
> As they dance singing with jubilation;
> Their streams of bitter tears will find

An outlet to the lake
It will be a place where souls polluted
Through hate, anger and ignorance
Will be immersed into cool waters of the spring. (44-5)

The gourd seed symbolises the new generation of liberators: united and liberated women and men (109).

The writer employs simple words, descriptions, dialogues and figurative language to tell her story, delving into African traditions, folktales and myths. Njau glorifies nature, shrines, sacred trees, birds and the arts; she provides regeneration for the characters while also encouraging and strengthening them through the traditional wisdom of folktales, proverbs, and songs. Through these literary texts, the women writers reiterate that literature must be functional, not merely for aesthetic value.

Chapter Six
Conclusion

Summary of Study

This thesis, "Female Identity and the Dynamics of Culture in Selected African Women-Authored Novels", is an in-depth study of the interplay of gender and identity as represented in eight novels by six African women writers. The writers are Flora Nwapa, Nawal el Saadawi, Evelyne Accad, Bessie Head, Grace Ogot and Rebeka Njau. The study examines the concepts of gender and identity in the narratives within the frame of womanist complementarity. It also examines how culture significantly shapes and defines gender and identity; that is, how women negotiate their identity within specific cultural precepts of a sex-gender system that favours patriarchy.

Through gynocriticism, the strand of feminist theory, which interprets women's writings based on the socio-cultural specificity with the operational models of linguistics, psychoanalysis, biology and culture, issues that define female identity in Africa are examined. It demonstrates how African women create and utilize strategies that enable them to rise above cultural restrictions in order to be key players in a communal culture of co-operative and co-equal existence with their male counterparts. It is observed that the female identity as represented in the selected novels is defined by several factors: culture, personhood/selfhood, motherhood, wifehood, politics, tradition, communality, nature and complementary relationships between men and women. It means that African women's identity is not static and ahistorical/acultural as is often depicted by Western critics and males. Rather, the female identity representations symbolise the dynamic evolution of socio-political changes in human relations. This evolution is

measured by the changes in tradition and modern cultures, location and cultural specificity. In the selected writers' narratives of women's identity, the notion of time, space and location are determiners in this cultural relativity, and evidence show that from traditional periods to the modern era, women's identities have been evolving progressively alongside human social factors. They are and have always been "co-players" in socio-political development and are part of the main culture and not uncultured or sub-cultured to the "maleculture". However, African women writers invert the patriarchal notions of gender and identity, and propose a society defined by communality and complementary roles between men and women for the development of the community and individuals alike.

This study analysed female identity as dynamic and evolves in different ways in response to the dictates of different cultural coherences in Africa. It is progressive and communal drawing upon the specificity of women's experiences and conditions that define their identities. These writers in depicting the African women's identity represent two spheres of women's participation: the "dominant" and the "muted" concerns. Each concern is mutually dependent on the other. The argument is that an isolation of one level affects the transformation of the other. The writers define their heroines' public and private roles; relevance and identity within communal functionality. In order to capture the various representations of female identity, the study is structured into three sections to provide in-depth analysis on the issues of identity and the dynamics of culture. The first part is Chapter One, which significantly assesses literary viewpoints concerning identity and culture using the theoretical apparatus of Elaine Showalter's Gynocriticism. It also argues that identity is a socio-cultural and depicts individual manifestation. The second part is sectioned into four: Chapter Two focused on the emerging pattern and

evolving structure of female identity in *Efuru* and *One Is Enough* narrated on the platforms of marriage and motherhood in the Igbo ethno-cultural region of Nigeria. *Efuru*'s locale is traditional, while *One is Enough*'s concern is contemporary in focus. Chapter Three demonstrates how Islam dictates the cultural and political perceptions of most North African countries. It is perceived as a conservative system with rigid religious structure of myths that keep the female presence invisible. Also, within these narratives is the view that an understanding of gender is dependent on religion. Chapter Four examines Bessie Head's engagement with racial, ethnic and gender disparity and differences. To her, "dominant" and "muted" concerns are inseparable, for if one separates gender identity from racial and ethnic issues, then the latter only needs a peripheral attention. Chapter Five showed, through the novel *The Promised Land,* the process of creating a positive identity within traditional beliefs and roles and how this leads to hybridity between traditional and modern identity perceptions in *The Sacred Seed*. *The Sacred Seed*'s praxis is a complementary co-existence between traditional culture and modern precepts, a portrayal of harmony between men and women, and a re-affirmation of female personality. The third part is the conclusion that also consists of the findings made in the study, the contributions to knowledge, direction for further research and limitations of study.

Findings

This section is the presentation of findings based on our stated objectives. In assessing "Female Identity and the Dynamics of Culture in Selected African Women-Authored Novels", the interpretations of identity which emerge from the eight selected texts indicate areas of

similarities and variance in relation to the geo-political/social structure or culture and location of the writers.

On a general note, these women writers create female models (legends, ancestors and goddesses) of expressions, inspiration, courage, spirituality and hope for the heroines. Underlying this methodology for female models is the idea of shoring up relevance and reverence of female ancestors and goddesses as models of female identity transformation. These female ancestral figures thus act as tropes for self-actualisation. This view is represented in *Efuru, One is Enough, Wounding Words: A Woman's Journal in Tunisia, Woman at Point Zero, When Rain Clouds Gather, The Promised Land* and *The Sacred Seed*. These female ancestral figures/models are oftentimes presented in contexts of religious expressions and worship.

1) Our research shows that manifestations of the female identity are progressively defined by specificity and cultural dynamism, which significantly colour the writers' experiences and expressions. Through the study, we find that Nwapa, Head, el Saadawi, Accad, Ogot, and Njau, in spite of the differences in their character representations, narrative techniques, and locations, show how their characters reject their status as victims of subversive and static values. So, the research identifies various female "stereotype" images, divergent representations of identity and the Womanist resolutions. From the writers' perspectives, we understand that female individuality and identity are results of specific cultural manifestations and an internalisation process that are essentially of socio-economic, political, and religious nature. This experience, at the level of the individual, leads to multiple interpretations. In other words, each narrative reinterprets identity distinctively and progressively based on the culture and location of the writer. Also, they distinctively

reject "stereotype" representations of African women as docile, submissive, emotional, sexually objectified, local and uneducated. Each writer represents a dynamic or progressive female identity along the lines of radicalism, complementarity, professionalism and empowerment. The process of redefining the contemporary female identity often creates social ripples especially when it contradicts the *status quo*. Instances of their representations of female identity dynamism are indicated below:

a) In *Woman at Point Zero*, culture does not necessarily change; rather, a socio-cultural awareness about the condition of women in Northern Africa is created through a conscious subversion of the *status quo* erected by patriarchy. Firdaus, Nawal el Saadawi's heroine, in *Woman at Point Zero*, radically challenges the *status quo* structured by religious beliefs and practices by "establishing" a contemporary identity through formal education and financial empowerment. However, subverting such rigid patriarchal norms may entail losing one's acceptance or relevance within her enclave. As such Firdaus in the process of subversion commits murder and this cuts the image of a *femme fatale*. Flora Nwapa's heroine in *Efuru* subverts her cultural norms economically and psychologically through religious transformation by becoming the priestess of *Uhamiri*, the river goddess of wealth. Her new identity is acceptable because to a large extent in West Africa, a level of independence is granted women as portrayed in the relevance of female goddess and priestesses in Eastern Nigeria. Tesa, a school teacher in *The Sacred Seed*, upturns the culture of exploitation (religious and political) through the creative freedom of expression offered by Kanoni and Mumbi – the female models of courage and hope. The female characters, through the choices they make, promote a progressive identity of contemporary

African women from docility to advocacy, and they become beacons of hope and transformation.

b) The definition of female identity as progressive by these writers is based on the principle of cooperation and collaboration between society and the individual, male and female and women with one another. Each female character in the selected texts is situated in a peculiar cultural background that circumscribes and stereotypes her behaviour, and only defines her identity in relation to men and their socio-cultural norms. Based on this awareness, each novelist, following the Womanist principle, portrays co-existence between men and women. However, the heroines of Nawal el Saadawi's *Woman at Point Zero* and Evelyn Accad's *Wounding Words: A Woman's Journal in Tunisia* are situated within rigid religious contexts that do not allow female participation. Their presence is subjected to the Islamic injunction that veils them in order to reduce their sexual appeal and activities. For this, the heroines are moved out of their "typical" experience of being quiet, dominated and dependent women into independent and public spheres. In *Wounding Words*, Evelyne Accad's narrative portrays a radical confrontation with religious/cultural subjugation and the westernization of the characters. Nonetheless, she cautions African women against being too radical in the expression of a new contemporary Self. Such radicalism may lead to dire consequences such as the death penalty passed on Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero*, and the alienation of Alhame in *Wounding Words*, when she relocates to France in the hope of a new life of independence.

2. An important fact that also emerges from the study is that the women writers use Nature as an aesthetic tool and symbol to formulate a contemporary identity. To the women writers,

the significance of Nature transcends mere aesthetic effects. It is seen as a medium of ensuring harmony; a representation of the balance between male and female, and between the individual and society. The interpretation of Nature is reminiscent of the ancient Greek practice of Nature worship. The Greek gods and goddesses worked to achieve and maintain a balance of power. When there is a balance of power between the male and female there is harmony in the world. African women novelists in our study deploy Nature to symbolise the desire for harmony through productive qualities. The process of recreation is embedded in the selected novels as a vortex in the process of social transformation of individual and the society. Their interpretation moves beyond the 19th century "escapist" ideal to the reality of male/female relationships, unconsciously going back to the Greek Nature worship that creates harmony in the human social environment. The theoretical framework for this study interprets the writers' works from both "dominant" and "muted" perspectives, and Nature in the context features as dominant in the representation of social transformation and the female process of self-actualisation. It serves as a symbolic basis of self-perception, metaphorically explored in the psychological, cultural, historical and religious struggles of human and woman relevance. The illustrations of the adoption of Nature as a tool of formulating an identity in the selected novels are provided in the sub-points below:

a) The adoption of Nature as an aesthetic symbol to formulate identity or subject matter by African women writers in itself suggests rebirth, growth, and empowerment. In the selected narratives, references are made to herbs in the forest, farm lands, streams, the sanctuary, the gourd (the seed of female bonding, eternal wisdom, hope and courage) and groves in *When Rain Clouds Gather* and *A Question of Power*; *The Promised Land* and *The Sacred Seed*.

In *Woman at Point Zero* and *Wounding Words: A Woman's Journal in Tunisia*, there are references to the waters of the Nile and the Mediterranean Sea (mythic waters of reformation) as markers of transition from one identity definition to another. Aïda's bathing in the Mediterranean Sea symbolises her transition from being docile to becoming an articulate and contemporary independent career woman. The characters are thus, energised by Nature. Also, the synergy between the women and Nature enables them to give expression to their sexuality (female vitality). This is captured in *The Sacred Seed*, *Woman at Point Zero*, and *Wounding Words*. Nature in this purview is further stretched into the sphere of religion. The river goddess in *Efuru*, the legendary Kanoni in *The Sacred Seed*, the mythic water of the Nile in *Woman at Point Zero*, and *Wounding Words*, and the mother-in-law apparition in *The Promised Land*, express the nature of African women as spiritual, successful, beautiful, adaptable, and neighbourly people.

b) Furthermore, Nature, in spite of its literal interpretation, depicts the writers' fictional perception, era and culture. In this case, it is equated with a literal 'voice'', that is, the 'art' of retelling or purgation; the vehicle through which lost identity is re-established and the interactive sphere for reconciliation between traditional male and female qualities. Literally, Nature becomes a mediator in the artist's vision of empowerment. Nature in this sense connotes wholesomeness, and by virtue of its openness, metaphorically contrasts culture, which marks the state of anomy in the African socio-cultural milieu. It is in this light that the possession of the Land becomes a symbol of psychological release from the trauma of dispossession and a sign of strength for Elisabeth in *A Question of Power* and the women in *The Sacred Seed*.

3. Another discovery is that African women's identity is not undertaken in isolation; rather, it is complementary. The concern of these writers is to create social change for both men and women. In other words, men and women are represented as victims of the deep-rooted socio-political, religious and cultural issues. The writers often step out of their cultures in order to give "objectivity" to their concern about victimization by being specific yet involving a whole people. Part of the strategies of attaining this "objective" female identity representation is to make a paradigm power shift to depict the dynamic development of women. Their characters are moved outside male-authored definitions by representing the "women's story". Their characters are signifiers of power or agents of reconciliation, negotiating complementary relations with man and society within the opposing forces of tradition and modernity, enslavement and liberation.

a) In this context, for instance, Head's texts create an exposé on cultural hybridity between two distinct cultures (African and Western) through female solidarity and African communality to challenge discrimination. This is designed to restructure the human value system through equity to accommodate interests of women (and even men) inside and outside different cultural milieus. It is for this reason that the main character of *When Rain Clouds Gather* is a man (Makhaya and he experiences psychological freedom through cooperation with women). The heroines in *The Promised Land* and *The Sacred Seed* respectively migrate from a familiar 'traditional' environment to unfamiliar terrains, where grounds of negotiation are consolidated through the complementary participation of men and women. The process of moving the heroine, Nyapol in *The Promised Land*, with her husband, Ochola, to an unfamiliar environment for economic purposes creates an

'objective' ground for female Self discovery. That is, one way African womanists try to define their contemporary identity is to sometimes pit men and women against one another in a binary opposition in society, or place them under harsh conditions to achieve a cultural and psychological growth or complementary responses to issues.

(b) The journey motif in these narratives is portrayed as a powerful symbol of self-knowledge through a re-entry into collective historical experience – the process of exposure and interaction. The journey through space becomes integral to unravelling the complex nature of identity and developing an individual consciousness. It is symbolically represented as the "road" to self-rediscovery. In addition, subversion is woven into the journey of self-discovery. Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero* challenges the handicaps of being a Muslim woman (which include female battering), by running away from home. Efuru in *Efuru* seeks solace as a priestess of *Uhamiri* (the river goddess) in order to redefine her Self (identity) as an African woman; while Amaka's journey from the village to the city in *One Is Enough* is a consciousness-raising process for economic empowerment. Tesa, in *The Sacred Seed*, shares a similar journey of rediscovery with Efuru in her recourse to Nature and traditional religion for creative development. The journey motif is not mere strategy but a mode of discourse which connects critical perspectives of the past, the present and sometimes the future. The writers, through physical movements of their characters from familiar to unfamiliar conditions and environments, emphasize the ideal of paying individual and collective attention to things that create harmony.

(c) The novelists represent dynamism in cultural perceptions of identity, indicating their desire for change and adaptability in time (period) and space (location). The authors' narratives

repudiate the stereotype images and patriarchal myths of female subjugation, sexuality, myth of women against women, and represent what we call a "liberating African female identity". Within this context, the writers represent narratives in which women struggle between complacent or conforming identity and resistant or deviant identity just like the pull of such opposing forces like tradition and modernity, enslavement and liberation. In their attempt to repudiate the conventional/complacent identities imposed on them by colonialism, the writers reconstruct and demystify the traditional myths by representing women in positive relationships that lead to individual and communal growth. The characters are portrayed in the light of helping one another to find the in-roads to identity: from unconsciousness to consciousness, from complacent identity to resisting identity, and from difference to partnership. The writers create platforms for female-bonding and complementarity.

(d) Female bonding and communal cooperation is the mainstay of African women novelists. In *When Rain Clouds Gather*, most of the characters are victims of socio-political discrimination, with Makhaya – male – as the main character being assisted by the women like Paulina Sebeso and Mma Millipede to overcome his psychological and social 'clouds' and 'thunder' of identity. Mma Millipede and Paulina also help Maria Dinorego to overcome the anxiety of her individuality and difference, while Makhaya and Gilbert (the white agriculturist) bond with the women in their struggle for economic survival in the highly political society. Female bonding is further depicted in the relationship between Elizabeth and Kenosi, which helps them on the journey to self-realisation and acceptability in *A Question of Power.* In *Efuru*, Ajanupu bonds with Efuru to overcome cultural mores. Amaka

in *One Is Enough* bonds with Ayo and other members of the Cash Madam Club to reconcile herself to her new status as an independent woman. Firdaus in *Woman at Point Zero* bonds with Sherifa in order for her to see herself in the 'mirror' not as a valueless and ugly projection of a patriarchal society but as a woman of worth. In *Wounding Words,* The International Day enables ground for *Ngambika*. Female identity in contemporary Africa is now defined in terms of personhood and communal bonding between families, male and female, and among women, all projected towards a social change and psychological re-orientation especially in the African continent where women are re-emerging as communal leaders. Thus, "the splits of anxiety" are overcome, communal identities are constructed and male-female bonds and reconciliation are established.

4. The novels also demonstrate the subversion of the *status quo* through the assertion of female's sexuality. The traditional African society regards female sexuality as a difference and a stigma. So, various norms are enacted to empower and protect men against women's sexual power. In the selected novels, it is regarded as a marker of identity and what makes women different. The stereotype image of being dominated, submissive and controlled through the "hijab" in *Woman at Point Zero* and *Wounding Words* is reversed by the heroines as a means of controlling the male sexual appetite. Firdaus uses her sexuality for radical change, while Aïda equates her sexual freedom with Nature in a harmonious rhythm. Firdaus' reflection in the mirror further enhances her sensuality and sexuality, and creates awareness about the worth of her identity. Subversion of suppressed women's sexuality is also represented in *The Sacred Seed* where Tesa's sexuality is projected as her identity and its abuse is repudiated. Elizabeth in *A Question of Power* is initially made to feel guilty about

the power of sexuality due to the history of her birth. But towards the end of the novel, she regains her identity through female-bonding and communal friendships. In the selected narratives, the notion of subversion and sexuality are interlocking.

Contributions to Knowledge

This study makes the following contributions to knowledge:

1. The study established through the application of gynocriticism that manifestations of identity are progressive. The adopted theory increases researchers' awareness about theoretical and methodological possibilities in analysing the recurrent issue of identity and culture in literary studies.
2. This work's inclusion of images of Nature as aesthetic symbols of transformation in the interpretations of identity and cultural dynamism has widened the framework of analysis of identity. It enables, in essence, focus on the significance of cultural practises and observances on the characterisation of [female] identity.
3. A major social spin-off of this work is the possibility of empowerment and "freedom" that the study offers women through their self-determination and complementarity arising from a deeper understanding of personhood.
4. This work has also underscored important social issues, whose neglect had always led to misconceptions about [female] identity in terms of difference and patriarchal dominance. That is, through the detailed analysis the work reveals differences in the definition of identity within African regions and shows unity in the patterns of subjugation and the female means to overcome or demystify the dominance.

Directions for Further Research

The research has attempted an empirical study of female identity and the dynamics of culture from a literary point of view. It is a step towards developing a holistic model that identifies, interprets and predicts contemporary female identity in Africa that is often misrepresented and misinterpreted.

The need for transformation in the perception of African women in terms of their "personality" or "individuality" must be seen in the light of the principle that equality means equal opportunities, rights and responsibilities for humanity, for the good of a whole society.

Perhaps another interesting recommendation and direction for further research lies in the comparative study of female identity representation and efforts to negotiate a change within pre-colonial and colonial periods. This is because a "new" generation of female writers is retracing the past in their writing to the time African women were regarded as "Amazons". Thus, a comparative discourse of the past (pre-colonial) representation of identity will further validate the identity evolution and transformation of women in Africa. This direction will enhance scholarship on the commitment of women in Africa to defining identity and creating an enabling environment for a stable social order.

The perspective of the "new" generation of female writers in defining female identity and the dynamics of culture is also in part a result of information overload or media misrepresentation of women's conditions, particularly Africans. This is a platform for the study of the "new" generation writers as they reconstruct African female identity mis-named by the media or popular culture as isolated, depraved, depressed, uneducated and overburdened. A study in this

new direction will present another perspective of a 'female world' in Africa. Also, this work will provide a data-base for any researcher not familiar with African women's culture and contributions to society.

The convergence in the study of different disciplines appears to enhance the viability of multi-disciplinary approaches to research problems, regardless of the specific discipline from which such problems originate. The status of literature as having almost all fields of endeavour within its purview can only enhance the utilisation of such approaches in terms of investigating African female identity. Identity, in this case, becomes an archetype of the conscious and unconscious personality, transcending all other elements of human nature.

Limitations of Study

Certain research difficulties were encountered in this study. They include: unavailability of research materials and the nature of the study. The problem of unavailability of material was peculiar to East Africa and North Africa, but this was resolved in part through book donations and chats with visiting scholars on their personal opinions regarding female identity formulation in Africa.

The other limitation or difficulty was in the nature of the work which is essentially a literary investigation that tends towards being sociological and psychological. This was overcome to a large extent by acknowledging identity as a sociological and psychological concept, while trying as much as possible to trace its literary overtones, that is, where sociology and psychology become literary concerns through thematic implications. This was made more adequate through the utilisation of a critical theory that is literary and culture-specific. The study focuses on the

thematic issues of identity and how a literary examination will shed light, and may be, reconstruct the sociological and psychological implications.

APPENDICES:

General Observations on Identity Interpretations by the Writers

Patriarchal Definition of African Women in the Selected Fiction – TABLE 1

Patriarchal Definition of Women	*Efuru*	*One is Enough*	*When Rain Clouds Gather*	*A Question of Power*	*Woman at Point Zero*	*Wounding Words*	*The Promised Land*	*The Sacred Seed*
Instruments of production: economic growth, traditional tillers (agriculturist)	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Male control and Definition – gaze, language, norms, customs and religion.	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Motherhood / wifehood as ascribed female roles	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	
As agents (hub) of cultural perpetuation and preservation: trope	√		√		√	√	√	√
Sex objects / Male appendages		√	√	√	√	√		√
Sexual control / practices: veiling, circumcision and other rituals and customs	√			√	√	√		√
Women against women as internalised myth	√	√	√	√	√	√		√
Biological interpretation of femaleness as cultural.	√		√	√			√	
Women as Objects of Pleasure/Victims of Rape		√	√	√	√	√		√

Female Identity and Cultural Dynamism by Women Writers – TABLE 2

Female Identity Revolution	*Efuru*	*One is Enough*	*When Rain Clouds Gather*	*A Question of Power*	*Women at Point Zero*	*Wounding Words*	*The Promised Land*	*The Sacred Seed*
Women as agent of change and productivity: religion, politics, social, culture and economic.	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Mediators / Preservers of Nature	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Complementary and hybridised relationships	√		√	√			√	√
Radical Transformational qualities: dress code as an identity		√		√	√	√		
Initiation of male / female relationship	√	√	√	√	√	√		
Image of African woman personhood	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Psychological implication and representations of femaleness	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Religious and cultural resolution of identity	√		√	√	√	√	√	√
Female bonding (*Ngambika*)	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√

Female Identity according to Regions – TABLE 3

Identity Representation in Texts from each Region	*Efuru*	*One is Enough*	*When Rain Clouds Gather*	*A Question of Power*	*Woman at Point Zero*	*Wounding Words*	*The Promised Land*	*The Sacred Seed*
Economic empowerment	√	√	√	√	√	√		√
Religious liberation.	√			√	√	√	√	√
Social / Racial Balance.		√	√	√			√	
Cultural Integration / hybridisation.	√	√	√	√			√	√
Genital Mutilation	√	√			√	√	√	√
Female relevance to socio-cultural development	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Radical female response to subjectivity	√	√			√	√		
Liberal cooperation for male/female co-existence and development			√	√			√	√
Enlightenment and Empowerment of Women	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Complementary involvement in social transformation	√	√	√	√		√	√	√
Female goddesses/Ancestors as models of reverence, hope and continuity	√				√	√	√	√
Violence against women (psychological, cultural, sexual, economic, social and religious		√	√	√	√	√	√	√
Violence against men		√			√	√		√
Sexual domination and manipulation of men		√			√	√		

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