

**From Chinua Achebe to Fred Khumalo: The Politics of Black Female Cultural Difference
in Seven Literary Texts**

by

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Declaration

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I, **David Magege**, declare that “ *From Chinua Achebe to Fred Khumalo: The Politics of Black Female Cultural Difference in Seven Literary Texts* “ is my own work and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references

Signature:

31 October 2016

Dedication

This accomplished piece of literary scholarship is dedicated to my dear wife Loveness, for her warmth of love and emotional support throughout the entire duration of my study.

Acknowledgement

For a study of this magnitude and depth, I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the following individuals and institutions. I am particularly indebted to their unwavering support during the entire duration of my study.

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Abstract

This study explores the notion of female cultural difference in the context of dominant patriarchal and other oppressive patriarchal structures. Essentially, its focus is on deconstructing stereotypical images of women, who are often perceived as homogenous. Throughout the study I argue that as much as their sensibilities are varied, African and African American women respond differently to the oppressive conditions they find themselves in.

The following selected texts provided the opportunities for exploring and evaluating the genealogy of female cultural difference that is central to my research: *Anthills of the Savannah* (Chinua Achebe); *Scarlet Song* (Mariama Ba); *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Kehinde* (Buchi Emecheta); *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Nora Zeale Hurston); *Bitches Brew* and *Seven Steps to Heaven* (Fred Khumalo). In the process of analyzing these texts, I demonstrated that the notion of cultural difference is often narrowly and erroneously construed. I discovered that the protagonists in these texts are not only conscious of their oppressed condition but often adopt strategic agency to contest male privileges that silence them. In pursuit of this critical perspective, I have proceeded to apply relevant theoretical frameworks constructed by Cornel West, Hudson-Weems, Bakhtin and a conflation of others whose philosophical tenets support the major theoretical frameworks. The aforementioned literary critics have enabled me to come up with a more comprehensive and richer analysis of the set texts.

In my analysis I have advanced the argument that female visibility manifests itself variously and temporally through individual and sometimes sisterly attempts at empowerment, self-definition and esoteric discursive features. I noted that all this is evidence of the nascent creative potential in African women who refuse to be silenced.

In my analysis of the Seven texts I have incorporated, modified and developed some of the insights from critical thinkers who engage in the ongoing debate about female cultural difference. This approach has enabled me to come up with new insights that ferret out veneers

of African women's rich cultural diversity, in light of the ever changing nature of women's operational spaces. It is this transcendental vision that basically informs and resonates with my study.

Key ideas

Black literature; deconstruction; textual politics; representation; visibility; agency; patriarchy; Africana-Womanism; heteroglossia; self-definition; oppression; Signifying; cultural diversity.

Contents

Declaration.....	ii
Dedication.....	iii
Acknowledgement.....	iv
Abstract.....	v
Introduction.....	1
FORMULATION OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM.....	1
1.1 STATEMENT OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM.....	1
1.2 DEMARCATION OF THE SCOPE OF INVESTIGATION.....	2
2. MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY.....	3
3. AIMS OF THE STUDY.....	3
4. METHODOLOGY.....	4
5. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	5
Chapter One : Anthills of the Savannah.....	23
Representation of men as agents of invisibility.....	27
Representation of female visibility and resistance.....	30
Movement and stasis in female representation.....	34
Beyond Nwayibuife: Mapping the future role of the African woman in the post independence era....	37
Deconstructing African women’s class differences: Towards shared sensibilities and empowerment..	46
Conclusion.....	54
Chapter Two: Scarlet Song, by Mariama Ba.....	56
Choice, Marriage and Motherhood: Towards a deconstruction of racial and cultural prejudices.....	56
Women, difference and the struggle for domestic space.....	63
Femininity, desire and embodiment: Taunting the male gaze.....	69
Journeying through”sameness”? Convergence, Divergence and rupture.....	74
Echoing voices: Negotiating fractured visions of the Postcolonial.....	80
Conclusion.....	89
Chapter Three: The Joys of Motherhood, Buchi Emecheta.....	90
Introduction.....	90
Divergent sensibilities, unique experiences: The dynamics of female subjectivities.....	93
Marriage , Masculinities and female entrapment in the domestic sphere.....	101
Intrusive values: The urban colonial space and challenges for the African woman.....	105
Parenting in an African family context : Hopes and impediments, conflicting values.....	109
Unravelling the diversity of African women’s heteroglossia.....	114

Conclusion.....	118
Chapter Four : Kehinde, by Buchi Emecheta:	121
Emerging perceptions: Diasporic oscillations of the African woman’s quest for self recognition	122
Negotiating male compatibility: The challenge of cultural imperatives.....	128
Reclaiming lost identity: Exploring the discourse of female solidarity and visibility.....	131
Immortalised voices: Navigating through the contours of female presences in the postcolonial	140
Motherhood and the matrimonial paradox: Traversing the confluences of home, exile and domesticity	146
Conclusion.....	153
Chapter Five : Their Eyes Were Watching God, by Zora Neale Hurston.....	155
Race, class and historical contingency in <i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i> : A Womanist perspective of signification	156
Marriage and Choice: The motif of time in the genealogy of female cultural difference	162
Subjectivity and identity: Challenges for the black woman’s empowerment.	170
Rediscovering a female cultural discourse : Diversity and challenges for a transcendental project....	179
Conclusion.....	187
Chapter Six : Bitches Brew	189
From Lesotho to Chesterville: A woman’s epic journey towards love, security and fulfillment.	190
Transcending Cultural frontiers: Challenges to women ‘s subjectivities in the changing South African socioeconomic terrain	197
Gendered discursive strategies: Mapping fractured identities through self telling.	203
Jazz vibes for Boozers’ Shebeenites : The monstrous complicities behind black South African social life	210
Inside the BP (Bhazabhaza Peace) lair: Confessions of sadistic male and female victimizers	215
Conclusion.....	223
Chapter Seven: Seven Steps to Heaven: Fred Khumalo.....	225
<i>Exploring dimensions of female visibility through the male author’s purview.....</i>	225
Introduction	225
Identity, memory and Difference: Insights into family dynamics within the contemporary black urban society	226
Deconstructing cultural conventions: A subversive or liberatory paradigm shift?	235
African Masculinities under Siege: The urban space as cauldron for socio-economic transformation	242
Genderised , racialised monstrosities : Towards transcultural alternative sexualities	247
Conclusion.....	256
Chapter Eight : Conclusions to the study	258

Restatement of research questions.....	259
Research findings in the context of theoretical foundations.....	266
Convergences and divergences in the configuration of female characters.....	269
Challenges and the way forward	270
REFERENCES.....	272
Primary Sources	272
Secondary Sources	272

Introduction

FORMULATION OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

1.1 STATEMENT OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Beginning with Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, which foregrounds Beatrice as the epitome of female assertion of a liberatory paradigm of difference, based on Cornel West's (1990) notion of resistance to misrepresentation and invisibility', this thesis explores six other comparable novels: *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neal Hurston, *The Joys of Motherhood* and *Kehinde* by Buchi Emecheta, *Scarlet Song* by Mariama Ba, and *Bitches Brew* and *Seven Steps to Heaven* by Fred Khumalo. The thesis ostensibly explores an alternative referential dimension that is at one redemptive in outlook and transcendent in its discursive practices. The thesis, therefore, sets out to use a decolonial deconstruction epistemology that veers off the run-of-the-mill feminist critiques but, instead, inaugurates African female self-recognition and representation through a prioritization of African women's sensibilities in both articulation and agency. Essentially, then, the problem is centred around the following questions:

- what are the discursive motors of difference for the self-recognition in the selected African and African American novels?
- what, *pace* West (1990: 94) are the politics of cultural difference at stake in the seven novels under examination?
- Where are the coordinates of genealogies of difference in the strategies of visibility in the novels?
- How have the authors depicted the African women's responses to the institutional power structures in the postcolonial era?

1.2 DEMARCATION OF THE SCOPE OF INVESTIGATION

The thesis confines itself to a thread of resistance to patriarchal dominant discourses through a steady focus on the strategies of representation of women in novels by African and African American authors who grapple with the question of visibility and agency. To this end, the demarcation is limited to a geopolitical spread, as it were, of West Africa (Mariama Ba, Buchi Emecheta and Chinua Achebe), South Africa (Fred Khumalo) and the Diasporic Africa (Zora Neale Hurston).

2. MOTIVATION FOR THE STUDY

This thesis has located a lacuna in scholarship where African and African American writers and critics have oftentimes had the sharp edges of the argument blunted by a covert critical monolithicism that equates male writing as generally articulating patriarchal norms. The said monolithicism, the study demonstrates, elides difference to a point where even female writers and critics are accused of writing within the prism of patriarchy. Whilst this is generally debatable, this study makes a case for the exception to the rule: it posits pointers to a discourse of difference in the discursive strategies of female visibility as a counter-measure to misrepresentation by the dominant power structures. It is also in this sense that the study explores the black women's potential to deconstruct prescriptive gender roles by adopting a transcendent vision of themselves. In its recognition of female diversity, therefore, the emphasizes the African women's attempts to define themselves as individuals within their own specific cultural environments.

3. AIMS OF THE STUDY

The thesis, in conception and execution, aims to reveal in detail the discursive motors of difference in the re-reading of characterisation of female protagonists and such like. Even in minor, if peripheral roles, the shebeen queen Sis Lettie in Fred Khumalo's *Bitches Brew* (2006) and *Seven Steps to Heaven* (2007), or the seemingly docile co-wife Nnu Ego in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) and disoriented Kehinde in the eponymous novel *Kehinde* (2004), there are paradoxical weaknesses that turn out to articulate strengths in terms of strategic agency. Given that in her 1996 interview with Julie Holmes for *The Voice* she—Buchi

Emecheta—has herself vehemently denied that she is a feminist but she “work[s] toward the liberation of women” (Akyeampong & Gates, 2012: 299), this thesis aims to locate the discursive motors of difference within the temporality of each of the seven novels and explores the politics of difference from a cultural-epistemic perspective. Through this specifically decolonial cultural-epistemic perspective, the thesis aims to provide an original set of coordinates of the genealogies of difference in the strategies of visibility in the female representation of novels.

4. METHODOLOGY

Broadly qualitative, in the sense of deploying a descriptive approach melded onto literary case studies, this thesis proceeds with an in-depth analytical review that is based on two conveniently coupled categorical axes: Difference and Signifyin(g). In respect of the first axis of difference, originally used by French philosophers such as Jacques Derrida(1967), in her essay entitled “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” and Gilles (1968), this thesis mobilizes ‘différence in the specific usage of Cornel West (1990), where there is a recognition of a positive “crisis” in thinking about representational practices in intellectual, existential, and political ways that inaugurate the ‘new cultural politics of difference’, that is, “distinct articulations of talented (and usually privileged) contributors to culture who desire to align themselves with demoralized, demobilized, depoliticized, and disorganized people in order to empower and enable social action and, if possible, to enlist collective insurgency for the expansion of freedom, democracy, and individuality”(1990: 94). This differential methodological axis is relevant for teasing out the manner in which each text has been received without enacting the critical staging of critical fissures in representation of

the intellectual, existential and political dimension of the self- recognition of female self- recognition and visibility.

In relation to the second methodological axis, drawn from Henry Louis Gate Jr.'s characterisation of black writing: a way of inscribing black difference into intertextuality where the black African female figure is represented in the seven novels through “a trope that subsumes other rhetorical tropes, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (the "master" tropes), and also hyperbole, litotes, and metalepsis”(1983: 686). Taken together, the difference *a la* Cornel West and the Gatesian Signifyin(g) practice, the methodology is at once innovative and relevant in terms of bringing to view a consistent “crisis”-based representation of alternative African womanhood in all its ethical dimension—untrammelled by Eurocentric feminist discourses.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between culture and difference has always been an area of contestation especially among critical thinkers. Postcolonial criticism and lately, various strands of feminism, continue to traverse this rugged terrain, using these critical categories as their main motors. Significantly, there has been a paradigm shift in discursive practices that seek to interrogate unequal power relations between men and women, especially in the early 1960s and 1970s. Stuart Hall (1990), in his seminal essay ‘Who Needs Identity’, has illuminated the ways in which Postcolonial theory can be used to articulate the dynamics of cultural and gender differences. Elleke Boehmer (1995:223) stresses this nascent feature when she notes that black excolonised women had “to insist on the diversity and layerdness of women’s experiences, and on the validity of forms of self-expression and community other than those prevalent in the West.” Similarly, Cabral

(1990), taking a cue from Fanon (1966), has emphasized the centrality of cultural liberation, thereby paving a way for theorizing on the critical role of culture in social transformation. The fact that these critics are mostly concerned about divergences and differences within the authentic indigenous cultures “arising from the intrinsic structures of those societies themselves” Ashcroft (1990:161), is an important discursive feature in my thesis.

It is however Frantz Fanon’s (1966) *The Wretched of the Earth* that most critics have drawn inspiration from. Other critics such as Homi Bhabha (1997) in an essay entitled ‘*The Other Question*’, and Cornel West (1990) have also come up with scholarly analyses which explore the questions of culture, difference and race. From the early 20th Century, with the development of gender studies riding on the groundbreaking views of Simone, de Beauvoir (1949), focus has shifted and narrowed more towards the discursive practices that address differences between men and women. Simone de Beauvoir (1949) argues that “women are not inferior in nature but are inferiorised by culture.” Significantly, subsequent research on female representation have dwelt on the question of power relations and difference. The main aim has been to deconstruct patriarchal conventions lodged in culture. While I find many areas of convergence between critics and my topic, my analysis has a different slant. It cascades towards the narrower focus of genealogies of difference in female representations of African and African American women. In the process I provide an original set of coordinates that inform the women’s quest for visibility and identity in their respective cultural environments.

This background explains why this thesis endorses Hall (1990:112) when he argues against relying on one experience and identity, and suggests the need to adopt a view that recognizes the presence also of “critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute what we really are.” The aim is to deconstruct the erroneous Eurocentric notion that portrays African women as a homogenous group of invisible silenced oppressed people. This deconstructionist theory is the brain child of Jacques Derrida (2006), who challenges the idea of a frozen structure by advancing the notion that there is no structure or centre, no univocal meaning. Echoing the same view, Gerder Lerner (1950) has noted that no single theoretical framework can explain the historical and cultural experiences of women. Clearly this observation is true even amongst the African women themselves.

Beginning with Derrida and Lerner’s theories of difference and women’s unique cultural experiences respectively, my thesis sought to locate cultural fissures that characterize African women’s responses to their lived experiences in terms of resistance, identity and representation. The main motor for my account is Cornel West’s (2003) *The Cultural politics of Difference*. In my appropriation of the theorists’ epistemology, I do not claim to endorse completely what they posit. I part ways with them in so far as I think it is possible and necessary to advance alternative conceptualizations. Further to that, Cornel West’s *The New Politics of Cultural difference* addresses fundamental issues that I have used to analyse the topic. What I find particularly pertinent is his thrust that calls for a programme of “trashing the monolithic and homogenous in the name of diversity, multiplicity and heterogeneity” (1990: 93).

There is great sense in his logic of historical and cultural influences in explaining the plural nature of society. West observes that there is need to empower the disadvantaged and “to enlist the collective insurgency for the expansion of freedom, democracy and individuality” (1990: 94). He suggests that there are intellectual, existential and political challenges to the new theory of cultural difference. This view is shared by Arnold, (cited in West, 1990:95), under the section “*The Intellectual Challenge*”, who believes in a humanistic conception of culture. This theory can be used as a basis for taking a fresh and incisive view at representations of blacks, especially black women. I wish to posit that black women’s representation must desist from the tendency to homogenize the condition of womanhood. Instead it must respond to their inner sensibilities and ethnic differences. Heather Clover (2003: 2), in her analysis of Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood*, admits that “because each woman’s experience is unique and dependent upon more than a mere chromosomal pattern, I cannot assign the same responsibilities to Emecheta that I would do to a female writer with my cultural background.”

To be noted is that both West (1990), and Leornado and Porter (2010) see the centrality of Fanon’s theory of violence. However, West only alludes to the use of counter -violence, opting to give a historical perspective of violence and responses to it. This perspective, in so far as it addresses the issues of marginality, is commendable but it tends to concentrate too much on global changes and hackneyed rhetoric about racial inequalities, instead of interstices of difference in the cultural status of African and African American women. This generalization glosses over the salient cultural exigencies of the marginalized people, especially African women. Significantly, West’s (1990) critique is relevant in examining the

notion of difference and identity, key aspects in the process of representation. He deplors the problem of invisibility and namelessness as:

the condition of relative lack of Black power to present themselves to themselves and others as complex human beings and thereby to contest the bombardment of negative degrading stereotypes put forward by white supremacist ideologies.

(1990: 102)

For a long time black women have been victims of what Hall (1990) describes as attempts to change relations of representation, a condition that mischievously ignores the women's unique experiences. In his novel *Black Skin White Masks*, Fanon bemoans the insidious role played by colonialism and racial segregation in rendering the black woman insignificant. He notes that like their male counterparts, black women have become so obsessed with whiteness that they are prepared to risk losing their identity (1967:42). This sense of insecurity is understandable, though regrettable, given the black people's long period of acculturation dating back to the days of slavery. The systematic attempts at erasing the black race, and by extension, the black woman through the imperial version of patriarchy, is a direct consequence of what Gilroy (1993:44) *refers to as "shifting relations of domination and subordination between Europe and and the rest of the world, especially Africa"* (emphasis added). Dismissing dependence on a western epistemological order, Mudimbe (1988:X) calls for cultural transformation, arguing strongly for a reinterpretation of our African "gnosis and epistemology that is constructed within the framework of our own rationality." But while Mudimbe's advocacy to return to African philosophy is plausible, it is unfortunately silent on the status and identity of the African woman in the postcolonial era. Here I find Amadiume's (1987) scholarly research on gender transformation more pertinent to my research. Amadiume lends an optimistic vision to suggestions for cultural decolonization, through her articulate retrieval

of a traditional organised social political framework that acknowledges the rights of women within a flexible gender system that does not necessarily privilege men. It is worth appreciating that the dual –sex organization that was operational among the Nnobi people of Eastern Nigeria afforded African men and women equal opportunities for acquiring power, authority and wealth.

The significance of addressing the temporality of representations and difference is echoed and given further emphasis by Hall, when he argues that “identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured, never singular but multiply across different, often intersecting and antagonistic discourses” (1990: 4). Here I get the sense that Hall’s analysis somehow complements West’s. Though West’s critique focuses on black / white relations, it provides useful insights into the representations of black women in their familiar cultural environment. To some extent, West makes a strong point when he stresses the importance of demystifying power relations through the agenda that pushes for the accommodation of “multivalent and multidimensional responses that articulate the complexity and diversity of black practices” (1990: 105).

In spite of the above positive comments on West’s critique, there are other aspects that call for more intellectual probity through further research on the notion of culture and difference. Firstly, the article is too much skewed to the global situation, especially given its concentration on historical and cultural events that continue to relegate the marginalized to positions of obscurity. Though the historical account serves to chronicle the changes to culture through time, it does not provide sufficient depth to the dynamics of culture prevalent in contemporary African and African American societies. There still remains a need to look into the

parameters that prescribe the different experiences of women within specific groups in particular cultural milieu. A theoretical perspective that locates the enquiry within the African ambit is likely to yield more reliable results regarding cultural differences in female representation. We still need to remove the homogenizing veil of shared experiences to get to the bottom of the matter, an authentic multivariant profile of the African woman. Thirdly, West's critique elides the presence of internal contradictions in the representation of African women. This is a serious omission that needs to be addressed as well. Lastly, though the article is relevant, it is based on Black Diasporan intellectuals. As a result I do not think it would be wise to superimpose it on some underprivileged African women who belong to a different class.

Over and above class, Zeus Leornado and Ronald K. Porter, in their article on '*Pedagogy of Fear*' (1990), raise pertinent insights in their critique of race theory using Fanon's theory of violence. They draw attention to the possibilities of inscribing within it the enquiry of female representation and difference. The critics' concept of a humanizing form of violence, a non-representative experience of power, invites further scrutiny in so far as it can be linked to the representation of African women. The critique problematises the condition of safety around public race dialogue, which the authors consider as a platform for maintaining white comfort zones as well as symbolizing some form of violence against people of colour. The authors note that the alternative of critical dialogue is risky and uncomfortable for whites because they benefit from that power. As a result, they propose what they call a humanizing form of violence, whose agenda is liberatory, to restore the black people's identity and

dignity. It is apparent that this critique seeks intervention strategies for interrogating unequal power relations between whites and blacks.

What I have gleaned from this essay is that though it does not adequately hang on the thread of my enquiry, it offers a blueprint for probing into the cultural conditions that are used to justify differences in the representations of Africans and African Americans on the basis of gender and class. This position is slightly similar to the one advocated by Mukherjee (2008) although the latter is more explicit about the theoretical basis upon which the project of liberation can be undertaken. Despite Leonardo and Porter's (2010) slightly different focus, their argument is relevant for understanding the problem of cultural differences in African women's representation, especially with respect to how they have been influenced by western feminist discourse. I also feel that the writers' main concern for the need for change in power relations is critical as a rallying point in my inquiry. However, I take exception to the assumption that the strategies can be applied wholesale.

Certainly there is need to search for the veneers of difference among the African women themselves. Linda Alcoff (1992:344) emphasizes the unique differences among women when she notes that such differences "allow women to think beyond the prescriptiveness of normative culture." Yet the violence implied in Fanon's theory is not my preferred interventionist strategy either. Instead, I feel that Dr King's strategy of psychic violence is more applicable as it is silent about physical confrontation. One of the points of departure in my thesis is the search for a redemptive and restorative vision that restores the African woman's dignity while maintaining an egalitarian heterosexual relationship. It has been proven that some African women resort to violence only as a defensive or retaliatory mechanism,

while others apply psychic violence. In fact, the complexity of relations in heterosexual cultural communities does not require a simple prescriptive panacea. It is in this regard that I am inclined to concur with calls for a humanizing form of violence. Because of their different cultural backgrounds, women respond differently to their plight.

Although there is much to appreciate from the authors' theory, I feel that it has its own limitations in respect of my enquiry. Firstly, the overemphasis on the historical condition elides the contemporary problems of African women. An inquiry that focuses more on the female trajectories from a cross-cultural perspective is likely to yield more results for my topic. I feel that the critique is guilty of reductionism because of its emphasis on binaries of black/white relationships. Again the fact that the research was carried out on public fora means that it misses out on the informal sector, where the majority of marginalized African women are represented. The idea of safe space also makes me uneasy. The notion of safety itself implies the existence of social inequalities between the contending forces. We need to ask, safe from who? Is merely being safe enough? Certainly safety among African women is not synonymous with freedom. In the African cultural context women who are safe are not necessarily guaranteed agency. Hence we need to conceptualize space from a broader existential perspective.

Apparently, in its emphasis on race Leonardo and Porta's critique glosses over categories of female representation, which is my main concern. There remains a need to look into how African women cross-culturally respond to, in their own agencies, male dominance especially on the domestic sphere. My thesis is focused on both male and female writers, whose works

emphasise what Elleke Boehmer (1995: 227) calls the “heterogeneity of women’s speaking positions”, such as it is noted by Gayatri Spivak in her essay ‘Poststructuralism, Marginality and Value’. In addition, we need to examine the inner sensibilities of individual female characters in relevant texts. This is another aspect that I also interrogate in my thesis.

Again, in pursuit of other scholarly anchors, my account also makes use of Arun P. Mukherjee’s (1990) article *Whose Postcolonialism, Whose Postmodernism*. This critique examines the underlying challenges within the two theoretical perspectives. In particular it draws attention to salient issues that have been overlooked by critics of either perspective. The main point of the study is the tendency for both Postmodernist and Postcolonial theories to assimilate and homogenize nonwestern texts within a Eurocentric cultural economy. Mukherjee argues that the erasure of inherent differences in each case is a literary weakness which denies the affected people authentic representation. His main attack is on the Postmodernists, for taking postcolonial works out of context. In his reference to Barbra Christian, he commends African American writers for depicting “a reality they do not want us to question” (1990:5). But most significantly Mukherjee blames postcolonialism for lacking what he calls “cultural inwardness”, and for collapsing the history of colonial experiences of African people. I feel that this is what renders this critique particularly relevant to my thesis. Its focus on texts by African and African American writers seeks to examine the discourse that captures the cultural nuances and values that can be appreciated more realistically by the community within which they are written.

What I also find relevant is the critic’s attack on the totalizing project of *Postcolonialism*, especially the point that Postcolonial theory is also guilty of obliterating cultural differences by constructing its own centers and peripheries. Mukherjee’s theory, however, has its own

limitations. Firstly, the fact that his research is based on nonwhite writing in Canada is a moot point because though he attacks the grouping under the Postmodernist label, it does not fit the Postcolonial label either because nonwhite writers in Canada are informed by their cultural environment, which is more Eurocentric than Mukherjee would have us believe. Certainly the cultural world of Canada is far removed from that of Africans in Africa. Besides, the term non-white is vague. It assumes that all non whites in Canada are black, which is not the case. Secondly, though I agree with him for criticizing Tiffin (1988:170), I still feel there is a problem of assigning a label to nonwhite writers, especially those living in Second world countries. I feel that works of art can reveal either elements of Postcolonial and postmodern experiences, depending on the author's style. This flexibility makes it difficult for one to make hasty conclusions on the theoretical perspective within which one is writing. Having said this, I feel there is scope for using this theory to inscribe pertinent aspects relating to the problem of cultural differences among African women. Mukherjee throws a spotlight on areas of further enquiry when he alludes to the need for texts to see that other matters are included in literary works. (p.5). This article has thus given my thesis more focus, especially where the writer refers to native African and African American women like Toni Morrison and Mirriam Tlali's fiction.

An important critical ingredient of my thesis is the aspect of language, which is given special attention by Bakhtin M.M. (1981), in one of his essays entitled '*Discourse in the Novel.*' He notes that one can find in different periods, "monologic utterances", i.e. various different nuances of meaning whose basic content remains unchanged (1981:270). This theory, which shares similar poststructuralist tenets with Jacques Derrida's theory of the sign, is critical to a more incisive analysis of cultural differences in female discourse within the African and African

American contexts. It further throws a spotlight on the problem of homogenizing and erasing difference among the African women. Bakhtin raises a useful insight for directing inquiry when he contends that for different historical development stages there is a particular ideological discourse. According to him, language is stratified into linguistic dialects, as well as languages of social groups, including languages of generations. Bakhtin's theory provides a useful basis for explaining the variety and flexibility of female discourse in the set texts, given that each of them is informed by the particularities of its setting and the cultural potential of the female subject to subvert conventions. Of particular significance is the fact that African women's "languages" of resistance to patriarchy over generations have been shaped by their circumstances. In the selected texts, all the authors present female characters who speak against invisibility in their own ways. In the words of Mukherjee (1990), the writers allow us to see the problem from inside. Needless to say, texts that articulate female consciousness and experiences can never be the same. It is easy to see why the theory intersects with Derrida's concept of differ'ance, which posits that there are no frozen meanings. Clearly, then, it is the temporality and cultural settings of these heteroglots that will enable us to identify the coordinates of African female difference. Bakhtin has also argued that "every concrete utterance of a speaking subject serves as a point where centrifugal as well as centripetal forces are brought to bear." He goes on to suggest that "language represents the coexistence of socio-dialogical contradictions between the present and the past... languages of heteroglot intersect each other in a variety of ways, forming new socially typifying languages" (Bakhtin 1981:291).

The aspect of language has also been given critical attention by Derrida (2006), whose emphasis on the deconstruction of discourse suggests a new way of assigning meaning to language. To the extent that it addresses the aspect of different "languages" or heteroglots,

Bakhtin's theory is relevant. However, it is not clear on the differentials of language use on the basis of gender. Nor does it shed sufficient light on the typicalities of such "languages" to individuals and specific communities.

While I find its concept of the intersection of centripetal and centrifugal forces an exciting area of enquiry, I am a bit uneasy over its silence over the effect of such forces on female subjects. In the context of my enquiry, the centrifugal forces would constitute voices of protest or resistance, that is, those advocating for change outside the established 'safe' discursive domain. Centripetal forces would then represent the patriarchal forces that keep protesting voices in check, by maintaining established conventions of expressing social discourse. The assumption that the heteroglots intersect implies that there is always conflict. I contend that this is not always the case. The theory is not clear on conflict resolution, and difference, aspects which are central to my enquiry. In my view, a critical analysis of female cultural difference must incorporate ways of probing into contemporary African women's agency, visibility, self naming/definition, within their contexts. Another worrying feature is that Bakhtin's focus on language leaves other elements of cultural difference unexplained. For example aspects of identity and self recognition need more attention. This is where Africana- Womanism becomes more relevant as a complementary epistemology.

In light of these considerations I consider it pertinent to incorporate aspects of Clenora Hudson – Weems theory of Africana Womanism. According to Reed P. Yaa Asantewaa (2001), Africana -Womanism as a theoretical concept and methodology defines a new paradigm which offers an alternative to all forms of feminism. It is a terminology and concept that considers both ethnicity (Africana) and gender (womanism) coined in the 1980s.

To note is the fact that Africana -womanism is different from Alice Walker's Womanism. It critically addresses the dynamics of the conflict between the mainstream feminist, the Black feminist, the African feminist and the Africana -Womanist (Hudson-Weems, "Global", 1814. Once again, my reading of these theoretical perspectives is not intended to endorse anyone of them as my central critical method. Rather, I wish to show that each one of these contains retrievable traces for my enquiry. My enquiry consciously avoids a wholesale endorsement of Walker's Womanism, which, though it advocates for love among African women, is suspect, given its radical stance and tolerance of violation of authentic cultural values. For instance, in its apparent tolerance of female sexual relationships, it ruptures the Afro-centric norms amongst most African societies on the continent. Indeed those who argue for its inception fall into the trappings of some of the obnoxious western social practices.

Hudson -Weems identifies eighteen descriptors which she claims serve to guide informed analyses of the Africana woman's existence. Some of these are self -namer, family centred, genuine in sisterhood, mothering, in concert with the African man in struggle, and flexible role player. Hudson Weems claims that this new ideology is grounded in African culture. As such, it focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs and desires of African women (154-155). However, the theory does not set a clear agenda on modalities for black women's identity in a changing society. There is need for a critical perspective that addresses modern socio-cultural trends that undermine the position of the African woman. Increasing levels of literacy for women have weaned them from the restrictive roles of the home. Their interaction space has expanded physically, socially and economically. Yet most of them feel that African women are still disadvantaged and gagged by the dominant patriarchal society.

Ironically, though, as a new theoretical perspective that seeks to articulate the African woman's world view, it is still fraught with problems of terminology and semantic ambiguities. First, the eighteen descriptors could easily be coalesced to four, namely: self definition, in concert with the African man in struggle, mothering and nurturing, and flexible role player. In addition, the numerous overlaps between the descriptors points to a need for a sharper focus that will give it authenticity as a term of reference. The Africana- womanist concept of mothering and nurturing, for instance, is no longer necessarily tied to marriage and family solidarity as was the case in the past. African mothers have become more conscious of their self recognition and status.

There is however scope for using the theory as an instrument for explicating the dynamics of female difference today. While some of the descriptors still retain nuances of western feminist ideology, the theory offers sufficient ground for exploring the African woman's experiences from a freshly African perspective. In its avoidance of the run -of- the mill western feminist philosophy, it gains credibility among contemporary African women, especially because of its subordination of the race issue. Current critical theory on female representation needs to address cultural dynamics in order to ferret out the distinctive features that separate the women. It is envisaged that the Afro-centric approach that forms the bedrock of the theory offers room for informed analyses of ways in which African women's cultural experiences impact on their sensibilities and agency, within specific communities. The philosophy of Afrocentricism, founded by Molefe Kente Asante (2000), is aptly defined by Gilroy (1993:188) as "African genius and African values created, recreated, reconstructed and derived from our history experiences in our best interests..."

I want to assert that the Africana- womanist theory, which I have incorporated as an analytical tool, derives most of its epistemological tenets from Afrocentricism. Tendai Mangena, in her

article *'Theorising women existence: Reflections on the Relevance of the Africana Womanist theory in the writing and analysis of Literature (2013)*, has astutely noted that the theory fits well into the postcolonial matrix because it is properly named and officially defined according to the African people's unique culture.

The theory has also been hailed as one that defines Africana women in their reality. However, though race is no longer an issue in most parts of Africa, it still is, in the diaspora and the Arab states north of the Sahara. Another complication is that in Africa the void left by race has been filled in by class. Most rural African women find it difficult to define themselves, given their relatively low education, low self esteem and entrenched community values that privilege men. Those who have attempted to define themselves on the basis of other women have often succeeded in erasing their identities, within their specific environments. Still, women's self definition is largely dependent on their economic status. Most African women who are dependent on their husbands' income would rather defer self definition than risk divorce. This is a serious drawback to female agency among the poorer African women.

Having said this, I think there is need for caution especially in the interpretation of descriptors of self naming, sisterhood and family centredness. African women's experiences are too complex to be glorified. As noted by Mangena (2013), to ascribe sisterhood to all women of African descent is to ignore the many conflicts among the women themselves. Mangena rightly observes that in representation, women are not always capable of maintaining genuine sisterhood among themselves, not only in the Zimbabwean context but the world over. She observes that even Hudson- Weems herself acknowledges the fact that sisterhood among women remains an ideal, not the norm. Given the historical and cultural factors that influence African women, it is important to note that family solidarity depends on values that govern a

particular society. Space-time convergence, which has been mediated by technology, also threatens to rend the thread of solidarity, especially in Zimbabwe where massive family disintegration continues to rock the belief in positive male – female relationships as foundations for the survival of African people and mankind (Aldridge: 2004). Long periods of spousal separation have exacerbated cases of infidelity, and in worse cases, violence. Many African women in this category have either been victims of separation or capitalized on the situation to assert themselves in a manner that defies the ideal of being in concert with the African man in the struggle. It is such challenges that militate against the wholesale applicability of the theory.

In view of the above considerations, I do not claim to build my argument entirely on Cornel West theory. Instead, I argue that while it is the most relevant for explaining the problem of female cultural difference, it needs to be blended with aspects of African- womanism, Derrida's theory of signification and Bakhtin's theory of Signification. Derrida's theory, in its rejection of frozen meanings, is particularly useful for explaining the effects of cultural transformation among African women. For example, African women are becoming more self-conscious of liberating themselves from the restrictive traditions of patriarchal hegemony. One reason why some African women condemn patriarchy is that it relies on obsolete entrenched values that privilege men. It is in this sense that I argue for an intersection of Cornel West's theory of female cultural difference with those of Derrida, Bakhtin and Hudson Weems. The major tenets that underpin these theoretical perspectives are critical in exploring the multiple layers of African women's cultural experiences. This new theory maps out the coordinates of difference among African women. Serving as a boon to the contemporary African women's liberational agenda, the said coordinates locate new lacuna, independent of the

essentialist and homogenizing perspectives of western feminists. I argue that African women today do not necessarily adopt a confrontational stance against men. Most of the women enlist their male counterparts to confront the denigrating values and traditions within our society. Furthermore, when African women resort to violence in domestic disputes, it is mostly perpetrated as a retaliatory recourse, not provocation.

Although these foregoing critics are not my main target of analysis, they nevertheless provide the ideal literary framework within which to situate my enquiry. That they write from the same cultural insider perspective as that of the authors I have selected for special study affords me opportunities to explore the different ways in which women are represented.

The above review has opened up avenues through which I can navigate my enquiry from a position that addresses the questions that still animate me regarding the issue of women's representation and difference. Basing on the cultural experiences of the African and African American women, the analysis looks into the genealogies of difference in the strategies of visibility in the seven novels. The distinct discursive practices that characterize the different geopolitical communities, as enacted through the experiences and sensibilities of the characters as well as the values that constrain them in place and time, is a veritable subject of investigation. Through an intertextual reading of the selected works I trace a female trajectory that advances a new theory of cultural difference, one that reveals African women's multivocal countermeasures to invisibility even as they divest themselves from the syncretic lure of their western sisters' universalizing culture of resistance. Finally, the thesis is intended to break the myths and misconceptions surrounding African women's representation.

Chapter One : Anthills of the Savannah

An alternative African womanhood

To many critics of postcolonial works *Anthills of the Savannah* epitomizes Achebe's response to "leftist criticism of works of established African writers, especially Wole Soyinka," and, from a gender perspective, an attempt to ingratiate himself with leftist feminist critics. Ame – Odindi Aba (2010:2), echoes similar views, in a rather cynical manner:

Achebe initiated a compensatory promotion of feminism in *Anthills*, which the readers anticipate but which is systematically denied or nullified. Achebe gestured an anticipated compensation to womanhood but denied it.

I wish to argue against such facile interpretations of this brilliant masterpiece. Achebe's significant literary and historical shift from the pan -African vision that informs his earlier works does not necessarily signal a radical departure from his ideological position. Apart from setting an agenda for the pessimistic gloom that haunts African governments in the post independence era, the novel also sets out to inaugurate the role and position of African women in the new dispensation. While it must be acknowledged that a feminist streak runs through the text, a close examination of the text shows that this is not his agenda. Achebe has instead constructed a novel that addresses the multilayeredness of African women's responses to their condition. It is a novel that calls for recognition and visibility of African women. To some extent, the novel resonates with elements of Africana -Womanism. Evidence for this is found in the presentation of Beatrice and Elewa 's self naming, self assertiveness and the different circumstances that affect their sensibilities. Of special significance is Achebe's portrayal of male and female characters. Both Beatrice and Elewa are epitomes of the Africana - womanist ideal that emphasizes positive male companionship, not confrontation. Beatrice's altruism and genuine sense of male

companionship is brought out especially in episodes involving the conflict between Ikem, Chris and Sam. It is also reflected in her concern for the welfare of the poor peasants of Abazon. The imperative for a more complex articulation of African women's sensibilities finds endorsement in Mohanty's rejection of analyses that merely dwell on gender, to the exclusion of society, class or ethnic details (cited in Ame –Odindi Aba : 2010). At the palatial retreat Beatrice comments :

Retreat from what/ From whom?'.....' From the people and their basic needs of water which is free from Guinea worm, of simple shelter and food. That is what you are retreating from. You retreat up the hill and commune with your cronies and forget the very people who legitimize your authority. (*Anthills of the Savannah*, 73)

It is clear from Beatrice's sentiments that she is not only concerned about the oppression of women but also disadvantaged members of society in general. In their respective roles of lovers, sympathizers and political commentators women in *Anthills of the Savannah* exhibit feminine qualities consistent with and deriving from Africana values and philosophy. However, it must be said that Hudson- Weems theory alone is not sufficient to explain the manner in which African women are portrayed in this novel, given the fact that they are characters whose fiancés have strong links with western patriarchal values. This is why it is necessary to address the presentation of female difference from a conflation of other theoretical perspectives.

Through the foregrounding of Beatrice as the epitome of female assertion of a liberatory paradigm of difference, the novel's deliberate subversion of patriarchal discursive practices attests to Cornel West's (1990) notion of resistance to misrepresentation and difference. In the novel Achebe draws attention to the need to redress one of the vestiges of imperfection in African culture: the inferiorization and stereotyping of women, among others. Achebe uses a

deconstructionist epistemology to make a point about African women's sensibilities. In the novel Achebe alludes to the invisibility of women in Sam's male dominated government even as he justifies Beatrice's self elevation. Here the notion of invisibility is played out in the arena of Sam's tension filled cabinet meetings, conspicuous by their absence of women, and in which His Excellency has effectively emasculated his sychophantic ministers as seen in the comic depiction of ministers such as General Okong and the Commissioner for Education.

On my right sat the Honourable Commissioner for Education. He is by far the most frightened of the lot. As soon as he had sniffed peril in the air he had begun to disappear into his hole, as some animals and insects do, backwards. Instinctively he had gathered his papers together and was in the very act of lifting the file cover over them and dragging them into his hole after him when his entire body suddenly went rigid. (*Anthills of the Savannah*, 3)

Uzoечи Nwagbara (2010) compares Professor Okong's puerile behavior to Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's propagandist minister, notorious for disseminating "half truths, cant and warped ideas." Sam's dictatorial regime has systematically denied both men and women voice and representation. While the men have been reduced to praise singers and apologists, the women's participation in the public arena has been effectively held in check. Significantly, despite her academic achievements, Beatrice remains a secretary, a role traditionally assigned to women. Ironically, it is this lack of recognition that equips her with the moral authority to observe and censure the political gambit in Sam's regime. One also notes that Beatrice has been denied a well deserved space in the formal operations of the corrupt Kangan government. It is only through her social interactions with Ikem and Chris that she articulates her feminist views. It would seem that Achebe has remained within the ideological position of his earlier works. Beatrice and Elewa are effectively excluded from mainstream politics. Thus attempts to locate

this novel within the feminist tradition appears contrived and far fetched. Such a run of the mill interpretation elides the fact that the text's framework lies in the politics of post independence Africa .

I take great exception to some critics such as Uwakweh who presumptuously ascribe Achebe's portrayal of female characters in *Anthills of the Savannah* to a change in ideological stance in response to feminist and Marxist critics. Such an interpretation is unfortunate as it implies that writers must conform to specific theoretical precepts to remain popular with the readership. Certainly writers have no obligation to do so. I argue that in *Anthills of the Savannah* Achebe presents female sensibility of a different kind, one that enables women to voice out their assessment of the sociocultural conditions around them, as individuals. This means that the woman's role transcends that of feminist activism. While the text might exhibit some feminist streaks or inclinations, and most do, it remains deeply anchored in African culture. Like previous novels by the same author, the work is an honest articulation of African philosophy in its temporality and space, untrammelled by narrow prescriptions of western feminist discourse. The satire in the text is mainly directed at modern African leaders who have detracted from Achebe's focus :the need to restore the dignity of the African including women. Achebe's elevation of Beatrice and other female characters, if it can be described as such, is thus not necessarily motivated by a desire to appease his erstwhile feminist critics. I do not believe writers have a sworn obligation to please critics. Indeed the text does not assume a monolithic view of African women confronting a stubborn patriarchal system. Rather, Achebe has moved with the times to depict African women's attempts at visibility and self recognition in a male dominated society. Fonchingong (2012:11) describes Beatrice as "the fulcrum of social change right in the nucleus of socio-political schema." This view is supported by Umalo Ojinmah (

cited in Uzoечи Nwagbara, 2010:103), who notes: “Achebe believes that the time is now for the new nations of Africa to invoke the female principle.” It must however, be understood that in the text, patriarchal values and norms remain a dominant feature. This explains why Elewa’s representation of female assertion is not confrontational but one of negotiating a female trajectory that claims a legitimate right to participate in the traditions and existential circumstances that inaugurate the new cultural politics of difference.

Representation of men as agents of invisibility

Achebe castigates the male gaze on female characters through Chris and Ikem’s preoccupation with their lovers’ sexuality. Chris admits that “BB is a perfect embodiment of my ideal woman.” (*Anthills of the Savannah*, 63). This remark, though well intentioned, elides other qualities that African women are capable of demonstrating. During the private visit to Abichi, Sam jokingly boasts that African leaders are polygamists. BB’s resistance to the stereotypical remark which relegates women to sex objects, highlights Achebe’s condemnation of male chauvinism. By portraying BB as capable of seeing beyond the fixed stereotypical gaze allotted to African women, Achebe is calling on the African men to adopt a different mindset in the postcolonial era. BB’S elevation to a role that overshadows all male characters in the text, including the President, is an indication of the writer’s intention to carve out spaces for female recognition within the patriarchy. Such a process is fraught with many challenges. This explains why according to Evans 1987: 134 (cited in Uzoечи Nwagbara), women must be active participants in the drama of political and social change.

Significantly, Achebe invokes Beatrice’s memory of her early childhood to reveal the generational differences in the representation of women and to call for change from such subservient and degrading positions. Through this flashback, Beatrice bemoans female

oppression as seen in her mother's submissive character and docility. Her mother could only protest indirectly by naming Beatrice, Nwanyibufe, "a girl is also something." Stuart Hall, in Jonathan Culler (1996: 118) astutely observes that "we define identities by names we give to different ways we are positioned and position ourselves in the narratives of the past." In her reminiscence, Beatrice recalls that her mother was a victim of her father's abuse but never complained. By contrast, Beatrice is the epitome of a new breed of African women who voice out against male oppression. Owusu 1991:468 (cited in Nwagbara) aptly notes that Beatrice is "the blood, mud and voice of Achebe's new women." She scoffs at people who take women for granted. In addition, she attacks those who support the cultural belief that every woman needs a man to be complete, and boldly declares that she has always been on her own, determined to put her career first.' (.88). Her ambition and strength of character emphasizes the need for African women to play a more active role in the new political dispensation in Africa. Beatrice remarks that 'it is not enough that women should be the court of last resort.' (.92). This statement should be analysed within the context of cultural change in gender relations. Her complaint to Chris about his lack of concern over his future wife's security during the party at Abichi, can be interpreted as an acknowledgement of the need for men and women to derive comfort around each other. Her declaration: "I want a man who cares enough for me", aptly endorses this view (113). In the same vein, Ikem observes that :

There is no universal conglomerate of oppressed women. Free people may be alike everywhere in their freedom but the oppressed inhabit each their own peculiar hell. (*Anthills of the Savannah*, 99)

The realization of the African woman's condition by both Beatrice and Ikem demonstrates the need for the women to embrace agency in order to discover new forms of making themselves

visible. Beatrice's prioritization of her career prospects over love affairs attests to her articulation of the liberatory stance that sets African women apart from those of the colonial era. It is a position that allows them to blaze a trail towards individual visibility.

A significant aspect of female cultural difference is brought out through the legend of Idemili, which reveals that power originally resided in women. This rendition mirrors that of Armah Ayi Kwei, who also draws upon African legend in his epic text, *Two Thousand Seasons*, to affirm the primordial power of women in the precolonial era. The importance of women in traditional African society is succinctly articulated by Amadiume (1987) in a chapter entitled 'The Goddess Idemili', in which she explains her divine role as head in the Nnobi religious hierarchy. Amadiume observes that:

Most of the activities which marked the traditional calendar were ritual ceremonies and festivals of thanksgiving to the goddess Idemili. The impression is of a society and culture completely coloured by the veneration of this goddess rather than the ancestors (1987:101).

Not surprisingly, in *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe invokes the myth of creation to raise the status of a woman to a Deity. In the legend women are elevated as descendants of the daughter of the Almighty. By linking the transcendental role of women to African culture, Achebe seeks to convince the reader that African women have always occupied a respectable position in African society. Amadiume attests to this in her elaborate account of how African women in precolonial times were actually more militant than their male counterparts, up until the colonial system of administration suppressed them by banning their strong *Woman's Council* in 1977 (Amadiume, 152-153). However what baffles me is that the symbolic role assigned to female characters in *Anthills of the Savannah* ironically relegates them to the periphery. I

contend that today female representation in the spiritual realm, while it remains relevant, is not sufficient to address African women's project of deconstructing male patriarchal hegemony.

I argue that except for Beatrice, the other women at the palatial party in Abichi are visible only when they appear to be flirting with men, especially His Excellency. Beatrice's visibility occludes that of the American female visitors such as Lou, whose presence seems to serve the traditional ornamental purpose, to grace His Excellency's image in the West. Sam's lecherous disposition is exposed through Beatrice:

The Big Snake, the royal python of a gigantic erection began to stir in the shrubbery as we danced together And I took him by the hand and led him to the balcony railings. (*Anthills of the Savannah*, 81)

Achebe deliberately uses phallic imagery to satirise male sexual desire taking advantage of political power, which has transferred to the individual. Beatrice's taking of the initiative in the sexual encounter with Sam accords her a momentary opportunity to reverse gender roles in a manner that is akin to self empowerment.

Representation of female visibility and resistance

One significant feature of *Anthills of the Savannah* is the paucity of female characters. This aspect is further complicated by the peripheral roles they play in the mainstream discourse of the novel, compared with their male counterparts. Although Achebe devotes whole chapters to Beatrice, where she articulates her personal views regarding Sam's government from a gender perspective, it seems the major issues remain the preserve of men. Also significant is the fact that the few occasions men talk about women are devoted to matters of sexuality. It would seem that in the novel women are not taken seriously.

Gender relations in the text are brought out mostly through memory or flashback. Beatrice's father's oppression of her mother emerges through flashback, giving the impression that passive characters are not part of the narrative discourse. By virtue of their nonexistence, Beatrice's parents remain invisible to the issues under the author's spotlight. In short, they are outside Achebe's scheme of characterization. Although the chapter devoted to Beatrice's ruminations over her illtreatment by His Excellency, manages to bring out her assertiveness and desire for self recognition, it does not have enough impact to shake the patriarchal edifice. Similarly, the chapter entitled "Daughters", where Achebe uses legend to capture the mystery behind Creation and gender, appears to be an attempt to avoid direct confrontation with patriarchy that Sam's government represents by appealing to the power of African deities. In the legend the preeminence of women in precolonial times is brought to the fore. This historicization of gender inequalities is probably intended to invoke sympathies for the marginalized African women. At the same time it calls for a revisioning of Afrocentricism, by reminding the reader that at some point in their history African women either lost their cultural position or have always occupied a nominal status. In the legend Achebe alludes to the idea that African women had more power and vision than their male counterparts:

His first visit is no more than to inform the Daughter of the Almighty of his ambition. He is accompanied by his daughter or, if he has only sons, by the daughter of a kinsman, but a daughter it must be. (*Anthills of the Savannah*, 103)

My reading of this cultural practice is that women's voices were louder than those of men in the past. While the legend manages to remind the African women of their lost power deriving from their cultural status links with the Divine authority, it is difficult for their contemporary African woman to appropriate this as an effective strategic agency to engage male oppression. The politics of female difference is further complicated by the realization that the contemporary

African woman cannot hope to fully rely on this strategy in retrospect, given that colonialism rendered the African traditions insignificant. In the novel Achebe seems to allude to the challenges that are predicated on imperialism's complicit role in silencing African women, notably through the deliberate erasure of past traditions in modern socializing agencies.

Beatrice Nwanyibuife did not know these traditions and legends of her people because they played but little part in her upbringing. She was born as we have seen into a world apart; was baptized and sent to schools which made much about the English and the Jews and the Hindu and practically everybody else but hardly put in a word for her forebears and the divinities with whom they had evolved. So she came to barely knowing who she was. (*Anthills of the Savannah*, 105)

Clearly then, it would appear that Beatrice's contemporary world requires a new strategy for engaging the entrenched patriarchal system, whose values had been tacitly legitimized by the colonial powers. Such a view can be corroborated by noting that in *Anthills of the Savannah*, Sam and his government, comprising male office bearers, by their own admission, are products of western tradition. Their sensibilities about African women have detracted from those of their forebears in the precolonial era. However, while these observations might be useful pointers to female visibility, there is need to avoid what Deborah E Mcdowell (cited in Eagleton 1991: 234), terms "... the risk of plunging their work into cliché and triviality." This is because whatever commonalities there are, they are manifested differently. Echoing womanist views by writers such as Toni Morrison, Cornel West has this to say:

The new cultural politics of difference can thrive only if there are communities, groups, organizations, institutions, subcultures and networks of people of color who cultivate critical sensibilities and personal

accountability - without inhibiting individual expressions , curiosities, and idiosyncrasies. (West,1990: 108)

Arguing from a postmodernist feminist perspective, Nancy Fraser and Linda J. Nicholson advocate for “plural and complexly constructed conceptions of social identity, treating gender as one relevant strand among others, attending also to class, race , ethnicity, age and sexual orientation.” (Eagleton,1991 :270).

In view of these theoretical considerations, it is clear that even though Beatrice and Elewa might articulate their conditions of womanhood from a similar cultural perspective, their inner sensibilities are different. Because of her low level of literacy and class as a maid, Elewa ‘s major complaints are restricted to matters of sexuality and the domestic space that defines her operations. This restriction is particularly evident in her pidgin language. Yet, she is able to assert herself in a manner that demonstrates her individual response to male chauvinism.

You explain what? I beg you, no make me vex ... Imagine! Hmm! But woman done chop sand for dis world – o ... Imagine! But na we de causam; na we own fault. If I no kuku bring my stupid nyarsh come dump for your bedroom you for de kick me about like I be football? I no blame you. At all! (*Anthills of the Savannah*, 34)

She takes great exception to Ikem’s abusive behavior. Her comment about the way women are abused by men cannot be simply ascribed to generalizations about what she has heard from other women regarding gender inequalities. What really comes out from her heart are issues surrounding her sexuality. But in her conscripted space as a woman , she plays her role very well, as a lover to Ikem and faithful, if not friend to Beatrice. Though she can be regarded as a woman who would have benefited more from the

aborted marriage to Ikem than Beatrice would have to Chris, she is assigned the privilege of giving birth to Ikem's daughter, and presiding over her naming by Beatrice. This ritual, happening after Ikem's death, can be seen as Achebe's attempt to elevate her to prominence. African societies greatly value motherhood, and ironically, by giving this privilege to Elewa, Achebe manages to render her even more visible than Beatrice in a world where men are privileged by culture. It can thus be said that the two women have been effectively drawn to mirror the position of women in history and to project their roles in the future. However, one must guard against a facile conclusion that Achebe's characterization of the two women provides a sufficient basis for explaining cultural differences in female visibility. The deaths of the two men at the end of the novel still leaves the reader with the question whether Achebe has been tempted, in his narrative, to sacrifice ideals of Afrocentric womanism to the whims of western feminist writers and critics, who advocate for confrontational radical approaches to the extent of envisaging a world without men. It would be unfortunate for anyone examining female representation among African women to reason from this skewed perspective.

Movement and stasis in female representation

A significant feature in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* is the presence of structural gaps with respect to the depiction of female characters in the novel. As alluded to earlier in this critique, the greater part of the first chapters are conspicuous by either the muted silence or omission of female characters altogether. Women play a shadowy role in the cabinet meetings presided over by His Excellency. In addition, they have also been effectively excluded from topical issues surrounding the people of Abazon. This gives the impression that these were not matters for women, as if women have nothing to do with survival and moral values that shape

the African people's life world. Nwagbara (2009:134) calls for African women to "overturn the public private dichotomy." He suggests that women must strive to occupy the public space which is an arena for democracy and good governance. It is within this space that women, who are the bulk of the subaltern, in the Spivakean parlance, articulate their own scripts which envision alternative ways of ordering political, public and private life.' (Tripp 2000:27), cited in Uzoечи Nwagbara.

I want to concur that in many respects women in the novel are restricted from participation in the more discursive spatial engagements that hold the potential to transform their degraded position.

Another notable observation in the structuring of the novel is the exclusion of women from the journey along the great north road. Significantly, it is Braimoh and Emmanuel who play a prominent role in the attempted escape to the north. While Beatrice is initially actively involved in alerting the two men of the danger awaiting them from state agents, and is the chief architect in the scheme to hide Chris from the police, the actual task of escorting Chris on the journey is left to Braimoh and Emmanuel. Beatrice is relegated to the traditional role of providing refuge, care and comfort to Chris. It appears that Achebe's privileging of the erstwhile male characters for the expected risks on the journey seems to have been designed with the intention of protecting the female characters and to avoid female visibility at various check points. One is hard pressed to interpret this strategy as also motivated by the stereotypical views that associate women with lack of self control, while men are perceived as capable of carrying out risks.

That the novel is structured in a masculine framework is also evident in a plot, whose trajectory renders women immobile, technically and physically. A close reading of the novel reveals that despite being the most educated and most level-headed person in Sam's government, Beatrice remains a secretary. Whatever the reason, Achebe's characterization here glosses over modern trends in female participation in the public arena. To a large extent the text visibly resonates with masculine ideals but this does not necessarily mean that their position remains uncontested. It would seem that Owoyema overlooks the important roles assigned to women when he remarks:

the men are the actual agonists, directly involved in the drama, staking their lives on their ideological convictions. Their actions directly determine and influence the direction of events' (2005:11).

Paradoxically, Beatrice's presence in the government is reduced to being subjected to the male gaze, as is later proved by Sam when he invites her for his palatial retreat. However, it is also necessary to give some credit to Beatrice. As she grapples with the unfamiliar male-dominated environment she displays immense versatility to render herself visible. In her we find a character who defies convention from both an intellectual and professional perspective. Her elevation beyond the traditional female roles of lover and motherhood attests to the uniqueness and diversified array of African women's sensibilities.

There is an extent to which Achebe uses Beatrice to break new ground, to tap into the diverse and transcendental potential of African women. On the other hand, through the portrayal of Elewa, Achebe has moulded a character who protests against invisibility imposed upon illiterate women. Yet, despite not having acquired an Honours degree in

English, she is capable of a vision that illuminates the dynamic nature of African women's individual responses to their lived experiences, with respect to male oppression.

When Elewa protests against being driven back home in a taxi at night, she speaks on behalf of many other African women in her situation who are in relationships that serve the interests of the modern African man taking full advantage of their economic deficiencies. But Achebe does not necessarily imply that Elewa typifies all African maids in a relationship. Through Beatrice's observations of her maid's strengths and weakness it can be suggested that her condition and how she responds to it is only one of the multiple layers of female representation within her class.

Beyond Nwayibuife: Mapping the future role of the African woman in the post independence era.

A useful way of reading *Anthills of the Savannah* is to consider it as a reflection of the image of the African woman in the future, not necessarily as a work the author wrote expressly to establish his feminist credentials as well as his solidarity with the masses', as Owomoyela (2005) would have us believe. In the politics of female cultural difference it is important to take a more profound examination of gender relations envisaged by the author. In this respect Beatrice is the starting point, given the symbolic meaning of her name Nwayibuife, which is an affirmation of her link with past traditions that need transformation and the future, which promises greater participation and visibility for women. I want to argue that Achebe's portrayal of Beatrice and other female characters was motivated by a desire to tickle the contemporary African woman's consciousness into reflecting upon her future role as more flexible and more

male compatible than before. In this respect, I feel that Beatrice's insights must also be seriously understood in light of Ikem's own transformation. Through the frank discussions with Beatrice in which Ikem acknowledges her wise counsel, Achebe has moulded the latter as a model of rational men concerned about the silenced disadvantaged masses as well as women. While the observation by Uzoечи Nwagbara that the disadvantaged members of the society and women share a common victimhood of oppression is relevant, it can be misleading in its erasure of veneers of difference that are critical to our analysis of female representations in African politics.

There is a rectilinear nexus between oppression of the masses in the postcolonial society and marginalization and denigration of women in our gendered space: the former is the macrocosm of the other. And to subvert this trend, identity consciousness is essential amongst the womenfolk.(2009:10)

I believe that Achebe has constructed a woman who is a representation of the need for women not only to reconstitute themselves but also to have a keen interest in the plight of the common man by interrogating male dominated public discourse that has been instrumental in making both groups of the disadvantaged invisible.

According to Cornel West "women must present themselves to themselves and others as complex human beings, and thereby contest the bombardment of negative, degrading stereotypes" (1990:102). In the text Beatrice is a far more complex character than her mother, who could only respond to her husband's frequent beatings indirectly by naming her daughter, Nwayibuife. Because Beatrice's mother lacked agency, she allowed herself to be a silent victim. This typifies what Foucault in his essay '*Discipline and Punish*' refers to as

disciplining the female body. I believe that African women must resist attempts by men to discipline their bodies and roles in acquiescence to tradition and male desirability.

Through Beatrice, her mother and Ikem's daughter Ama, Achebe charts a way forward for female difference at a cultural and generational level. Beatrice's vision of a liberated African woman is foreshadowed through Amaechina, who can actually be regarded as an extension of Beatrice. While Beatrice's mother belongs to a passing era that only knew submission to the oppressive patriarchal authority, Beatrice becomes the conduit through which African women must step into the future, able to know and name themselves. Yet Beatrice's transcendental role is somewhat compromised by the fact that she seems to be a lone figure in the struggle. From a womanist perspective, sisterhood is crucial if the patriarchal edifice is to be demolished. While her counsel and consciousness about Sam's oppressive government is greatly appreciated it risks being dissipated into insignificance due to lack of support. This is unlike Ikem's University revolutionary address on views of the struggle. During the meeting Ikem not only gets a standing ovation from the students and the Abazon delegation but also manages to send shock waves of change to Sam's dictatorial government. His message of solidarity and resistance is unanimously received.

There was a huge applause not only from the tables where the Abazon people sat but from other tables as well. (*Anthills of the Savannah*,127)

In the text Ekewa provides the possibility of sisterhood in the struggle against invisibility of women and social injustice. However, because of their different education and social status, they seem to share a precarious fractured vision of their plight as victims. It is actually during the naming ceremony that Achebe provides them with a formal platform

to speak with one voice with other female characters, and in the process, lends an optimistic vision to the condition of women in the post independence era.

Despite the apparent shortcomings in representation, both Beatrice and Elewa evince individual sensibilities about African women which cannot be ignored. Both address the topical concerns that the contemporary African man must consider and accommodate in the spirit of gender conflict resolution. But while Elewa's concern about the plight of the African woman in general is a useful consciousness raising aspect, it is not pursued as an agenda on a sustained scale. In her statement "But women done suffer for this world", one gets the impression that she is merely echoing the common cliché for all women, instead of focusing specifically on the African woman's unique experiences. Elewa does not provide the reader with that window through which the African woman must see the future. Compared with Aisatou and Ramatoulaye in Mariama Ba's *So Long A Letter*, which depicts two female friends solidly behind each other in sisterhood, Elewa's voice of protest does not quite touch the core of African women's heartstrings. To her credit, however, her manner of standing up to the rights of women is not confrontational. In fact, it is expressed in almost the same tenor with Beatrice's intellectual debate with Ikem and Chris over the rights of women. The difference however, between Beatrice's academic protestations to Chris and Ikem, and Elewa's is that Beatrice's are directed at transforming the male mindset while those of Elewa, though rational, are directed at domestic social relations.

Significantly, the two women provide a blueprint for reading through the divergent responses of African women to their different situations as well as possibilities for intersection of sensibilities. Seen from this perspective, other female characters' experiences serve as different

strands that make up the intricate fabric of female representation. However, one minor challenge is that the women's individual actions and visions only intersect at a ceremonial level. It is at the end of the novel that we find Beatrice empathizing with Elewa during her sad moments after the abduction and subsequent coldblooded murder of Ikem by Sam's security agents. Beatrice assumes a supportive role, calming her down and assuring her that she still holds the future in her hands.

You no fit carry on like this at all. If you no want s ave yourself then make you save the pickin inside your belle. The only thing we fit do now is to be strong so that when the fight come we fight am proper. Wipe your eye. No worry. (*Anthills of the Savannah*, 175)

It is essential to note that in this touching show of empathy for Elewa, Beatrice reverts to the common woman's language, pidgin English, signifying the importance of sisterly solidarity as one of the motors for the African woman's visibility and strength in the future. Achebe seems to suggest that one of the unique cultural features of African women is their flexibility to collapse class differences and rally behind each other in times of trouble. As a representation of the African woman in the post independence era, Beatrice speaks for the generality of all those who bear the brunt of male oppression that has reared its ugly head through Sam's dictatorial government.

Yet the reason why some critics see a breakthrough in Beatrice, rather than Elewa, is precisely because the former has dared to confront the representations of oppression at a higher political and philosophical level. In fact, she is assigned multiple roles that accords well with the transformative, unifying and redemptive functions encapsulated in the womanist philosophy. This view is strongly highlighted by Patricia Allen (in Holger Ehling 1991:70).

Beatrice serves primarily as a guide and teacher of men. She urges Chris to mend his relationship with Ikem and alerts him to the coming danger from Sam, the President. She educates Ikem, poet and dissident editor of the National Gazette to see the need for including women in the new roles in his utopian political order.

Echoing similar sentiments, Fonchingong (2006:45) observes that “Beatrice is the fulcrum of social change right in the nucleus of sociopolitical scheme.” He goes on to argue that the portrayal of Beatrice represents a woman shouldering the responsibility of changing the course of female emancipation.

One would however argue that in the contemporary African world of politics, engaging the public functionaries informally is still not enough, though it is a good starting point. Paul Freire (1984:49) perceptively argues that:

In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform.

Freire’s philosophy thus attests to the need for a more outward looking discursive engagement. It is disappointing that in *Anthills of the Savannah* it is only Beatrice who makes an attempt at transformation in the public sphere. The rest of the women are still confined to protestations confined to the private space.

Ebun Modupe Kolawole (1997) notes that “Beatrice’s new coalition” does not embrace a large group of women but a few individuals – Elewa, her mother, Adama and Agatha. Modupe’s observation on this aspect, while plausible, is rather simplistic, for upon careful observation it is clear that the last three are not fully developed characters to constitute a coalition. If by coalition we mean a people agreeing to work together to resolve a common problem, then,

talking of a coalition in *Anthills of the Savannah* is stretching the issue too far. I argue that if Achebe had been serious about a coalition he would not have constructed such flat characters. For instance, Beatrice's mother is only mentioned through her daughter's reminiscences of her childhood; Agatha is only a religious fanatic and a mere house-girl who rarely shares any mutual conversation with her boss, while Adama, coming as she does at the end of the novel, is just a tragic victim of Sam's disgruntled military renegades. Clearly, except for a few instances where they feature making some feeble voices, apart from Beatrice and Elewa, the rest of the women seem to be far removed from the discourse of female agency to constitute a force to reckon with. Ironically, in his portrayal of these minor characters, Achebe seems to have regressed to the pattern he adopted in his earlier novels such as *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* and *A Man of the People*.

The issue of African women's transcendental role in the reconfiguration of African culture is played out through Beatrice and Ikem's debate on female representation. What emerges during their discussion is a mutual understanding on the need to deconstruct male stereotypical views of women. Reiterating her previous attack on Ikem as a man who had "no role for women in his political thinking", Beatrice suggests that African men's attitudes must change and accommodate female interests.

But the way I see it is that giving women today the same role which traditional society gave them, of intervening only when everything else has failed is not enough. (*Anthills of the Savannah*, 91)

The above statement is a clear indictment of contemporary African men, not only those who have internalized western notions of gender relations but also those who still blindly and selfishly subscribe to oppression of women. Yet what also emerges from Beatrice's assertions

is the need to avoid tabling female issues as a single package. The novel conflates issues of female oppression with those of class, corruption and justice on a broader sphere. In a sense, Achebe suggests that if African women participate in these topical issues too they will help to mould a culturally richer and freer society. Thus from the text it would appear that Achebe's vision of the way forward for the African women is a frank mutual exchange of ideas with men.

In the new political dispensation the battle for female recognition and representation must also be fought at an intellectual level. Thus Ikem's acknowledgement that Beatrice taught her something is an indication that African women can transcend received notions of their cultural environments. I wish to reiterate that African women's condition requires different strategic agencies than the singular exclusionary and often confrontational ones touted by western women. In her astute analysis of Achebe's earlier novels, Andrea Power (2008) suggests that they reveal blind spots when it comes to important gender issues. To the extent that Achebe addresses the topical issues, he has opened an avenue for African women to move beyond platitudes of resistance and identity. Instead there is dire need for male-female collaboration in an atmosphere of mutual trust and understanding.

One can also argue that besides the progressive image of women that Beatrice stands for, her characterization seems to have blazed a trail towards proffering an answer to Andrea Powell's call for women's issues to "make their way into public discourse." This is because although the public image depicted of Beatrice is peripheral in this text, it breaks new ground for female participation in a unique way. Admittedly she is invisible from the inner circle of power politics that deliberate on the fate of the people of Kangan. Yet, paradoxically, the men in Sam's government apart from Ikem and Chris are only visible physically, given that

they are mere stooges whose fear of Sam is far worse and comical than anyone would imagine. It is from this perspective that I find the following assertion by Owoyeme (2005:11 somewhat disturbing:

The men are the actual agonists directly involved in the drama, staking their lives on their ideological convictions. Their actions directly determine and influence the direction of events. Beatrice's role is exactly as Sam's summons that she attend Abichi reception indicates : she is a token.

As is clear from the text, Sam is the only man who is in charge, not only as head of government but of all ministries. For instance he even has the power to deny them the decision to resign from their cabinet posts.

On the other hand, it would be simplistic to consider Beatrice's role as only that of Sam's girlfriend. The text provides sufficient evidence to prove that she does more than that. Her being Chris' girlfriend only makes her human; at no point in the novel does this role preclude her more illustrious position as the epitome of female visibility, as she embraces the more altruistic socio cultural roles that encroach into the patriarchal domain.

In a sense, *Anthills of the Savannah* challenges the reader to reflect seriously on the need to enlist women in power politics in order to erase the problem of corruption and dictatorship which men condone out of fear and the selfish desire to keep their posts. This presupposes that the African women must emerge from their culture of silence to meaningfully take agency beyond gender discursive practices. Not only is such a stance liberatory from a black woman's perspective but also an indication of their participation in the public space. Delores Williams, in '*Womanism, Afrocentrism and the Reconstruction of Black*

Womanhood,’ asserts that the Black womanists are like freedom fighters {who} value a liberational ethic, which is also Afro-centric.

Deconstructing African women’s class differences: towards shared sensibilities and empowerment

A notable feature of the post independence era has been a fracturing of female sensibilities along class and sometimes ethnic fault-lines. In the novel class differences are not only played out overtly through the depiction of the man’s world but also, rather saliently, within the woman’s. Uzoечи Nwagbara bemoans the existence of Manichean power relations which find “testimony in fierce, unabated power play in gendered social space” (2009:3). Given the colonial conditions from which Africans have emerged, it is not uncommon for those who have attained higher educational levels and jobs to look down upon those less fortunate than them. While Achebe recognizes these differences in this text as historical contingents, he also presents a positive view of the women’s individual responses to their plight. The women in *Anthills of the Savannah* may be different but their responses to men are informed by a desire to articulate a new cultural aesthetic that veers off the mainstream feminist struggle paddled by their western sisters, in a manner that inaugurates an African woman as an active participant. It is therefore prudent, I would argue, to consider the presentation of women here, not from the narrow lens of bereaved lovers and their consolers but from the broader sociopolitical perspective that charts the way forward for female recognition, naming and assertiveness in the new dispensation.

Beginning with Beatrice and Elewa, each woman in the text can be categorized as representing a loosely connected social stratum. Even the seemingly invisible women such as Aina, Agatha, Elewa’s mother and Adamma have special roles to play in the reconstruction of female roles.

Beatrice, by virtue of her education, and government post as Secretary in Sam's government enjoys a lofty status that affords her the privilege of staying in a flat, in addition to being able to employ Elewa as a maid. As a woman who has earned herself the post without male patronage, she is portrayed as an epitome of the progressive African woman. Significantly, this role contributes to her visibility beyond the expectations of her male counterparts such as Major Ossai. Ironically, the same role has made her feel superior to Agatha. During the tense moments before the official news of Ikem's death is broken to both Elewa and Beatrice, the latter rebukes Agatha for not helping Elewa in the preparation of breakfast. We read that Agatha has been reluctant to serve Elewa on the grounds that "she is no better than a servant herself" (*Anthills of the Savannah*, 133). This incident is a microcosm of how class differences, which are a colonial legacy, can divide and perpetuate petty prejudices that are likely to undermine group resolve and solidarity against patriarchy.

Agatha is a representation of lower class women who have limited agency to contest or protest against verbal abuse even when it is inflicted by fellow African women. The internal contradictions affecting African women in their quest for self recognition is paradoxically played out when Beatrice initially condemns Agatha for her apparent hypocritical adherence to Christian conduct without regard to its practical ethics. Ironically, when she comes to her senses, Beatrice in her moments of introspection, remorsefully realizes the folly, unfairness and immorality of her assessment of the poor girl.

She had never belittled the problem, or consciously looked down on anyone because she was a servant, so help her God. For she was sensitive and intelligent enough to understand, and her literary education could not but have sharpened her perception of the evidence before her eyes... (*Anthills of the Savannah*, 183).

Through this philosophical analysis of Beatrice, Achebe laments the dilemma of African elites who often get carried away in championing the rights of African women while failing to enlist their less fortunate fellow women in a united effort to make them visible as well. By allowing Beatrice to see through her shortcomings, the writer seems to suggest that African women must present themselves as flexible to constantly evaluate their sensibilities by becoming more accommodative, not individualistic. Hudson-Weems cites “flexible role player” as one of the eighteen descriptors necessary for African women in their quest for self recognition and liberation. I submit that Achebe’s intention here is not to cast African female elites in bad light but to depict Beatrice as a reflective thinker, as an epitome of the new brand of African women who hold the power to transform African women’s sensibilities beyond individual and class interests.

This perception is poignantly brought out in the authorial voice:

So how could a girl like Beatrice , intelligent, compassionate , knowing that fact of our situation look down on another less lucky and see more to it than just that : blind luck? (*Anthills of the Savannah*, 183)

In this respect Achebe is probably warning the educated African woman against what Fanon (cited in Leornado and Porter, 2010) condemns as a form of educative psychic violence, which makes the colonized stay in their place and participate in a complex process of consent where they enact violence against each other. Within the framework of liberatory discourse from patriarchy, it would be prudent to endorse Fanon’s paradigm, which in essence calls for a common struggle, regardless of class, generational or ethnic differences.

In what appears to be a major shift of focus from the one expressed in his earlier novels, *Anthills of the Savannah* advances a more gender sensitive vision that promotes shared sensibilities across class, ethnic, generational and religious differences. Achebe thus presents Elewa, her mother and Aina to raise pertinent issues that the contemporary African woman must embrace and execute. If we agree that erasure of class and cultural differences among African women and the society at large is not a prerequisite at the moment, we would find it easier to accept that every woman can play her role in her own capacity. Here I find Mohanty's (cited in Ame-Odindi Aba 2010:2) observation an important aspect of the analysis on the politics of female cultural difference:

....even within the third world, the woman's life is after all heterogenous; therefore the feminist analysis should not dwell on gender to the exclusion of society, class and ethnic details.

In the text, Beatrice is in a better position to occupy the dual roles of engaging Sam's dictatorial and predominantly male cabinet in the public domain and enlisting the shared participation of the less privileged women, whose more inscribed social positions preclude their participation at any other level. It is precisely for this reason that Elewa is assigned a voice of protest that transcends her social status:

It was perhaps the strong spiritual light of that emergent consciousness that gave Elewa, carrying as it turned out a living speck of him, with her, this new luminosity she seemed to radiate which was not merely a reflection of common grief.... But a touch, distinct, almost godlike, able to transform a half literate, albeit good natured and very attractive girl into an object of veneration. (*Anthills of the Savannah*, 184)

Indeed the qualities that are attributed to Elewa raise her almost to the same level of consciousness and dignity as Beatrice. I argue that the glorification and near deification of Elewa serves the purpose of assuring the readership that there is a standard of humanity to be tapped within the African woman, even in her apparent simplicity.

Achebe thus makes a point that African women can benefit from each other through shared experiences. Elewa's luminosity is said to have impinged on despised Agatha in a manner that forces Beatrice to withdraw her earlier resentful attitude to her. Hence within the despised low class, African women like Agatha, lies a latent consciousness that needs to be retrieved and acknowledged. In fact Achebe provides us with different images of African women, women imbued with redemptive and transcendent qualities in their own unique ways:

In her lot Agatha by her adamant refusal to be placated may be rendering a service to the cause more valuable than Elewa's acceptance, valuable for keeping the memory oppression intact, constantly burnished and ready. (*Anthills of the Savannah*,185)

Through this authorial voice Achebe enlists Agatha's contribution in the cultural project of spearheading and transforming the African woman's position. What Achebe has done in this novel is to portray African women discovering each others' potential roles in the common pursuit of deconstructing myths about patriarchal dominance, even as they were paddled and consolidated during the colonial era. African women are therefore seen as establishing solidarity across class, each making significant contributions towards the liberation of African women, not in the sense touted by their white sisters, but guided by the African womanist philosophy that acknowledges the role of men in the emancipatory process. Though Achebe has allowed some of these lesser female characters to boldly encroach the male dominated

public sphere, claiming recognition and participation in a manner that redeems the image of the African woman, a closer examination of their portrayal will reveal some contradictions. Firstly, it is disappointing to note that the space allocated to Agatha and to some extent Elewa, is not commensurate with the glowing description accorded her. Indeed there is good reason to think like this, considering that readers normally judge a character's worth by the space allotted to them. Secondly, at the end of the novel Achebe seems to have been at pains to make up for the invisibility of the female characters by eliminating key male characters. I wish to argue that apart from the fact that the ending appears to be endorsing the western radical feminist perspective, it detracts from the Africana - womanist position that calls for sisterly solidarity bolstered by male companionship. By eliminating effective male companionship, the writer seems to have gone too far in his reconstruction of the African woman.

Despite these shortcomings, the writer still deserves credit for advancing the view that African women must transcend petty class vanities that detract from the mainstream goal of challenging patriarchal hegemony. In the novel it is essential to observe that the denial of voice to some female characters is a reflection of vestiges of invisibility that still need to be removed. Such indicators are also reflective of the dictatorial regime that the fictitious Kangan government represents. Sam's oppressive machinery, in which all the cabinet ministers have been emasculated, has spread its tentacles to the informal and domestic arena where women who are underrated become the worst victims. As the most economically vulnerable, Elewa's mother, Braimoh's wife and Adamma are invisible. Elewa's mother lives in the slums of Bassa, where she ekes out a living as a petty trader. Such a casting of the female characters paradoxically endorses the western stereotypical characterization of African women.

It is crucial however, to note that these characters become more visible after the tragic deaths of Ikem, Chris, and the coup that topples Sam's oppressive regime. This development appears to be in sync with Achebe's intention to raise the status of women. Adama, the girl for whom Chris sacrifices his life, is initially denied voice to articulate her gratitude and sympathy with the deceased. Though she shows solidarity with the bereaved by attending the funeral, as well as the naming ceremony for Elewa's daughter, she rarely utters a word. According to Isaac Nuokyaa-ire Mwinlaaru (2004:14):

Adama stands for the vulnerable ordinary citizens of Kangan, while the police sergeant is an image of the monstrous power displayed by the military government, an effigy of Sam, as it were.

The same can be said of Aina, who is only described as a native of Abazon. Though she plays an important role when she volunteers to "personally escort the distinguished refugee and hand him over to his in-laws up there for safekeeping" (*Anthills of the Savannah*,195), she remains voiceless.

Thus, in the depiction of lesser female characters we see a slight change from the trend found in the earlier novels, once again highlighting the view that African women occupy different positions with respect to patriarchal hegemony.

It is in the concluding chapters that Achebe reenacts the important role played by women in the domestic sphere. With the naming ceremony providing an occasion for the coalition of women to chart the way forward, albeit in the absence of men, the writer locates the home as a space for female empowerment. Both Aina and Agatha join in a holy seductive dance in a free environment where, according to Egun Modupe, they are seen as participating dynamically and advancing social change. The fact that during the ceremony Elewa's uncle is overshadowed by

Beatrice's usurpation of the traditional male role is a reflection of the liberatory role the writer envisages for the African women in the new cultural dispensation. While Modupe laments the fact that Achebe did not go far enough in this endeavour to enlist the collective consciousness of African women I wish to argue to the contrary. Her assumption is that constructive engagement with or resistance to patriarchy is only effective in the public domain. Yet she overlooks the view that the public space is only the ultimate destination to female liberatory discursive practices that invariably begin with and are often fought within the domestic sphere. In their paper, which castigates western culture for propagating the narrow gendering of space, Muwati and Gambahaya (2012) argue that from a western feminist vantage point, the private space is identified with femininity and therefore with powerlessness and worthlessness. They contend that the private space deserves as much importance as the public. From this Africana -Womanist perspective, they argue that the African woman's performance space transcends the limitations imposed by a narrowly contoured private / public space dichotomy.' I find Muwati and Gambahaya's insightful analysis convincing in the manner it deconstructs the western notions of the kitchen, and by extension, the home as a place of confinement for the female gender:

The discourse which identifies the kitchen as a private and feminine space incapable of meriting value and significance in the lives of African women is wholly alien to Shona culture. It only exists as an expression of Victorian values in which the curtailment of women's mobility is achieved through domestication and confinement to so called feminine and private spaces. (Muwati and Gambahaya 2012:102)

To provide corroborative evidence for their analysis, the above critics refer to the conceptualization of the Kitchen in Shona culture as the nerve centre for all activities and rituals that take place in the home or "musha." They further draw attention to Professor Mararike's

reading of the Shona family setup in his paper ‘ *Rediscovering African Womanhood in the search for sustainable Renaissance: Africana Womanism in Multi disciplinary Approaches* Mararike endorses the deconstructionist view that the home is actually a public relations centre, where all important activities such as negotiations on marriage of daughters, family meetings, rituals for the birth of a child, or wake for the dead are carried out. Significantly, in all these activities, the mother plays a central role. Though there is scope for women’s recognition in Muwati and Mararike’s analysis, I think they exaggerate the nature of upliftment. The concept of kitchen as public space must not be misconstrued as synonymous with the public political space where women demand participation in national affairs, with full rights and responsibilities as men. It is essential then, to note that in *Anthills of the Savannah*, the naming ritual for Elewa’s daughter takes place in the home, presided over by the women. This is an allusion to the need for African women to recover their key roles of nurturing, mothering and taking up agency in a male compatible environment. But mothering should not be the end. To this role there is need to add others directly involving women in central government.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have analysed Achebe’s *Anthills of The Savannah* by looking at the presentation of women. Emphasis has been on articulating their attempts at visibility and self recognition in a male dominated postcolonial political environment. I have insisted that the different ways in which the women articulate their individual sensibilities or respond to patriarchal entanglements is a reflection of their uniqueness. In addition, I have pointed out that in the text Achebe envisions a new way of looking at the politics of female cultural difference, a vision that encapsulates the redemptive and transcendental potential of African women to transform themselves into complementary active participants in contemporary

African politics. My analysis has also deliberately dwelt on the African woman's experiences as seen in the past and the present.

Chapter Two: *Scarlet Song*, by Mariama Ba

Choice, Marriage and Motherhood: towards a deconstruction of racial and cultural prejudices

Following the end of colonialism, works of deconstruction have traversed an almost predictable trajectory of gender inequality. Riding on the success of their western sisters, most African female authors of the postcolonial era have constructed works that roundly condemn patriarchal doctrine for its oppression of women. Without doubt the emphasis on the African women's subjectivity has made great strides in empowering women. But Ba's *Scarlet Song* is informed by fresh insights into the condition of womanhood. While her earlier epistolary novel has endorsed the outcry against the oppression of women, *Scarlet Song* uses a different lens to locate the dynamics of African women's discursive practices within a racial context. Notwithstanding that race is the main motor of difference in *Scarlet Song*, I am also concerned about the manner in which Ba's text subtly deflects from the run of the mill criticism towards a seemingly inaugural cultural discourse that pits women against each other. By bringing in the racial matrix, the writer foregrounds a nascent polemics on female sensibility that is not necessarily mediated through gender.

As in Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, Ba's portraits of female characters in the novel *Scarlet Song*, are informed by the matrices of choice, marriage and motherhood. Within this matrix is inscribed the potential for African women to confront the institutional structures of patriarchy and racism. In presenting racism of a different kind, one where the white woman is the victim, *Scarlet Song* explores women's self definition, identity and assertion through the prism of cultural difference. The text examines ways in which western and African traditions in particular, constitute temporal spaces within which African women define themselves. In its

thrust it locates such spaces as sites for affirming differences among women, including cross-culturally. Biya (cited in Mutunda,2007), believes that Post-structuralism can be used to explore the critical differentiating cleavages, heterogeneity and differences inherent among women (2007:118). In this respect the text points to possibilities for female agency, while drawing attention to divisive elements that seek to maintain the symbolic order. Though several critics have alluded to such differences, they have glossed over many finer discursive areas of divergence, especially those pertaining to specific individuals and subgroups acting in concert. As Biya (1986:118) has asserted:

Women cannot be thought of as a single category, even though there are important unifying struggles in which they engage.

In the novel the choice of marriage partner by the younger women is the litmus test for Ba's experimental paradigm shift towards racial integration. Key figures in this project are Mirelle and Oulematou. Mirelle's marriage to Ousmane exposes the polarization of family relations on the basis of race. While the couple's respective parents are the chief architects to its destruction, it can be argued that other forces are to blame. Both women have resisted patriarchal structures that deny women agency through parental interference. To be noted also are the antithetical circumstances that trigger the young women's resistance. On the one hand Mirelle, after having been charmed by Ousmane, dismisses her father's choice of Pierette, whom they consider suitable by virtue of his class and race. On the other hand, Oulematou defies traditional conventions by running away from the old man betrothed to her as African custom dictated. Significantly, in both cases the young women are inspired by a sense of independence and a conviction that cultural conventions can be broken. It must however, be noted that though both women are invested with the power to resist normative expectations, their grounds are different,

in the same way their strategies for resistance are different. For instance, Mirelle's defiance of the social order is not just directed at her father, but the whole cultural edifice that privileges men at the expense of women, and whites at the expense of blacks. To some extent Mirelle assumes the unfamiliar role of the avant-garde in the new dispensation.

As my argument makes clear, part of the complexity of female difference emanating from the novel is distinguishable by the women's motives for naming themselves, as well as their individual standpoints in male compatibility. Both Yaye Khady and Oulematou's actions amount to a negation of the African womanist philosophy that celebrates sisterhood. Playing the politics of exclusion and destabilization, each erroneously justifies their hatred of the white woman by revisioning African values from a narrow lens. While Oulematou's actions are motivated by self interest, Mirelle's are inspired by genuine love, commitment and sacrifice. Sadly, part of Mirelle's tragedy is her inability to detect signals of infidelity in Ousmane, so glaring in his reticence about his family background and his uncompromising demands, compared with Mirelle's openness and genuine show affection. At the height of their love, during her bitter altercation with her father, she declares:

I'm in love, do you understand! I love a black man, a man black as coal. Black, Black! I love this man and I won't give him up simply because he is black.
(*Scarlet Song*,29)

Mirelle's sincerity is contrasted with Oulematou's treachery. Throughout the text Oulematou exhibits a demonic desire to spite the white woman. In her deployment of seductive weaponry that eventually paralyses Ousmane, she capitalizes on the African man's inability to resist the female gaze. By flaunting her sexuality provocatively she leads him into a false sense of

rediscovering the contours of her body, which he re-envisioned as the symbol of the African motherland to which he must return.

At this point in my analysis it is pertinent to compare the circumstances within which the two women charm their lover. Mirelle's and Ousmane's love develops naturally; it grows within their inner sensibilities, not the external world and physical features that Oulematou supposedly symbolizes. Ba seems to suggest that this is the ideal love, one that blossoms out of the human sensual spirit, as revealed by Ousmane's interior monologue:

This was his treasure, his secret, which he was able to bring to life at will. To him the white girl, with her aristocratic name, was his princess. (*Scarlet Song*,16)

The arrival of Mirelle back to Senegal as a daughter-in-law marks a turning point in her love life. The text presents Yaye Khady as a resentful woman who does not even make a pretence of her cold attitude to Mirelle, a gesture that makes a mockery of the latter's affectionate warmth. This first encounter between the two women portends a doomed marriage. At the Guiye homestead Mirelle learns to put up with her mother-in-law's taunts, in addition to the gossip of the Usine Niari Talli community. This is in contrast with Yaye Khady, who regards Mirelle as a shatterer of her dreams.

And I who dreamt of a daughter in law who would live here and relieve me of the domestic work by taking over the management of the house, and now I am faced with a woman who's to take away my son from me. I shall die on my feet, in the kitchen. (*Scarlet Song*,66)

Declaring herself as the queen in her own house, Yaye Khady embodies the power relations that come into play on a domestic level. However, to read Yaye Khady's unwelcoming behavior as characteristic of all African mothers would be to miss Ba's point. In fact, as illustrated in her

first novel, *So Long A Letter*, where she presents Ramatoulaye as a mother-in-law sympathetic to other women's plight, in *Scarlet Song* Ba suggests that not all African women are victims of patriarchal oppression. By focusing on women oppressing each other, the author reveals that the diversity of African women's experiences must be examined within specific situations in order to explore the "creative responses to the precise circumstances of our present moment" (West 1990:93). It is within such situations that African women's character traits emanating from their individual perceptions can be analysed. I strongly feel that Yaye Khady's resentment of the white daughter-in-law does not emerge from the cultural code of Africana-womanism. Hers is a personal revulsion against whites, partially arising from her upbringing under colonial conditions. I have a feeling that she would have exhibited the same reaction if her own daughter Soukeyna had married a white man. During the altercation over Mirelle's eligibility as a daughter in law, Gibril Guiye taunts her by reminding her that she was chosen for him by her father.

As proof that mixed marriages were becoming a common feature among the younger generation, Ba presents parallel couples in Lamine and Pierrete, Ali and Rosali. Not only are these couples the antithesis of Mirelle's and Ousmane's failed marriage but they highlight the idyllic mixed marriage the writer envisages. Ba has used these couples to present a new level of the womanist vision, which she seems to share with Chikwenye (1985:7), who believes in the integration of men and women even as she condemns the dehumanization resulting from racism. Hence, Ba suggests that without external interference such marriages can last. This is not to say that all marriages are immune from interference. What is implied is that couples' experiences and coping strategies to external challenges are different, that all depends on mutual trust. This view is echoed by Mutunda (2007), who observes that Ba does not condemn mixed marriages since she

provides examples to show that such a union could work. In the text, Lamine is said to be devoted to his French wife Pierrette.

With respect to Mirelle and Ousmane, I want to argue that the pressures brought to bear on both during their romance are equally difficult, yet they overcome and consummate their relationship, for some time. Ada Uzoamaka Azodo's (2003) assertion that both lovers manifest symptoms of postcoloniality helps us to understand that it is not only Mirelle who fails to adapt to the new social order but Ousmane as well. This is why Ba contrasts them with Lamine and Pierrette, whose marriage is not tied to their respective segregationist traditions. While Mirelle strives to adapt, Ousmane succumbs to external pressure, especially that of Yaye Khady and Oulematou. What makes his behavior extremely illogical is that he expects his wife to change overnight, to observe and adhere to African ethics of feminine motility. This constitutes a measure of psychological violence on Mirelle since she belongs to a different culture from which she must gradually be weaned had her husband been more considerate. In fact, it is not because Ousmane is unaware of his wife's ignorance of African culture. Rather it is because he has allowed himself to remain an uncritical disciple of his mother, and partly because unlike during his youthful years, he is no longer able to discipline his body. Not surprisingly, he hides behind Negritude philosophy to ditch Mirelle.

Ousmane distorts the concept of Negritude, using it to justify his brutal rejection of his white wife and his secret marriage to Oulematou, the black woman who represents Ousmane's "coming home" to Africa. It must be noted that Mirelle herself has always supported revolutionary politics on the African side, as shown by her active solidarity with the Dakar students during the riots. Paradoxically too, Mirelle has liberated herself from her parents. In this scenario, female diversity of a unique kind is brought out. Ironically, Yaye Khady, who

enjoys privileges of monogamic life in a community that sanctions polygamy, exhibits character traits that do not typify African mothers-in-law. In her, Ba suggests that older women's sensibilities are not necessarily informed by cultural tenets.

Yaye Khady's oppression of Mirelle must also be judged from the perspective of race. The importance of preserving cultural purity through the blood line has always been a topical issue whenever races mix. Thus, Yaye Khady's resentment and oppression of Mirelle and her grandson goes beyond the limits of the fear of losing her dignity and status as a mother-in-law. To her, Oulematou's son is not just an extension of Ousmane but an assurance that the black blood remains pure. This explains her exuberance on the birth of Oulematou's son, while feeling mortally disgraced by the birth of Gorgui, Mirelle's coffee-colored boy. Patrick (2005:26) in *'Mapping the woman's body: race, sex and gender,'* observes that:

Ousmane marries Oulematou because she is the proper channel who can mother and ensure the continuity of the purity of the blood of his cultural heritage.

While the above assertion is plausible, it overlooks the fact that there are several factors that play into Ousmane's lecherous mind. Chief among these is his mother. One is also inclined to ask why he had earlier on willingly proceeded to secretly marry his white prince charming, in defiance of his mother's warning, earlier before his departure for Paris? After all, his cousin Lamine had as much a chance of siring a coloured baby as him. What is clear to me is that both Yaye Khady and Ousmane reject Mirelle for their own selfish reasons. The meaning Yaye Khady attaches to duties and privileges of a woman is antithetical to that for mixed marriages. Feeling that her status is under threat, she applies preemptive criteria of culture to dismiss the white woman. By seeking self recognition and grandeur, she makes it difficult for the white woman to adapt.

Women, difference and the struggle for domestic space

Traditionally regarded as an exclusive discursive arena for women, the domestic space inscribes intriguing power dynamics in *Scarlet Song*. In its depiction of African women acting on their individual capacities or in concert with group insularity, the work performs a unique evaluative portraiture of diverse African women's experiences. To begin with, the deliberate exclusion and silencing of male characters is a space clearing literary device, to leave the women as solely empowered but culpable in the subversion of mixed marriages. In the novel Gibril Guiye is rendered effeminate by his outspoken wife Yaye Khady.

The novel's epistemology of female sensibility and difference is mainly driven by motors of culture, race and education. As I argue in this thesis, these eventually jointly constitute points of rupture. Crucial to the conflict that emerges is the central role assigned to Yaye Khady as an agent of destabilization while ostensibly pursuing a course of cultural purity. In her Ba traces a character who by her excesses and paranoia, highlights the inherent fears and concerns of some African women in the postcolonial era. It has been suggested that the writer uses Yaye Khady to settle unequal power relations between whites and blacks in the colonial era. However, I do not think there is sufficient substance in such an argument, since Mirelle is not a representation of colonial rule. I therefore wish to illustrate that Yaye Khady's role is more complex than this. And I want to hasten to say that she is not necessarily a model of the African mother-in-law. This is not to deny the existence of rivalry between daughters-in-law and mothers-in-law in African societies. There can never be a formula for predicting the nature of such relationships. Rather, Yaye Khady's hatred is more pernicious because it is also motivated by self interest, greed and an obsessive attachment of an Oedipal nature to her son Ousmane.

One of the unique features of *Scarlet Song* is Ba's depiction of female sensibilities in the domestic space. The home and the village setting become the disputed arena for the articulation of womanhood. This is where the battle for Ousmane and, by extension, for the African woman's self definition begins and ends. Interestingly, Yaye Khady's appropriation of this operational space is foreshadowed early in the novel, through her subtle encouragement of Ousmane to help in the domestic chores. It can be said that this is also where Gibril Guiye loses his grip on both Ousmane and his wife, for he only complains but takes no action to nip the unorthodox training in the bud. Thus, Yaye Khady's desire for control and authority must also be measured against the background of her comatose husband. Through the portrayal of the oppressive mother-in-law, Ba affirms the hierarchical nature of African women's access to and control of the domestic space. The writer suggests that African women, in their diversity, are sensitive to class, status and race. Though not distinctly drawn, the classes derive ascriptively from age and marital seniority. With the emergence of a modern industrial economy African women can also achieve higher reflected status through their son's financial and material possessions. Here one is reminded of the same status Nnu Ego yearns for but never gets in *The Joys of Motherhood*.

Within polygamous families such as Pathe Ngom's, senior wives are accorded a higher ranking than their junior co-wives. In the novel we read that Mother Fatim (the senior wife), "ruled her house like a tigress. Her co-wives feared her viper's tongue" (*Scarlet Song*,140). Hence the fight that ensues between Mother Fatim and her co-wife Maimona, epitomizes the contradictions and struggle for control of the domestic space within various households in African families. It can be argued that Maimona is a symbol of resistance against oppression by senior women at a domestic level. Her eventual victory is a form of liberation from the dominant force, given that senior wives are traditionally accorded the status closest to that of head of family.

Significantly, the existence of such hierarchies among wives, a manifestation of female difference, is also enacted in *The Joys of Motherhood*, where Agunwa and Adankwo by virtue of their seniority, occupy respectable roles to the extent that at times they endorse normative expectations of patriarchal discourse. Emecheta presents the same conflict situation in Kehinde, by pitting the senior wife of the same name against her co-wife.

What is enacted on a larger scale in *Scarlet Song*, however, is Yaye Khady's jealous guarding of her domestic space, her own centre. Her behavior confirms Mukherjee's (2008:6) contention that "Postcolonial societies have their own internal centres and peripheries." In her ruminations over the threat her white daughter-in-law poses, she vows that the white woman cannot deny her the privileged high status she has been looking forward to. Convinced that "a toubab cannot be a proper daughter in law", on the assumption that 'she will only have eyes for her man'(66), Yaye Khady vows to jettison Mirelle out of the matrimonial home. For Yaye Khady, Mirelle is the "she-devil" who stands in her way of being relieved of domestic duties at her ripe age. Paradoxically, the queenship role she desires is a Victorian convention, a replica of the conventions of the white race she abhors. But, given the African patriarchal structure, there is need to guard against roundly condemning her for being racist and judgmental. The text makes it clear that even among the black women themselves rivalry of this nature, though not the norm, is common. As Ba's authorial voice suggests, though the white woman is obviously more maligned, she is neither the first nor the only victim.

Acting according to unspoken and undisclosed principles, the mother-in-law gives orders, supervises, makes her demands. She appropriates the greater part of her son's earnings. (*Scarlet Song*,72)

From her traditional experience, Yaye Khady sees a daughter-in-law as an agent of her liberation from the condition of womanhood. Indirectly, she seems to admit that before her son's marriage, her burden, like those of other women, will remain. In her authorial voice, Ba appears to share the African woman's ambivalence in the light of the problems mothers face when bringing up children.

Like all mothers she had had her share of those terrible sleepless nights when she had to rely on her instinct to diagnose a child's teething or the high temperature that might precede a childish ailment, when its life could be at risk.
(*Scarlet Song*,73)

It is such thoughts which bring Yaye Khady to conclude that "one of the high points of a woman's life is the choice of a daughter in law" (73). But what Yaye Khady fails to acknowledge in her reflections, is that Mirelle's mother deserves as much honour and respect for bringing up her own daughter. Instead, she gets carried away by a selfish sensibility that disregards the plight of women of other races. Yet it must also be said that part of Yaye Khady's problem lies in Ousmane himself, for "ambushing her"(my *emphasis*) by secretly marrying the white woman. I contend that had he prepared his mother psychologically, the fierce resistance she evinces might not have taken place.

The other dimension to Yaye Khady's control of the domestic space is brought out through her awareness of financial and material security. She feels that the respectable status she now enjoys and flaunts among the women of Usine Niari Talli is in danger of being conferred upon Mirrele. This also explains her eagerness to forestall chances of being rendered invisible. During the naming ceremony of Oulematou's baby son, Yaye Khady exults in her enhanced status . Like her mother-in-law, Oulematou feels a sense of fulfillment by virtue of being the preferred

daughter-in-law. Yet it is this postnatal victory that further alienates Mirelle by rendering her invisible. Understandably, Mirelle also fights for her man by redefining herself. Unlike Oulematou she has internalized western values of maintaining order and cleanliness in her house. This is a virtue which even her rival appreciates, hence her desire to emulate it.

At the height of their conflict, Yaye Khady takes her battle to the couple's bedroom, picking her teeth, and arrogantly imposing herself on the couple's privacy. This invasion of Mirelle's privacy and domestic space extends to Ousmane's cronies, and to the family budget. After a tipoff by Soukeyna, her sister in law, Mirelle soon discovers that Ousmane has been drawing large sums of money from their joint account to support Oulematou and his mother's insatiable needs. In my view, what compounds Mirelle's plight is her husband's inability to guard their matrimonial space. Indeed his puerile siding with his mother where he would naturally be expected to restrain her, defies African ethics. It amounts to a flagrant violation of Mirelle's trust. His renewed interest in African traditional music is only a ruse to drive the cultural wedge between them, and justify the claim for rehabilitation of cultural values. There is a detached selfish tone in his assertion; "I live as it is right for me. I love the tomtoms" (*Scarlet Song*, 91). This is the closest Ousmane has gone to "divorce" (*my emphasis*) his wife in preference for his culture. One wonders therefore, whether the renewed patriotism has all along been waiting for Oulematou's provocative sexuality to be rekindled? Had he not been equally tempted by other African women before? I contend that Ousmane and his mother are architects of Mirelle's doomed marriage. No wonder Mirelle faints when Ousmane angrily asks her to get out of the house. Yaye Khady's resentment of the white woman is a space clearing gesture intended to pave way for Oulematou, who, as Arnt (2001:167) points out, Ousmane believes is an embodiment of traditional gender roles.

The psychological war Yaye Khady wages is deliberately intended to win back the domestic space she feels Mirelle must relinquish. Her actions thus constitute what Fanon (cited in West, 1990), describes as psychological violence. Unlike the humanizing violence that Fanon posits for the amelioration of racial conflict, Yaye Khady's violence dehumanizes since it is not only immoral but also disrupts the family cohesion that is expected to accompany and nourish the marriage institution. At the end, Mirelle, mortified by her sense of loss of identity and acceptable motherhood, unleashes violence against herself, her son and husband. The reader is often continually touched by the fact that apart from Soukeyna and Rosalie, Mirelle lacks support even from her husband. Often taking refuge in her bedroom, she is rendered invisible even in her own home.

It is in light of the foregoing depiction of female characters that I find scope in West's (1990) argument on cultural difference :

The new cultural politics of difference can thrive only if there are communities , groups, organizations, institutions, subcultures and networks of people of colour who cultivate critical sensibilities and personal accountability without inhibiting individual expressions , curiosities and idiosyncrasies. (108)

Though West's theory dwells mostly on difference at a higher racial realm, I feel that it finds an echo in Ba's work, particularly through its criticism of women who oppress other women without regard to their individual sensibilities. In the text Mirelle grapples with the problem of defining herself in an environment that does not recognize her individuality. When Ousmane begins to define himself on the basis of a pure African culture that dismisses the emergence of "solid alliances and coalitions," (West, 108), he wrecks his marriage.

Femininity, desire and embodiment: taunting the male gaze

Gender constructions of ideal femininity have always occupied a contested terrain. This is because culture and ideology, the basis of such constructions, are not static. Damian (2006:90), defines femininity as culturally acquired. She writes: “A feminine identity has been successfully constructed if the external observers can recognize a “feminine” body associated with a feminine behavior.” The implication here is that women are denied choice of what they want to be, as individuals. In our analysis of the notion of femininity as a social category that determines a woman’s desirability and role, we need to avoid such essentialist criteria that elide specific values held sacrosanct by particular communities. However, what is increasingly generating critical interest, given current global trends, are the multiple shifts in perspective regarding the female embodiment. Cross-cultural comparisons of female aesthetics, individual tastes, social class, lifestyles and emerging identities have brought in new lens through which women can capture the male gaze.

Through Mirelle, Oulematou, and Ousmane’s divergent ideological positioning, Ba interrogates the discursive practices that the embodied female of the postcolonial era in Africa has to grapple with. The novel thus presents a man who is torn between aligning himself with the western feminine aesthetic that fulfills his acquired modernist values, and a black woman who not only taunts his macho ego but also apparently links him to his roots through the metaphorical contours of her body.

In her treatment of Ousmane’s double love life, Ba incorporates images of desirability and cultural aesthetics. The importance attached to black and white aesthetics is poignantly brought out through the portrayal of Mirelle and Oulematou. To the man who is at the centre of their love, and on different occasions, each woman embodies a unique irresistible femininity. Early in

the novel, Mirelle is portrayed as a model of white beauty, a rare quality that even Yaye Khady appreciates, as seen through the appellation of “Jinne.” The novel captures various moments during which Ousmane is visibly captivated by his lover’s stunning beauty, a gaze that keeps him safe from other girls’ lustful eyes. But later in the novel, Ousmane is bewitched by Oulematou’s African feminine features.

On his first encounter with Mirelle, Ousmane is said to have “thrown himself at the mercy of the white woman”(*Scarlet Song*, 18). The novel suggests that the lovers’ infatuation with each other develops naturally, oblivious of the hostile forces around them. The fact that the lovers have been enriched by their differences attests to Ba’s approval of interracial relationships as a possibility in Africa. Mirelle is said to have given her heart and body to Ousmane. This declaration amounts to submission, to rendering herself as part of any ideals Ousmane represents. Sadly, it bodes ill of the white woman’s value system, which emphasizes equality. It can be argued that in her total submission, Mirelle embraces the other by erasing her own cultural values. To note is the fact that Ousmane symbolically grabs and takes control of her femininity. In one of his letters to her he declares “I hold you tightly in my arms” (*Scarlet Song*, 59). In my view, this is an admission that he regards Mirelle only in erotic terms. Little wonder then, that some critics have blamed Mirelle for failure to discern clearly the conditions under which their love sprouted. For instance, while Ousmane goes through moments of introspection before making a final decision, Mirelle does not stop to consider possible external backlashes to her relationship with the black man. Even when her father discovers Ousmane’s photo, which he castigates as “this object”, Mirelle continues to show commitment and sacrifice by affirming her romantic attachment to the man who will eventually reject her. Yet such a confirmation of their love before Jean de la vallee foreshadows her acceptance of Ousmane’s

uncompromising demands , that she converts to Islam. Unlike Mirelle, Ousmane is still concerned about the consequences of his love to the community.

Was he to reject Usine Niari Talli? No longer heed the pointing finger of his father's respected Muslims, directing him towards Goody's royal road? Shred the thousand pages of his ancestral heritage? Trample under foot the talismans that protected him and his people? Repudiate the raps and the jinne? Divert from its proper channel the blood which is the carrier of virtues? (*Scarlet Song*,37)

Ousmane's reflections on such external intervening variables betrays his ambivalence, a lack of compromise which contrasts with that of his lover. It is important to note that though the resolution he makes at the end of this monologue is in favour of racial integration, he breaches it later in the novel, upon seeing Oulematou. There is a way in which her body and sexuality ignite the sense of identity he cannot ignore. Bordo (1993:120), in her analysis of the body as a representation of femininity, argues that "the body may also operate as a metaphor for culture." She suggests that "bodily discourse" (1993:120) informs us what clothes to wear, facial makeup and other adornments. Though her essay focuses on the way patriarchy shapes women's bodies, her observation here finds relevance because Ba's Oulematou uses her body to subvert male authority, by making Ousmane surrender his gaze to her body. In her paper entitled *Stranger Woman, Rebellious woman*, Ada Uzoamaka Azodo (2003) makes a strong point about Yaye Khady and Oulematou's ability to wield power to their advantage. She notes that though Oulematou defers to Ousmane in the matrimonial home, the fact that she manipulates him before their marriage is an example of how women's power can be at least as great and as influential as that of men. During his secret visit to the Ngom homestead, Ousmane's male gaze is bewitched by the seductive allure of Oulematou's plump buttocks, shapely thighs and bulging breasts. Not only are these features metaphors of the African woman's fecundity, but they can

also be read as strategic signposts for him to explore the “map”, of Africa that Oulematou represents, to discover the hidden treasure that her eroticism enacts. Hence the novel suggests that what Ousmane sees in Oulematou is a new identity, a new connection different and antithetical to the one Mirelle represents. This interpretation that Ousmane’s gaze on Oulematou triggers his desire to reconfigure his identity in African terms must be taken with a pinch of salt. It makes me uneasy because it tends to exonerate Ousmane from his confusion regarding the effect the young women’s embodied selves have on him.

Stratton, (cited in Patrick, 2004), observes that Ousmane’s views are shaped by the racial and sexual mechanisms of his society, thus rendering him racially and sexually insecure. Here again, I wish to refute the race factor as inexcusable because up until his secret wedding with Mirelle he has been well aware of its implications. Rather, it is Oulematou who renders him sexually insecure, even though he is a married man enjoying the conjugal rights with the white woman.

In view of the foregoing, I submit that it is appropriate to see Oulematou more as a sadistic female victimizer than a mere rival or embodiment of African woman’s feminine aesthetics. What makes her visits to the Guiye family suspect is the ulterior motive behind the help in the washing of clothes. Hers is clearly an ingratiating action of a prospective daughter-in-law’s rehearsal of duties expected of her by the mother-in-law. I argue that Ousmane’s gestures are in bad faith, and hence disqualify her from being a representation of the embodied African woman, given that these chores are conducted with a view to supplanting the lawfully married white woman. Oulematou’s sinister motives are particularly revealed on the night she seduces Ousmane. Using her sexuality and body she allows Ousmane to explore her body features like a map.

Arguably, Ousmane is also to blame for the breakdown of his marriage. For instance he puts himself in a dilemma where he has to balance his individual expectations of a wife with his mother's concept of womanhood. Furthermore, it must be observed that this dilemma emerges only after his sexual desire for the white woman has waned. Confessing that Mirelle no longer appeals to him, he finds occasion to substitute class compatibility with the white woman for Oulematou's sexuality, on the pretext of returning to his roots. Here I am suggesting that at this point in the narrative, what draws Ousmane closer to Oulematou has more to do with his libidinous desire for her than the need for him to rehabilitate his hybridized identity. One can say that the concerns he raises here are a mere ruse because early on he had already set parameters that guaranteed him a position of dominance in their marriage.

Ousmane's fickleness is further played out by his objectification of his two wives. Unable to control his desire for Oulematou's sexuality after her visit to him at work, Ousmane returns home, aroused sufficiently to take on Mirelle. "Then he took Mirelle in his arms and in the body of his white wife assuaged his desire for the black woman" (*Scarlet Song*,111). Shevlin (1997:942) appears revolted by this "anatomizing" of the two women's bodies. What makes it mostly unfair is that it is Oulematou Ousmane now prefers. This callous exchange of affection is corroborated by his admission that he was cheating on his wife because he no longer loved her, that he had only been drawn to Mirelle by the need to assert himself, to rise intellectually and socially (*Scarlet Song*,123).

The point that Ba insists on here is the tragedy of women rendering each other invisible, for the advantage of men. In several instances where she intervenes as commentator, the writer exonerates and empathizes with Mirelle. Highlighting different scenarios of mixed marriages, the narrator points out that while Ousmane had ventured to occupy the cultural liminal space

through marrying the white woman, he lacked the commitment to sustain “the peace and equilibrium” it entailed (*Scarlet Song*, 123). Ba laments the fact that the lack of tolerance and inability to respect differences is the major cause of failure in such marriages. Invoking sympathy for Mirelle, the narrative provides evidence of her unappreciated attempts at adaptation.

Mirelle had made every possible concession, she looked after him, showed hospitality to his parasitical cronies, demonstrated her goodwill. (*Scarlet Song*,121)

This exoneration can further be proved by the fact that she tried her best, on the advice of Soukeyna and Rosalie, to perform the traditional courtesies required of a daughter-in – law to her in laws. It can be said that they expected too much too soon from her. In this vein, I find Arnt’s (2001:166) castigation of Mirelle for “seeing her confession to Islam as a purely conventional matter”, rather too harsh and unwarranted. Given all the sacrifices she puts into the marriage I do not agree that her transformation is superficial, as the critic alleges.

Journeying through “sameness”? Convergence, Divergence and rupture

In this section I appropriate the metaphor of women’s bodies as maps by borrowing largely from Bernard Patrick (2005) and Shevlin Eleanor’s (1997) theoretical constructs. Though each examines aspects of culture from slightly different angles, I find their analyses useful , especially with respect to Ba’s preoccupation with identity formation and racial difference.

Shevlin (1997:946), in her reading of the novel as a journey, makes the following observations:

Ba’s novel establishes sequences of roads travelled by multiple characters. These multiple routes develop into circular, conflicting and converging paths....On these roads characters ostensibly paired together are suddenly seen on paths directly

opposed , while characters seemingly headed in entirely different directions are discovered to be journeying side by side.

According to Patrick (2005:5) the bodies of the two women are the major character in the novel because “without them Ousmane’s journey towards identity would not be possible.” Alluding to the failed mixed marriage, Patrick observes that the novel focuses on “the threat of the mixing , splitting and dividing of identity.” Echoing Wilson Tagoe’s (cited in Patrick, 2005) reading of the African woman’s novel as a complex discourse with general intersecting points, intersecting and interrogating each other, Patrick argues that through biological mothering, a woman’s body can alter racial identity. The link between mothering and racial composition is also brought out by Doyle (in Patrick 2005:5), who notes that because women are the carrier of race, “ in a mixed marriage it leads to a mixing of aesthetics, in a situation where the woman’s body represents the place to project the memories and fantasies of racial and cultural authenticity.”

Given the optimism that surrounds Ousmane’s and Mirelle’s early love life in the first part of the novel, before the dramatic standoff, it can be said that the work enacts a psychological journey towards identity transformation. I argue that from the outset the two lovers are consciously aware of the implications of their union to their identities. This is amply illustrated in their love letters as well as in Mirelle’s denunciation of his father’s bigotry. It is with this in mind that Ba insinuates that while the fusion of identities is a possibility, it is fraught with challenges. In the novel cultural differences between the two lovers only become an issue as a result of interference by external forces that threaten to deflect them away from the path of integration. The first attempt at such deflection is by Jean de la valle who is visibly revolted by his daughter’s relationship with the black man. As far as he is concerned such a union is a recipe for cultural contamination of his supposedly superior white race.

Drawing from the theory of eugenics, Doyle (1994) provides ample evidence of how the white race tried to justify their claims to racial superiority through fears of “racial degeneration.”

Quoting extensively from Henry Goddard’s (1919) theory he observes that:

For some social radicals, it meant that ‘marriages should be conducted on a rational basis, with partners choosing each other for their genetic qualities of appearance as well as character and appearance. (Doyle 1994 :10- 11)

Doyle also notes that it was on the basis of this theory that Howard and Charlie Davenport warned against miscegenation, claiming that “a hybridized people are a badly put together people and a dissatisfied , restless ineffective people.”(1994:15). Paradoxically, in the novel, Yaye Khady and her female accomplices wage their own war against miscegenation by excluding Mirelle from any efforts to identify herself with the Senegalese community. The birth of Mirelle’s son, Gorgui, also heralds a wide split between the two women. Not only does the coloured boy alienate Yaye Khady from the Usine Niari community but he also becomes a symbol of cultural dilution. It can be said that both Jean de La valle and Yaye Khady converge on a collision course intended to halt Mirelle’s journey towards cultural fusion. Both exhibit deep seated chauvinistic attitudes ostensibly intended to preserve the purity of their respective races.

The text presents Ousmane as an unfaithful lover who makes a sudden u- turn on the journey towards racial integration. Ironically, in abandoning Mirelle, he also indirectly disowns Gorgui , the child of his genuine love. This constitutes a serious act of betrayal by a man who does not have the courage to embrace change, to forge and cherish compatibility within difference. By enacting parallel trajectories of female difference and sensibilities against each other in a bid to expose the complexities, tensions and tensions among women, Ba also shows that such tensions

are discernible among women of the same race. For example Soukeyna and her mother diverge in their perceptions of the white woman's role and adaptability in the family. While Yaye Khady's attitude is one of resentment, Soukeyna is accommodating, accepting the white woman as natural. For Yaye Khady the white woman and her son are an eyesore who will bring shame to her and the community. In her racist rebuke she reenacts the spiteful lashing racist tongue imputed to Ousmane by Jean de la valle when he describes his photo as "this object." To Yaye Khady, Mirelle, especially her coloured child, have become symbolic objects whose repulsive nature cannot be tolerated. Thus the mother and daughter diverge on matters of identity, race and morality.

The novel also examines the black man's commitment in mixed marriages. Judging from his interior monologue earlier on, it is clear that Ousmane has problems about consequences of marrying his white wife. Not only is he worried about Yaye Khady's possessiveness, he is also insecure about the poverty and general backwardness of his African environment.

He would describe his shack amid nauseous effluvia from stopped up drains. He would present his little den with its dozens of chinks in its wooden walls.
(*Scarlet Song*,39)

In other words, Ousmane feels that the coming of Mirelle would condemn him to the gutter, exposing his inferiority complex in the face of the white woman's sophistication and elegance. The feeling that his wife's nostrils would be assailed by the odour of dried fish in the compound' (*Scarlet Song*, 39), attests to how much he underrates himself, and his identity as an African. Ironically it is an affirmation of the white stereotype of Africans. As such he predicts the derailment of their romantic journey by perceived externalities that can easily be overcome if both committed themselves. This pessimistic view contrasts with Mirelle's who has a mind of

her own, and is genuinely prepared to close ranks, to make the marriage work. “Just tell me what to do and nothing else will matter”, she confides (*Scarlet Song*,37).

The text also presents other characters whose interference contribute to plunging the couple’s marriage onto a perilous precipice. Boly’s cynical question, ‘What will you and your white woman have in common about the fate of mixed marriages?’ (149), fuels further tension since it raises issues of identity that Ousmane had ignored during their courtship. Contributing to the racial debate, it is Ali together with his wife Rosalie whose visions of mixed marriages resonate with Ba’s. Without mincing his words Ali castigates Ousmane for blindly following his mother’s wrong ideas as seen in her racist attitude to Mirelle and her penchant for ‘extravagant ostentation.’ (138). Such behavior, Ali argues, makes him the racist. It is also significant to appreciate Rosalie’s complementary gestures towards Mirelle’s plight. It is she who initiates Mirelle into the social conventions of Senegal. As a white woman who has integrated into the Senegalese society Rosalie also takes it upon herself to recommend to Mirelle the correct path to cultural adaptation. This path includes visiting her in-laws in the absence of her husband, in addition to preparing sumptuous dishes for her father in law.

Rosalie’s friendly gestures are also complemented by Soukeyna, Ousmane’s sister, who even goes to the extent of openly confronting her mother for her callous disregard of the white woman’s condition. Visibly offended by her mother’s attitude she snaps:

By your selfishness you are driving Ousmane to eventual disaster ; and simultaneously you are killing another woman’s daughter, as Mirelle also has a mother. (*Scarlet Song*,152)

Despite being a minor character, Soukeyna is the voice of reason in the text. In her voicing for the silent oppressed women, whose circumstances are different, Ba provides a moral touchstone for the condition of womanhood, regardless of race. As I have argued elsewhere, the path that Ba is advocating is one of racial integration. But she also seems to be suggesting that instead of oppressing each other women must not allow their differences to stand in their way. Though the issue remains problematic, Ba seems to have faith in the younger generation, presenting them as the most likely to embrace change in a world that is characterized by globalisation, while the older generation from both the white and black cultural traditions appear to be obsessed with racial purity. In her essay entitled *Can the Postcolonial subject be white ?* Ada Uzoamaka Azodo sums up her philosophical views when she says, “The best that one can do in a world further and further globalised in the 21st Century is to condone diversity in all its facets and tolerate one another as fellow human beings.” In this vein the young couples of Lamine and Pierette, Ali and Rosalie, including Soukeyna, epitomize the ideal destinations which Ousmane and Mirelle should arrive at but fail to do so because of vacillation on his part and failure to weather the storm of cultural interference. Shevlin(1997:947), has revealed that ‘Rosalie and Soukeyna engage in highly similar, charged exchanges with Ousmane over Mirelle’s rights.’ She goes on to say that Ousmane serves as a ‘fixed point around which the paths of female characters intersect, split and coalesce.’

While I agree with Shevlin’s observation I think the text also plots a more volatile fixed point around Yaye Khady, since her interference signals rupture. In my view she is the culprit behind the failed marriage. One can even say that up until the couple return to Senegal after their successful marriage, Ousmane and Mirelle have been moving in a straight path towards matrimonial fulfillment and new identities consistent with global trends. It is mainly the coming

of Oulematou onto the scene, aided by Yaye Khady, that an irreparable rift occurs. Yaye Khady uses cultural leverage to rock the matrimonial boat until it capsizes. Both women conspire to jettison the white woman out of the matrimonial orbital plane drawn by Ousmane and Mirelle. The point I wish to uphold here is that it is Yaye Khady and Oulematou who mastermind Ousmane's backward journey to his so called roots. Together and for slightly different reasons, these women derail the couple's grand dreams of what Mirelle perceives as enriching Africa's cultural heritage.

Echoing voices: Negotiating fractured visions of the Postcolonial

Scarlet Song resonates with a multiplicity of voices, some silent, some whispered and others violently visceral. It also abounds with an amalgam of sounds, rhythms vituperations, sighs and monologues. What I want to problematize in this section is the extent to which the characters' voices derive from contradictions in cultural conventions on the one hand and personal agency on the other. Using this dichotomy as a starting point will help us unravel the dynamics of female subjectivities, particularly the contingent articulations and their effects on individuals.

In my attempt to bring to the fore the exigencies which shroud women's divergent utterances, I partially incorporate Ferdinand de Saussure and Charles Sanders Pierce's (in Griffin 2005:72-74) theory on semiotics. Both theorists help us to understand that the signified (the object or concept) has a particular relationship with the signifier (the sound or image attached to the signified). But it is Pierce's more elaborate theoretical construct of the iconic, indexical and symbolic signs that intersects with my analysis. For example, Monsieur de la vallee's interpretation of Ousmane's photograph derives from its identical resemblance of the real Ousmane, but on a more symbolic level it invokes the stereotypical image of the colonised black whom colonial convention has condemned as inferior, unintelligent and primitive. In the text Ba

mobilises different, often antagonistic signals to explain the problematics of race , class and gender. Jean de la vallee's derogatory "shifted signified" (Griffin 74) characteristics onto Ousmane, Mirelle's black lover is to him, a painful reminder of his domestic African servants, "the hideous halfwits." On the contrary, Mirelle has internalized an affectionate image of her lover, as shown by her willingness to surrender to his love, her defense of his intelligence and adoration of his photo, often studying and smiling at it during his absence.

The qualities of masculinity, virility and intelligence which Mirelle assigns to Ousmane are denied and construed in negative terms by Jean de la vallee. As Hall (1980) has aptly theorized, there is an inherent set of conventionalized ways of making meanings that are specific to particular groups of people. In the text Ba suggests that the different codes assigned to different individuals and groups of people often yield misplaced segregationist interpretations that are based on assumptions of static cultural ideologies. The protagonists give sense to each other according to how they have understood their culture and according to their individual inclinations. But among these characters, Ba also invests some with a transcendental vision, one that envisages a multicultural world enriched in its diversity. Furthermore, the multiple voices in the novel can be likened to what Bakhtin(1981) refers to as heteroglots, or multiple voices. The work deploys such discourses through articulations of female characters as victims , victimizers or as the voice of reason. Of particular interest is the fact that the women take agency, in their own ways to gain visibility, male compatibility and identity.

Ba 's intention is to construct a new vision of female identity for the postcolonial society. The difficulties associated with such a project are poignantly brought out through Ousmane and Mirelle both of whom, in this case, constitute the target audience for such voices. As astutely observed by Treiber (1996:114)

For Ousmane, his personal conflict is expressed in a dialogue of two voices within himself. He perceives tradition as the voice of reason, while his romantic desire becomes the voice of love and is more associated with individualism.

Treiber goes on to suggest that besides Ousmane's own voices, there are two other voices in the novel demanding change. One of these is by Ali who represents 'a rationality according to which colonial and gender oppression are interrelated and need to be addressed simultaneously, and one by Ali's wife, Rosalie, calling for women to stick together' (Treiber 1996). As I subsequently emphasise, there are voices which either complement or oppose others. While the author's own voice often intervenes as commentator in some places, there are several instances where she speaks through Soukeyna, Osseynou and even Gibril Gueye.

Another pertinent observation Treiber (1996:122) makes is that the voices are antagonistic because while some are "constructed along lines of a mystifying notion of African essence, others attempt to reconstruct it by way of multiple alliances, including gender discourse." It is within this framework that I examine the issue of visibility and voicing. Significantly, though most of the discourse is constructed around Ousmane and Mirelle, it has reverberating effects on other characters. In fact, I insist that the major conflicts in the novel arise from the interference of Monsiuer de la vallee, Oulematou and Yaye Khady. For example, it is Ousmane's mother who mobilizes the Usine Niari Talli community to support her in the destruction of her son's marriage. Assuming the role of cultural referent and custodian by articulating the voice of authentic African identity, the women unashamedly exclude Mirelle from the female discourse, while aiding and abetting Oulematou's battle to wrestle Ousmane from the white woman.

It must be recalled that before making their relationship public Mirelle and Ousmane are content to hear the sweetness of their complementary voices. Wrapped up in her passion for Ousmane,

and imbued with her transcendental vision of humanist liberalism, Mirelle is determined to hear only the voice of love. However, what she fails to realize is that her lover remains ambivalent, confused by the echoes of cultural inertia, including the compelling possessive voice of his mother, as his following monologue reveals:

On the one side, my heart draws me to a white girl...on the other my own people. My reason fluctuates between the two, like the arm of a balance on which two objects of equal value are weighed. Reject the Niari Talli district? These loud voices in his ear, singing in unison of traditional values, urging obedience to the dictates of a collective existence, these were the voices of his birthplace. (*Scarlet Song*, 36)

The difficulty with which Ousmane wrestles with the voices is exacerbated by what he perceives to be an equally questionable task of his eligibility to marry the white woman whose upper middle class status he fears would expose his inferiority complex.

Yet the situation is different for Mirelle, partly because from the outset she has severed the cultural ties that identify her with Europe and colonialism, and partly because she inclines to the sound of her African love. Treiber (1996: 120) observes that “while it seems easy for Mirelle to cut off ties with the past, Ousmane feels an obligation to follow the demands of the tradition.” However, I have some reservations regarding such an interpretation. For one thing, the two are only forging an alliance that demands that he makes even less concessions according to the patriarchal values.

The real test for Mirelle in the relationship comes with the discovery of Ousmane’s photo by her father. What is enacted is an occasion for Mirelle to hear a different voice from her father, a voice charged with the vitriolic outburst of racist venom. It dawns upon her that this voice had lain silent, dormant under the guise of humanitarianism and fake philanthropy.

That violence was now out of control. Mirelle recoiled , horrified. That voice was now making no secret of the disgust her friend inspired. (*Scarlet Song*, 28)

Convinced about her ideological stance, Mirelle takes the explosive encounter as an occasion to articulate her voice of reason against her father, scorning him for being a racist relic of the colonial past, while disguised as a humanitarian. Echoing and endorsing her protagonist's position, by intervening as commentator, Ba suggests that Mirelle's "impassioned unequivocal voice of love was too strong for Monsier de la vallee" (*Scarlet Song*, 29). It is significant that Mirelle's voice is recognizable as a clarion call for what Treiber refers to as "multiple alliances." Ironically, while Mirelle's call for such alliances is genuine and altruistic, that of her father is guttural and disgustingly hypocritical. Here it is also worth noting that at the end Mirelle is ironically betrayed by the lying words of the very man for whom she has placed so much trust and sacrifice. The words imprinted on the letters pasted on the walls of her bedroom assume a hollow mocking echo to her fading love. What is more, Gorgui, the product of their love has become an object of Yaye Khady's mocking song, "*Not white, not black*" The unfortunate boy has been reduced to the hushed whisper of his grandmother's taunting effrontery. Thus, through Mirelle's father, Ousmane and Yaye Khady, Ba shows how patriarchy and racism conspire to undermine and oppress women on grounds of difference.

And sadly, at the end Mirelle finds herself in a quandary. She cannot imagine going back to the parents she scorned., given that her open rebuking torrent of accusations are still ringing in her mind. This brings to question her vulnerability in that despite her economic independence she can neither save herself nor her child. It defies logic to find the woman who showed so much courage and moral uprightness against her father earlier on, opting to remain a slave to a dead love (Onwuegbuche and Akung, 2011: 9).

The coming in of Oulematou into the marriage adds a discordant voice to the discourse of love. By default she sounds the nationalist echoes of black identity. For Ousmane, Oulematou is a representation of an invisible voice calling on him to return to Africa to reclaim his motherland. In a moment of introspection reminiscent of his earlier infatuation with the white woman, Ousmane imagines that the truth is dawning upon him. "My will, more than ever, influences me to retain my identity as a black man" (149). Yet, in his marriage to Mirelle he has never been compelled to renounce his identity. There is a sense in which the text plays out the confusion on the imperatives of assimilationist policies of colonial times against multiple /racial alliances of the post independence era.

The motif of multiple voices and sounds is registered in various other sections of the text. Often accompanied by the sound of the tomtom, the characters are made to revisit their cultural past. For Ousmane, Yaye Khady and the community women, the tomtom invokes a spiritual link with their past which they cannot ignore. In its invocation of black traditions it affirms African authenticity while accentuating cultural differences between Mirelle and Ousmane. At the same time it is a medium for performing the cultural rites of the Senegalese during the baptism of Oulematou's baby boy. Ironically, the tomtom sounds the knell for Mirelle's ostracism from the culture she had sacrificed so much to support. Ousmane actually interprets it as the sound of exclusion. Similarly, the griot's song, sung as a romantic accompaniment to Ousmane's seduction, mingles with the incantatory chants of "Oussu eat, eat! Oussu, drink! Oussu wash your hands! Oussu!"(*Scarlet Song*, 118). The effect is to envelop him in a cocoon of endearment, to usher him back into the caressing arms of the African woman. It must be noted that Oulematou is out to make a difference that spites the white woman.

The text reveals a cruel twist of fate in that when Ousmane is with Mirelle, he “hears” the echoing calls of his nickname that link him to his past, his mother and to Oulematou, calls that, in the process, alienate Mirelle.

He could hear the call of Oussu in his heart, and hurried off to Niari Talli. ‘Oussu!’ The nickname linked him to his past and sang to him of his future. (*Scarlet Song*, 121)

I submit that these are imaginary sounds borne out of Ousmane’s lust for the black woman. While some may accept Onwuegbuche and Akung’s (2001) contention that it is the fear of ostracism for marrying a white woman that makes Ousmane to turn his back to Mirelle, I argue on the contrary because Ousmane has never felt ill at ease about his marriage until he visits Oulematou at their family homestead. Instead, I share Nnaemeka’s argument (in Onwuegbuche and Akung 2001:7) that Ousmane is not confused at all but merely fighting his demon, that his betrayal displays “deceit wrapped up in naturalized, ongmarry, feminized, idealized and motherised Africa...”

At this point in the discussion I want to focus on Yaye Khady’s own voice. In the novel she is presented as a woman who has a bloated sense of the African culture, a woman who has been brought up to understand that a daughter in law must wait upon her mother in law. In addition, cultural convention expects older women to look up to their working sons for material and financial support. I want to say that there is nothing sinister about such normative expectations. However, what makes Yaye Khady’s behavior towards her daughter-in-law unacceptable are her exaggerated demands which are obviously intended to render Mirelle irrelevant, to exclude her in order to pave way for Oulematou, whom she prefers merely on grounds of colour. Yaye Khady paints her voice with black in order to silence the white woman who she imagines to be

a representation of white heteroglossia that she finds detestable. For example, she says a white woman will only have her eyes on her man, that she will not help in the household chores. This explanation is both facile and inexcusable, given that when Mirelle makes attempts to adapt, on the advice of Soukeyna and Rosalie, her efforts are dismissed with the cynical disdain of one determined to block her completely from the African female discourse. The exaggerated demands on Mirelle to serve a whole chicken to her father-in-law are not necessarily part of Senegalese tradition but, intended to intimidate her out of her marriage.

There is so much malice in Yaye Khady, so much ill disposition against the white woman that the latter is given no room to adapt. I argue that while Yaye Khady's misgivings have been partly nurtured by conventional imperatives, it is her selfishness, racism, materialism and paranoia that Ba wants us to condemn as not being in sync with post-colonial socioeconomic trends. The irony is that Yaye Khady is guilty of oppressing other women.

The women of Usine Niari Talli, though occupying a peripheral space, also constitute heteroglots, a wider cultural voice within which even Mirelle is encapsulated. Thus, their murmurs, their snooping, and complicit participation to spite Mirelle is significant. In their actions they exacerbate Mirelle's loneliness and dejection. They cannot be exonerated over Mirelle's silencing and oppression, which leads to her eventual madness and poisoning of her son. During the baptism of Oulematou's baby boy they reassuringly elevate Yaye Khady to her desired status.

Those who had been present at this particular function would put a stop to any future slander; they would display the proof of her financial resources and restore her dignity. (*Scarlet Song*, 134)

In a scene reminiscent of the voices and music of the griot heralding Ousmane's reunion with Oulematou on their romantic night, Yaye Khady's celebration of Oulematou's baby is marked by excited cries of delight, ululations and applause. (*Scarlet Song*, 134). The delighted voices and the exclusive occasion, punctuated by esoteric language, is deliberately intended to confirm Oulematou as the legitimate daughter-in-law and her son as a fulfilment of Yaye Khady's expectations. Again it reestablishes her status as she is seen addressing the lower caste women (133). The women's celebratory chants, and songs accompanied by the sound of the tomtom, contrast with the silent forlorn scarlet song of the marriage they set out to destroy.

It is difficult to judge whether the marriage would have held had it only been Yaye Khady interfering. How much the couple would have weathered the old woman's onslaught is anybody's guess. However, I contend that it is Oulematou who drives the final wedge. Feeling no remorse about the white woman she is supplanting, and driven by sheer self interest, Oulematou conceives a devious scheme that culminates in Ousmane turning away from his faithful wife. She is a woman who hears her own voice as revealed by the deceptive manner in which she offers to assist with Yaye Khady's laundry and cooking. When her secret ploy succeeds she proceeds to entice Ousmane with the rhymes of her body. On the night she invites him for supper she proves herself adept not only at preparing his favourite "couscous" dish but she also successfully deploys her seductive weaponry. As if that was not enough, she enlists the services of Mabo Dali, the griot, to play the music of seduction, whose cadences are suffused with the romantic refrains of "Oussu prince of culture." Resonating with the romantic mood, the music's soporific effect lulls Ousmane into Oulematou's inviting arms. Punctuated by the conspiratorial words "Unsettle his senses, Trouble his heart!" the Mabo's singing has the effect of causing Ousmane to melt, to be tense with desire. Throughout the night he hears protestations

of love. What is more, the endearing voice, “Eat Oussu, eat daddy , ”(*Scarlet Song*,118) are a reminiscent echo of the same words of endearment his mother used to intone, only this time they are utterances of Oulematou’s seductive voice. Here it is worth noting that Oulematou’s scheme for visibility is different from Mirelle’s, who believes in an honest show of affection.

It would seem that Oulematou’s evil scheme benefits her on two grounds. First she manages to lure her lover to prepare his favourite couscous dish. This, Mirelle has not had the opportunity to do. Secondly, the seduction takes place at her own family household. While the two young women’s circumstances demonstrate the depth of their cultural differences in terms of love, Ba suggests that even among the African women themselves there are diversities that are not always attributable to culture. For, how can one explain that Ma Fatim, renowned for her strong objections to illicit liaisons, capitulates in Oulematou’s case, simply because of material interests. On a wider context the incident is an occasion to highlight the divergent responses African women are capable of expressing in the postcolonial era. Hence Ba suggests that African women’s voices are not always mediated by collective agency but also individually.

Conclusion

In my analysis on Ba’s *Scarlet Song*, I have established that race appears to be the main motor that fans tensions among women. However, other salient variables have a more profound effect. Class, tradition and age also have a telling effect on female cultural difference. Mirelle’s misery and betrayal is not just because she is white. It is also triggered by Ousmane’s failure to stabilize his desire on one woman, and on his mother’s stereotypical views of white women. Through this work, Ba has highlighted how conflicting traditions can ruin mixed marriages in the post independence era. Yet, despite its pessimistic ending, I feel that Ba suggests that such marriages are possible, as seen in the younger mixed couples’ happy unions.

Chapter Three: The Joys of Motherhood, Buchi Emecheta

Introduction

Much of what has been written about *The Joys of Motherhood* (hereafter, *The Joys*) revolves around the question of how representative it is of African women's experiences and sensibilities. While this is a moot point for critical discussion of this postcolonial novel, it has lured some less discerning critics to cast *Nu Ego* as a model of African women. This interpretation arguably emanates from the protagonist's preoccupation with motherhood. But, as Remi Akujobi (2011) suggests, there is need to problematize the concept of motherhood, whether it is visible in vital areas of human endeavor. From a different standpoint, I pursue a position that eschews an essentialist universalistic perspective. As I have argued persistently in this chapter, Emecheta's work calls for a more profound objective analysis that takes into account its multilayered discursive features. To begin with, I want to partially agree with Carolyn Lesjak's (2002:36) astute observation that the work examines Paul Gilroy's appropriation of W.E.B. Dubois' notion of "double consciousness". Lesjak uses this analogy to posit that the work 'performs the "looking" in (at least) two directions at once in its focus on women and their dual roles within indigenous patriarchal and colonial / postcolonial structures.

While this observation is a useful guide in our analysis of the text, we need to understand that not all women are affected (at least directly), by the double consciousness. In her mapping of the diversity of African women's experiences Emecheta appears to be tracing the genealogy of African women. Beginning with pre-colonial women as epitomized by Ona, and Agbadi's wives, the work proceeds to present rural Ibuza women, whose traditions typify the African women's experiences, untainted by British colonialism.

Conceived in this way, it appears that the strength of *The Joys of Motherhood* lies in its realistic presentation of African women in a manner that surpasses the artistic vision of male writers. To a large extent, this aspect gives *The Joys of Motherhood* a more intrinsic fervor since female sensibilities are articulated by the authentic practised voice. To borrow from Cornel West (1990), Emecheta provides a platform for an incisive exploration of female “specificity and particularity” from a more informed position. Through the portrayal of Nnu Ego responding individually to the dictates of degrading cultural values in the Ibo rural environment and subsequently, the Lagos urban society of the colonial era, the writer allows the reader to ferret out grievances that are often quieted or trivialized in preference for the more radical subversive platitudes of western feminists. Significantly, *The Joys of Motherhood* resonates with an autobiographical tinge, given that there are occasions when the circumstances of Emecheta and those of her protagonist seem to intersect. In her reference to this apparent dual portraiture of the author – cum- protagonist, Carolyn Lesjak notes:

On closer examination, however, Nnu Ego and Emecheta are bound by similar institutional structures and concerns.’ (*The Joys of Motherhood*, 137)

Lesjak goes on to refer to Emecheta’s rumination after her daughter leaves:

This was going to be my lot. I was going to give all I had to my children, only for them to spit on my face and tell me that I was a bad mother and run to a father who had never bought them a pair of pants. (*Head Above Water*, 224)

I argue, however, that though some of Nnu Ego’s woes mirror those of the author, it would be shortsighted to see her as an epitome of African woman’s suffering, and motherhood victimhood. The novel draws a character whose destiny is predetermined and driven by the cultural contingencies of the Ibo tribe, a woman whose life experiences are always haunted and

constrained by her own world. Stephane Robolin (2004) attributes her misfortune to the sins of her father, an allusion to the slave woman who “was forced to accompany her mistress into the spirit world.” (*The Joys of Motherhood*, 3). The fact that throughout her life Nnu Ego is always grappling with the desire to please and conform to the whims of the generation of male characters, including her own children, attests to the extent to which patriarchal values have thus continued to entrap women. Yet, Emecheta’s point is not to depict the African woman as a loser. Rather than merely invoke sympathy for her, Emecheta endorses the new cultural politics of female difference by drawing other female characters who exhibit divergent responses to patriarchal strangleholds and a rapacious colonial system that preys upon its African subjects. Consistent with the focus of my thesis, I draw attention to other relatively marginal female characters, whose plight and sensibilities attest to the complexity and individuality of African women.

Through the presentation of Ona, Agunwa, Nnu Ego, Adaku and other female characters, Emecheta illuminates the veneers of difference that are often elided by western critics who are wont to universalize African women’s images. Indeed there is scope for reflection in Dubek Laura’s assertion that Emecheta’s novel challenges assumptions that “sexist oppression affects all women similarly” (2001:24). But in my analysis I further posit that the complexity of female difference is always mediated through temporal and physical spaces.

Beginning with Ona’s rebelliousness, pitted against the powerful chief Agbadi, Emecheta enacts a traditional woman who is instrumental in subverting traditional conventions of her time. Though Ona’s response to the man she loves appears to be an act of madness, it highlights the fact that within traditional societies there were women who could act independently. While Ona must be credited with the unique vision and sensibility that empowers her to name herself and

deflate Agbadi's arrogance, Nnu Ego disappoints by her vacillating feeble responses to the patriarchy. Though the women are contesting the same patriarchal values that legitimate masculinities, their worlds are different. Raised in a generation that values marriage and motherhood, Ona defies both. Her reaction is contrasted with that of Agbadi's wives who are said to have sunk into "domesticity and motherhood", a characteristic that their husband seems to have grown weary of. The fact that Ona has dared to match her lover's macho traits of arrogance and stubbornness is a reflection of the need for us to acknowledge the complexity of traditional women's sensibilities. Her conduct and manner are contrasted with Agunwa and her co-wives, who had been taught to worship a man (*The Joys of Motherhood*, 21). Ona's resistance should also be examined in conjunction with that of the slave woman who resists being buried alive with her mistress Agunwa.

Nnu Ego's futile attempts at self fulfillment are seen through her myopic quest for survival and recognition within the matrimonial home of Ibuza where she will always be regarded as a second class citizen, and the urban setup in Lagos where she fails to adapt. In both these environments she exhibits a naïve and shortsighted understanding of the underlying cultural values that undermine female advancement. Thus, Emecheta suggests that while the deconstruction of patriarchy must begin within the domestic space, its impact must not be spoiled by a blind allegiance to degrading oppressive ideologies.

Divergent sensibilities, unique experiences: the dynamics of female subjectivities

In '*Under Western Eyes : Feminist Scholarship and Colonial discourse*', Chandra Talpade Mohanty suggests that there is a fundamental flaw in most western feminist analysis, "the fact that women across classes and cultures are socially constituted as a homogenous group identifiable prior to the process of analysis." I find this critic's observation a useful starting

point in the analysis of *The Joys of Motherhood*. Those who engage in a simplistic reading of the text are tempted to concentrate on Nnu Ego's distressful and tragic life as a prolific but unfulfilled mother as typical of all African women. While it is not my intention to tease out the novel's feminist credentials, I agree with Mohanty that it is wrong to homogenize African women's experiences and identities. I take umbrage with critics such as Eustace Palmer (2002), who fail to realize that Emecheta's protagonist is not necessarily an epitome of all African women. No wonder such critics pass the novel as a feminist work, a view that the author herself categorically denies. I strongly believe that the novel explores a whole range of female voices in various contexts.

Women in this novel do not necessarily constitute a homogenous group of victims, nor do they exhibit similar perceptions about their situations. While they are all products of the cultural and historical conditions that affect Igbo women, the multiplicity of their voices suggests that their experiences and responses to them are different and contingent upon the circumstances in which they find themselves. The writer uses a journey motif to underline such differences. By juxtaposing the rural and urban spaces and tracing the trajectory of female subjectivities from colonial times to the colonial era, Emecheta opens a discursive arena for seeing through the divergent sensibilities of African women. The women in this text find occasion to speak about themselves, other women, and about men. According to Solberg (2002), 'one should look for the African woman seen from "inside", in the words rendered by women.' In the chapter entitled *The duty of a father*, Ato teaches Nnu Ego, after the loss of the latter's baby, counsels her on the need to regain her laughter and goes on to proffer her philosophical knowledge of men's behavior, that while most of them "can make love and give babies, they cannot love" (*The Joys of Motherhood*,75). The polyglossic cadences of their voices attests to the unique

ways in which African women find expression and name themselves in typical social contexts. It is precisely these group and individual articulations and experiences that lend authenticity to cultural differences. Individual women such as Mama Abbey, whose husband is said to have deserted her, seek their own ways of survival. While some women in the text are endowed with agency to contest patriarchal values and colonial conditions, others appear too overwhelmed to contemplate possibilities for ameliorating their lot. This is precisely what Dubek Laura (2001:25) alludes to when she suggests that 'survival depends on individual change and a woman's ability to name herself). In the text Emecheta draws motley female characters whose roles and circumstances cannot be simplified. Even the very minor character Iyawo Itsekiri, makes an important contribution to Nnu Ego's welfare and her children.

Iyawo Itsekiri made a lot of the stew, hoping that she would be able to tempt both Nnu Ego and Oshia, for she still suspected malnutrition and not malaria. Was the main cause of the boy's illness. Why otherwise had his stomach become so huge and the hair on his head light brown instead of its normal black?

(The Joys of Motherhood, 104)

This altruistic gesture reveals the author's keen sense of observation about African women in spite of the fact that she often gets carried away by western feminists' essentialist portrayal of African women as willing victims. In fact, even the most submissive and naïve of them, Nnu Ego, occasionally finds a voice to question some patriarchal and colonial values. There is a sense in which the author's casting of Nnu Ego betrays her own bitterness about her life. In several instances the protagonist's plight reflects that of Emecheta herself, given that she brought up her own children in England after her husband had deserted her. Like her protagonist's children, Emecheta is also said to have been terribly heartbroken when the same children left her to join their irresponsible father.

Despite the above observations, the text is still strong in its deconstructionist slant, since its protagonist ends in disaster, pointing to the fact that there is nothing to emulate in her, no joy. Yet it does not mean that all African women are unhappy. Our analysis of female sensibilities must start with Ona and Agunwa, both of whom represent divergent responses to patriarchy in the pre-colonial era of the 1930's. Both women, including the ill-fated female slave buried alive with Agunwa, are assigned different voices which distinguish them as individuals acting in compliance with or against traditional practices that undermine the African woman's self worth.

Though tied to two men who wield the power to stifle her sensibilities, Ona manages to hold her own. She successfully revolts against the institution of marriage, an act regarded as a flagrant violation of African tradition at the time. Yet the situation is different with Agunwa. Agunwa might have acquiesced to the practice of polygamy but she is not necessarily treated as a chattel by men. In fact some of the women who submit retain a measure of respectability as individuals. Though ironically her husband is the cause of her death, following his sexual orgy with Ona, Agunwa is given a heroine's sendoff by her husband and sons at her funeral. Thus, contrary to Palmer's (2002:22) views, African women are not pounded like yam. I dismiss this flawed interpretation as an indication of a research that lacks sufficient validation regarding authentic images of African women. Emecheta uses Agbadi's preference for some tall exciting and proud African women, as typified by Ona, to deconstruct such western images of the traditional African women. In fact, Kamene Okonjo (cited in Theresa Derrickson (2002: 3), contends that " Ibo women still wielded considerable influence both within their marriages and within the larger community." As an epitome of the traditional African woman who defied the marriage institution, Ona finds partial fulfillment but remains flexible. She bears a child

and enlists her lover's commitment to seeing to it that her daughter is allowed freedom of choice of husband or not to marry. It is however, a commitment that betrays Agbadi's egotism, greed and treachery, one he partially fulfils since he arranges a husband for her while remaining fond of her. Significantly, Ona's fate is staked against the wishes of her father and lover. To note is that Agbadi remains charmed by Ona's desirability to the extent of denying his other wives their conjugal rights. Consequently, she wields a powerful influence on him because of her ability to control his erotic desires.

At this point in this argument it is important to take cognizance of distinct differences between Ona's rebelliousness and her daughter's submissive disposition. Unlike her mother, Nnu Ego is denied agency in both marriages. In her excessive trust in the power of the chi and myopic belief in the security of male children, she charts a precarious course that inexorably leads to self destruction. What is more pitiful is her warped propensity for self pity, dependency syndrome and a crazy obsession with motherhood. Hers is not a motherhood that can be celebrated, since, according to Remi Akujobi (2011: 6), it lacks the elevation of status, respect and myth that accompanies motherhood. Not surprising then, throughout her marriage she remains invisible, exulting in the misconception that only childbearing will guarantee her security and recognition in a male dominated world. "Maybe I shall come with a string of children," she dreams (*The Joys of Motherhood*, 39). Apparently, Emecheta warns against such a course of life, which is bound to cause disaster for the African woman. The ironic nature of the title suggests that African women who emulate her risk death and destruction. Throughout the novel Nnu Ego is portrayed as a woman who lacks the qualities of an African woman. Yet it must be acknowledged that she is not completely blind to her oppressed condition. On many occasions she shows resourcefulness and discernment, but fails to take agency to change her

situation. Even though at times she chides Nnaife for his irresponsibility and chauvinistic attitude, the cultural inertia remains too strong for her to take strategic agency outside the matrimonial home where she continues to suffer stoically. After Nnaife loses his job as a result of the departure of the Meers, she challenges him to go and look for a job. But such calls not only confirm her dependency role but also betray her lack of the kind of agency that is capable of breaking new ground in female emancipation. In the concluding chapter Emecheta sums up her protagonist's plight: "She had been brought up to believe that children made a woman" (119). It is from this perspective that we can see Adaku as Nnu Ego's foil, given her more proactive response to the patriarchal power and the effects of urbanization on African women .

A notable feature of Adaku's character is her flexibility and independence, qualities that earn her the readers' admiration . It does not take her long to fit into the restrictive and sordid living conditions of the poor Africans in Lagos. Her adaptability is also shown through the ease with which she fits into the Owulum family. As a co-wife she cushions herself against the petty jealousies shown by Nnu Ego. In fact, up until the time she leaves the family, she plays the good role of unifier, often forging solidarity with the senior wife. It is her who masterminds the cooking strike in a bid to force Nnaife to provide money for family upkeep. Van Allen (cited in Derrickson, 2002) decries what she calls the "loss of domestic authority experienced by both women as a result of their dependency on Nnaife." She contrasts women's predicament with the force it wielded upon men in pre-colonial times.

..African women , as a unit of solidarity, exercised considerable influence over village affairs and were notoriously effective at using boycotts , strikes and a process called "sitting on a man", to legislate the politics of both their private lives and their communities. (*The Joys of Motherhood*, 8)

Clearly, had it not been for Nnu Ego's shortsightedness, the strategy would have succeeded in knocking sense into their irresponsible husband. Nnu Ego's premature calling off the strike confirms her total dependence on Nnaife, who revels in his restored dominance.

In her readiness to subordinate petty female jealousies to more pressing issues of family survival by forcing their husband to play his traditional role as head of the family, Adaku epitomises the womanist quality of sisterly solidarity. Through interior monologue, Adaku warns that women make life difficult for each other (*The Joys of Motherhood*, 189). Before walking out on her matrimonial home Adaku bemoans the fact that women often make life intolerable for each other. Though she is as illiterate as Nnu Ego, she is endowed with foresight of a transcendental nature to the extent that many critics, such as Theresa Dickinson(2002), see her as the author's role model. Her sensibilities go beyond those of marriage and childbearing. Obioma Nnaemeka (1989:10) describes her attitude to motherhood and relations with her daughters as one that "encourages mutual growth and discourages dependency." To note is the observation that having witnessed the failure of the cooking strike, she subsequently decides to walk out of the marriage. Significantly, by refusing to define herself in terms of the patriarchal structures, she saves her life and that of her daughters. In her analysis of Adaku's role, Florence Stratton(1988) suggests that Adaku "climbers out of patriarchy's shallow grave." This is an allusion to her likeness to the slave woman who died heroically, threatening to come back and haunt the family. It is noteworthy that the attribution of the revenge theme to women is a characteristic feature of African tradition. Known as "Ngozi" in Shona culture, it is characterized by the aggrieved spirit (usually that of the mother), wrecking untold suffering on the perpetrator. In *Wounds* (2001), by Jameson Gadzikwa, Robina's aggrieved spirit, following her death by poisoning, causes destruction in the Tazvitya family, leading to a cleansing

ceremony. Regrettably, Nnu Ego's revenge, enacted posthumously at the end of the novel, proves ineffectual, compared to Adaku's. Florence Stratton observes that Adaku, though a marginalized character, remains strong as a result of the female visibility and resistance she represents.

Another woman whose voice calls for attention is Adankwo, who refuses to join Nnu Ego and Adaku as an inherited wife. Concerned about Nnu Ego's prolonged stay in Ibuza after her father's burial, she shows awareness of male compatibility by advising her to go back to save her children's inheritance. Though she appears to share Nnu Ego's belief in male privilege and power, she is more dignified and wiser. "We as a family don't all have to live and be brought up in the same place," are the words of her wise counsel (159). Adankwo still retains her rights because she has elected to remain in Ibuza instead of following Nnaife to Lagos as custom on wife inheritance would dictate. That choice is a measure of freedom, despite the fact that some would argue that she is still living within the Owulum household. By remaining in the home of her late husband she maintains her status and dignity. In the African tradition, women do not have to deprive themselves of male companionship to be considered independent. Kalu Anthonia (2003:6) argues that African women exist as "a complementary opposite of males." This view is plausible, and is in line with the Africana Womanist theory which posits that African women seek compatible relationships with their male counterparts. It clearly distances itself from the western feminist views that seem to advocate confrontation. As Susan Andrada indicates, there is need to address "the heterogeneity that analyses of African women's texts must foreground to respect the cultural heterogeneity of Africa"(7).

Furthermore, in *Kehinde and Taiwo*, Emecheta has constructed a younger generation of women whose sensibilities are radically different from their mothers. Kehinde shocks her father by

boldly telling him that she wants to marry the butcher's son. This rebellious attitude is also found in Taiwo, her twin sister. The girls' utterances mark a new beginning in identity formation for the African woman in the emerging dispensation.

Marriage , Masculinities and female entrapment in the domestic sphere

Given its cultural context, *The Joys of Motherhood* revolves around issues of marriage and choice. Characters in the text are always making choices or grappling with effects of choices made for them by men acting within the institution of patriarchy. My understanding of the writer is that she is not against marriage. Rather , her interest is in unravelling the multiple discursive processes imbedded within African societies. To begin with , the aspect of choice , whose implications are both psychological and cultural, is summed up by Ona early in the novel, when she pleads with Agbadi to allow her daughter to have a life of her own, a husband if she needed one. Though addressed passionately to her lover at the time, this is a key statement whose political import has wider repercussions in so far as it questions the traditional society's treatment of women. While the statement smacks of Ona's paranoia over her child's future in a patriarchal environment where women are silenced, it does not completely rule out the existence of opportunities for women to contest their social status. But, as Heather Glover (2005) has astutely observed, Ona's pleas are not respected since her daughter fails to live a life of her own. Emecheta suggests that somehow Nnu Ego shares this frustrating entrapment with Ona her mother; she is at the mercy of Agbadi and Obi Umuna, the men who deny her agency by choosing a husband for her. Clearly, what follows is a life blighted by a desire to please the men and subsequently, her sons. It is a life of self inflicted entrapment. In the words of Heather Glover (2005:3), "Nnu Ego fails to obtain a life of her own, for she commits herself wholly to the welfare of her children and to being an exemplary wife to Nnaife, a man for whom she does not care." I share Glover's observation that instead of seeing Nnu Ego as Emecheta's heroine,

we need to regard her as a failure whose actions must not be emulated. In my view, the true heroines are Adaku, Ona, Kehinde and Taiwo. These women in their own temporality and discursive spaces, grapple with the suffocating influence of patriarchy and the indirect effects of colonialism and urbanization. Yet, while the former must indeed be condemned for its oppressive values, African women must learn to cope with the inevitability of change brought about by urbanization. By denying these women sufficient space in the novel, Emecheta seems to have made a literary blunder because it is precisely within these women's actions and utterances that change resides.

Through Ona's rebellious response to Agbadi, we are made to evaluate traditional African society as one whose cultural values stifle and gag women's agency. In her refusal to succumb to male dominance under her circumstances, Ona achieves self-fulfillment. To note is that she manages to extend her domestic space where most of her colleagues remain entrapped. Ironically, the role of spearheading African woman's transformation is taken up later in the novel through Adaku, who also grabs agency by leaving her matrimonial home. It would seem that her decision is more justified since it is undertaken after two consecutive marriages to different men, and in different domestic environments. The first time we meet Adaku is when she arrives in Lagos to join the Owulum family as an inherited wife. Not only does her arrival mark her as an exchange commodity in the marriage contract but it also enacts a reversal of spatial configuration. The Ibuza extended family community confers a wider social space to women along kinship lines, while limiting their opportunities for venturing into other means of economic survival in an urban environment that falls under the jurisdiction of colonial masters. Within this urban space Adaku finds the physical space of Nnaife's makeshift one room revolting and stinking. Within this restricted terrain Adaku has to adapt to a married life in

which the senior wife repeatedly makes legitimate claim to the husband by virtue of first marriage and Nnu Ego's pride in male children. Worse still, Nnaife is often away looking for a job or cutting grass, denying her the comfort and company she desperately needs for adaptation. It must also be noted that the marriage contract, according to Ibo tradition, consigns the woman to the family line even after her husband's death. It is from this perspective that I see the forced remarriage of Adaku as Emecheta's way of attacking the failure by the Ibo tradition to confer freedom to widows.

Ironically, Nnu Ego, who enjoys a wider social space in Lagos than Adaku, fails to make good use of it to venture into more productive economic projects. Florence Stratton observes that "the notion that she might become financially independent if she only stopped childbearing never enters her mind." Sadly, in her obsession with childbearing, Nnu Ego is soon outstripped by the more adventurous Adaku, who soon becomes rich, much to the senior wife's chagrin. Given the circle of friends who are always willing to assist her, Nnu Ego remains fixated on her male children's future support. It is clear then that Nnu Ego is not the writer's model of a self fulfilled independent woman. The point that must be emphasized here is that African women do not have to be docile to earn legitimacy in the matrimonial home. The home where the mother is independent, flexible and resourceful, can be as liberating and as male compatible as any other.

Multiple voices of female cultural difference are also discernible in some minor characters such as Ato, Mama Abbey and Cordelia. These women are always available to provide Nnu Ego with opportunities for extending her social space through sisterhood solidarity, in the same way Ramatoulaye helps Aissatou manage her stress in Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*. Ato comforts Nnu Ego after the loss of her baby and teaches her to value the power of laughter.

In addition, she counsels her on male behavior. Both Ato and Cordellia are always available to lend moral support to Nnu Ego, which she desperately needs to remain in a home where the glory of having children is the only reason to sticking to her disgusting husband. Florence Stratton blames her for remaining helplessly trapped in her assigned role as a “sacrificial victim.” Stratton further observes that her ‘ultraconservative upbringing is also the reason why she later conspires to assign her daughters to the same restrictive existence she so desperately needs to escape.’ One explanation to be derived from this baffling kind of entrapment is her obsession with the power of the chi, which often gives her a false sense of security, in spite of the abject poverty around her. The slave mentality of her chi has transferred on to her character, to combine with her own deep seated fear of Nnaife’s macho traits. But the novel also strongly alludes to the fact that there is no formula with which to judge African women’s responses to the cultural conditions within which they find themselves. Thus, one of the motors of female difference is personal agency which is often mediated through one’s awareness of the self.

Because Ato’s concept of motherhood is rooted in the personal experiences she has learnt from the community, she has a far more profound and altruistic sense of the African woman’s self worth and identity than Nnu Ego, whose essence of womanhood is circumscribed by the supernatural and a paranoid feeling of insecurity without male patronage. The tragedy of Nnu Ego is that she fails to see that there are other avenues for improving her life. As Paul Freire (1970:49) observes:

In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform.

Though women in this novel do not suffer oppression in the Freirian sense, one gets the feeling that they need to extricate themselves from either self delusion , or the effects of tradition.

Intrusive values: the urban colonial space and challenges for the African woman

Apart from articulating the diversity of female voices within the African cultural environment, *The Joys of Motherhood* also subtly touches on the crises that affect both men and women in the postcolonial societies. Particularly vulnerable to the influence of colonialism are the illiterate men and women living in the urban areas. Invariably, there is a ripple effect on the children in terms of living space, opportunities for jobs and education. In the same vein, Emecheta alludes to the proliferation of intertribal prejudices and conflicts. These problems are always a threat to group and family solidarity and they reach a head through Naiife's rabid attack on the Yoruba family whose son his daughter Kehinde had eloped to. Significantly, this incident adds a new dimension to the politics of female cultural difference, by raising questions of values, entrenched taboos and stereotypes, all of which are potential threats to female visibility and solidarity in the new dispensation.

Nnu Ego laments that Nnaiife does not give her as much care and support as Amatokwu used to do. Upon the death of her child she says:

He would have mourned aloud with her ... Yes, Amatokwu measured up to the standards her culture had led her to expect of a man. (*The Joys of Motherhood*, 72)

In her naivety she judges the two men by the same yardstick, yet they are different, first as individuals and secondly as products of unique socializing environments. Indirectly, Emecheta blames colonization for depriving women of opportunities to cherish male companionship.

Earlier in the text, Nnu Ego mocks Nnaife for accepting a demeaning job of washing white women's undergarments. This feeling of revulsion at the emasculation of African men is brought out in the assertion, "I want to live with a man, not a woman made man." This statement, which apparently suggests her acceptance of male dominance over women, is also shared by Cordelia, who bemoans the dearth of cultural values that sustain African men's honour and identity.

"Men here are busy being white man's servants to be men.", she intones. "Men in Lagos are now like machines" (*The Joys of Motherhood*, 51). Cordelia's observations give credence to critical views that see through the intrusion of colonial values into African culture as divisive and inflicting psychic damage that leads to strained relationships between black men and women, especially in urban areas where working men spend most of their time away from home. It underlines the need for a paradigm shift that will restore spousal compatibility by affording African women greater agency expected of them in the materialistic urban environment. According to Derrickson (2002:2) :

The Ibo women of Emecheta's novel are subjected to new forms of exploitation as they are asked to assume traditional duties and responsibilities under a newly imported economic system that unlike their native system fails to validate or reward them for such work.

Derrickson goes on to assert that "colonialism was a far greater threat to their collective well being than the strictures of village patriarchy" (2002:3). While this observation is true, it shifts attention away from Emecheta's agenda, that of portraying the African women as a diverse group capable of adapting to historical changes as individuals. My contention is that whether they are responding to strictures of tradition or colonialism, the variables that inform their sensibilities are not always traceable to externalities of colonial or imperial power. Men will

have to embrace a new culture that endorses female visibility in the interests of family survival and awareness of women's productive potential in the commercial world. Yet Nnu Ego refuses to accept the inevitability of change. Even when Iyawo Itsekiri saves her children from starving, she fails to learn the implications of this kind gesture. The only adjustment she makes to her lifestyle is acceptance of Adaku and later Okpo as co-wives. What emerges in the text is that part of the tragedy that befalls Nnu Ego is failure to face up to the challenges of the times. Adaku by contrast benefits from her adaptation and a realization that a woman does not need a man to be complete.

In the portrayal of Kehinde and Taiwo, Emecheta envisages a new generation of African women who are more independent and empowered than Adaku and Mama Abbey. The two girls' assertiveness resembles that of their grandmother Ona. They embody the political values that their mother Nnu Ego articulates but fails to put into practice. In her moments of introspection she moans:

God when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage? She prayed. (*The Joys of Motherhood*, 86)

Ironically, in the same prayer Nnu Ego blames herself for not having hope in her daughters. It is difficult to understand why she does not summon enough courage to ameliorate her situation, given that she is fully aware of the oppressive conditions she is facing.

But who made the law that we should not hope in our daughters? We women subscribe to that law more than anyone. Until we change it is still a man's world (*The Joys of Motherhood*, 187).

Nnu Ego's musings sound like an echo of Emecheta's authorial voice protesting against patriarchal rule which disadvantages girls and women. It is an indictment of male chauvinism,

personified in Nnaife's biased attitude to his daughters. On the contrary, Mama Abbey and Adaku epitomize the new vision that accommodates girls in socioeconomic development. Both women see to it that their daughters acquire the education that will raise their status and potential for self fulfillment. The implication is that unlike in the urban environment, the close agrarian traditional Ibo culture does not provide opportunities for the education of the girl child.

It is also ironical that the presence of colonialists in Nigeria had spawned a nuclear family which has very little ties with the conservative family in the rural areas. Within the new urban colonial space, most women have become more visible as they have to supplement the family income. The text reveals that at one time Nnaife depended on the meager cigarette selling business of his wife. Emecheta, however suggests that the women's complementary efforts are not always appreciated by men, most of whom want to maintain their superior hold, to maintain the lifestyles of their counterparts in rural villages. The point that the writer explicitly makes here is that women who are prepared to adapt have greater chances of prospering and fulfilling themselves than men. Though she has been abandoned, Mama Abbey is a self fulfilled woman, who is able to send her son to a decent College. Like Adaku, she gains visibility by operating outside the dictates of traditional boundaries. On the contrary, Nnu Ego is heartbroken because she always wants to conform, despite the unstable playing field. She seeks solutions from within, through self pity, instead of adopting bold initiatives to wrestle with the constraining forces. As Carolyn Lesjak (2002:138) observes:

What the novel actually depicts is the radical disjunction between Nnu Ego's expectations and her experiences as a wife and mother. The notion of playing it by the rules assumes a stable ground upon which such rules can be erected.

Because the Lagos urban colonial field was no longer suitable for her, she should have heeded the advice of other women and friends such as Mama Abbey, who were always at hand to assist. Sadly, she chooses to remain a slave to tradition, haunted by the spirit of the female slave, her chi.

Parenting in an African family context : hopes and impediments, conflicting values

An important theme that is encoded in the *Joys of Motherhood* is the effect of changes in cultural values. In pursuit of this theme, Emecheta explores the growing challenges faced by African women in the execution of their duties in both the pre-colonial and colonial eras. Throughout, female characters are seen as either grappling or coping with challenges associated with motherhood and nurturing children. Though parenting is a natural role for both spouses to undertake, the novel suggests that there is always a psychological nexus that associates women with greater affinities for parenting than is the case with men. Commenting on the value of motherhood, Akujobi (2011), notes:

motherhood is also seen as a moral transformation whereby a woman comes to terms with being different in that she ceases to be an autonomous individual because she is in one way or another attached to another, her baby. (2011: 2).

In most cases the novel enacts what Vambe M.T. (2005), refers to as “unbalanced relationships.” My reading of the novel reveals that while most African women are capable of dutifully taking parental responsibilities, even in the absence of their husbands, they are affected differently in the process. In their diversity, the women in the novel either exhibit fractured relationships with their spouses or stronger filial attachments to their children than their husbands. During the stillborn cooking strike, Nnaife, in a characteristic show of abdication of responsibility, digs in:

It's your responsibility to feed your children as best as you can. Don't worry about me. I shall take care of myself. (*The Joys of Motherhood*, 136)

In the novel men invariably appear as arrogant spectators with respect to the fundamental role of nurturing children. The African women's unconditional commitment to parenting is foregrounded in the first chapter where Nnu Ego, as a young mother, nearly commits suicide after the loss of her son Ngozi. Significantly, her husband does not share the same deep sense of loss. Unlike Amatokwu, Nnaife neither grieves with nor comforts his wife.

Earlier in the novel Ona pleads with Agbadi to remain a responsible parent to their daughter, Nnu Ego. But to the reader's dismay, Agbadi proves to be only interested in her bride price, not her welfare. The African woman's physical and emotional attachment is also played out through Amatokwu's wives, Mama Abbey, Adaku and Iyawo Itsekiri. As Cornel West (1990) argues in his seminal paper on *The New Cultural politics of female difference*, these women's responses attest to the unique specific, contextual discursive practices that can neither be ignored nor universalized. Indeed NnuEgo's obsession with child bearing and rearing as a panacea for all problems must not detract from discerning the diversity of women's "creative responses to the precise circumstances of their present moment" (West). Though Ona is merely Agbadi's mistress, she retains the maternal attachment to her daughter by looking beyond Nnu Ego's future. The filial bond between her daughter does not lead to a transference of the same parental sensibilities. While both look into their children's future lives, Nnu Ego's shortsighted forlorn hope in male children's security is contrasted with her mother's trail blazing voicing for the liberation of the girl child. Where Ona calls for her lover to allow their daughter to be granted freedom of choice of husband, Nnu Ego suppresses hers by constantly reminding them

of their inferiority compared to their bothers, and denying them similar opportunities to acquire education.

Male irresponsibility is exposed through Nnaife, who is more interested in spending his money drinking palm wine instead of providing for his starving children. Nnaife's abdication of his role as head of family is clearly brought out in the chapter ironically titled 'The Duty of a father.' In this chapter Emecheta captures female talk between Ato, Cordelia and NnuEgo to expose men's selfishness and negative concept of parenthood. During the cooking strike Naife practically disowns his children, in a stupid show of his masculinity, when he says children belong to the mother. Emecheta contrasts male irresponsibility in parenting with the polyglossic articulations of women's experiences, often enacting and juxtaposing instances of female solidarity with those of individual sensibilities and agency. In both the urban and traditional environments, parenting is decidedly gendered. The communities of practice in these environments exhibit a high level of female visibility. According to Sally McConnel –Ginnet (in Meyerhorff and Holmes 2004:71) :

a community of practice (CofP) is a group of people brought together by some mutual endeavour , some common enterprise in which they are engaged and to which they bring a shared repertoire of resources, including linguistic resources , and for which they are mutually accountable.

Emecheta makes the point that in spite of the petty conflicts and jealousies among them, the women consider motherhood as their primary concern. In their woman talk they present themselves as themselves, in a world they know too well, compared to their male counterparts. The first instance of female solidarity in mothering is brought out in Nnu Ego's first marriage , when she nurses her co-wife's child up until Amatokwu slaps her for plotting to steal the

baby, not for feeding him, since tradition allowed surrogate motherhood. Amatokwu's violent attack on his wife demonstrates his ignorance of female sensibilities regarding child rearing, widely regarded as an exclusively feminine duty in traditional societies. In the Lagos urban community of practice, women's prominent role in surrogate parenting is even more pronounced. This is a traditional African practice which works particularly well in the rural areas where it is often couched in polygamous families. The urban environment is thus a test case for superimposing the practice onto an African family in transition, torn apart by the dictates of the colonial economic system. With Nnaife and his friends spending most of their time at work or drinking palm wine, the onus of parenting once again falls on the women. All the women render emotional support to NnuEgo, especially in times of need. Nnaife's bubbly young wife adapts well into the family and is always supportive to Nnu Ego. Often she plays the role of surrogate mother to her senior wife's young children such as Adim. Mama Abbey, Iyawo Itsekiri and Cordelia provide solidarity by attending to her children's welfare. Mama Abbey offers to take Oshea, whom she affectionately calls 'our son', to the sea for sightseeing. On his part, the boy feels very comfortable around the surrogate mother. In fact it is mostly through these women that Nnu Ego is able to adapt to the new urban environment.

The theme of parenting is mostly played out through Nnaife and Nnu Ego. A close examination of the couple will reveal that their understanding of cultural values has a negative effect on their children. The discrepancy between parental expectations and children's sensibilities is the major cause of conflict and disappointment for both. Nnaife and Nnu Ego have failed to realise that in the changing world the practice of deferred reciprocal support from the children is no longer a guarantee for old age security. Upon being told that it was time for him to take over family responsibilities Oshia is visibly annoyed and surprised. In his response he declares that

under no circumstances will he commit himself to his father's responsibilities. He reveals that he is actually saving to go to the U.S. for further studies. This is a typical case of generational conflict. The confrontation reaches fever heat when Oshia declares, "I can do without seeing your face, old man" (*The Joys of Motherhood*, 201). Given that Nnaife has sacrificed for his son's school fees, one feels that he has a point, and deserves his son's support, not a slap in the face.

The above incident highlights the ideological conflict between parents and their children, a development that can be attributed to colonial values which often alienate children from their parents. In this era the young people are not prepared to make up for the miseries of their parents. But the incident is also an occasion for Emecheta to question some of the traditional values that foist a family burden on male children. While the system worked very well in traditional times, it tends to limit individual aspirations. Not surprisingly, Nnaife is disappointed by his daughters' refusal to accept his choice of marriage partner. Emecheta deliberately gives agency to Taiwo and Kehinde to stress the need for African parents to embrace change that divests them of unfair demands and control over their children's destiny. Though Kehinde's claim for self definition and visibility has disastrous consequences on family cohesion, in the manner that it leads to Nnaife nearly committing murder and his subsequent imprisonment, it charts the way forward for female empowerment and voicing. Asked by the policeman arresting Nnaife, Kehinde boldly replies, "I ran to them. And I am going to marry Aremu, the butcher's son" (*The Joys of Motherhood*, 210). The repetition of "I" in Kehinde's answer is an affirmation of her embracing agency and determination to name herself. Coincidentally, it is at this moment that her mother appears to rue her failure to discern the truth. In her interior monologue she says :

Things have changed... the fact is that parents only get reflected glory from their children nowadays. (*The Joys of Motherhood*, 220)

The irony in the above statement is that it suggests her absolving of Kehinde of rebellious behavior. The divergent perceptions between the mother and her daughters, with respect to matters of choice and independence demonstrates that within the same family, generational differences and circumstances are crucial in identifying veneers of female cultural difference. It is left for Adaku to tell Nnu Ego that she has been wrong in believing that Nnaife owns her.

Unravelling the diversity of African women's heteroglossia

The text traverses the diversity of African women's experiences, mostly through their utterances in specific situations. The women's discourse, which largely defines their circumstances and identity, corresponds with Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia. It can be argued that in *The Joys of Motherhood*, the ideological discourses of imperialism and patriarchy both work to gag the African woman's voice, but in varying degrees of intensity. In their 'small talk' the women in the text grapple with the means with which to contest the dominant discourses opposed to their wellbeing. This they do in their 'specific social spheres,' as individuals or solidarity groups. Okeke, cited by Heather Glover (2005:3), *Watermarks*, notes:

Within many traditional African communities exists a network of women that work together to sustain a sense of female kinship, a support system in which women aid one another in village life and provide each other with friendship and sisterhood.

In the text the key characters make choices; either submitting to the discourse of patriarchy and colonial ideological impositions or seeking fulfillment of a liberatory paradigm. A symbol of the centrifugal discourse women need to subvert the male order, Ona can be lauded for her brave

stance in taming the proud Agbadi, by refusing to marry him, while agreeing to be his mistress. Her rebellious but compromising self definition suggests that not all pre-colonial society's women succumbed to the oppressive rule of patriarchy. What is particularly intriguing is that within a culture that privileges men, Ona finds her own language that is fulfilling. However, Emecheta also makes it clear that there were also other women as bold and as assertive as Ona. Agbadi is said to have preferred the tall and aggressive women of his time.

Emecheta's depiction of Nnu Ego elicits pertinent discursive issues about African women which cannot be ignored. I strongly feel that those who write off Nnu Ego as a submissive and as perpetually silenced are not doing justice to the character's sense of wellbeing. I argue that though she is often found submitting, the author reveals that there are moments when she resists, in her own way. What is disappointing however, is her apparent ambivalence, which also points to Emecheta's as well. For why would she create a character who is always aware of her oppressed condition yet remains fixated to her dreams? Obsessed by the desire to have children, Nnu Ego subordinates her individual faculties and freedom to the expectations of her husband and, by extension, the Ibuza community. This aspect of her character is initially shown in her first marriage to Amatokuwu. When she fails to conceive she quickly apportions blame on herself, thereby playing into the hands of the cultural stereotype that condones self-denigration of women. Never does it cross her mind that matters of conception are a mutual factor.

I am sure the fault is on my side. You do everything right. How can I face my father and tell him I have failed? I don't like going there these days because his wives always rush out to greet me hoping I am already carrying a child. (*The Joys of Motherhood*, 31)

Nnu Ego's language is disappointingly self-effacing, pointing to the fact that she has thoroughly internalized patriarchal discourse which denies a woman a voice to question the status of a man on matters of conception. Faced with prospects of being relegated to role of Amatokwu's labourer in the yam field, following his marriage to another wife, she can only plead for clemency, while blaming herself all the way.

Amatokwu, remember when I first came to your house? Remember how you used to want me here with only the sky for our shelter? What happened to us Amatokwu? Is it my fault that I did not have a child for you? (*The Joys of Motherhood*, 32)

Her feeble entreaty betrays a sensibility that has totally surrendered to the dictates of male authority. It is a desperate denial of her self-worth, a condition that further reinforces her belief in the power of the chi. But certainly her behavior is not a characteristic feature of all African women who find themselves in a similar predicament. Significantly then, the first phase of Nnu Ego's life is characterized by her submissive behavior. The inclination to submit to male authority is reproduced during her second marriage but on a lesser scale. When Nnaife ravishes her tired body on the first day of her arrival in Lagos she fails to find words of protest. Despite the fact that she finds his physical appearance revolting, she consoles herself by hoping that he will give her a baby. Indeed when she picks up the pregnancy she says, 'He has made me into a real woman.'

But her apologetic sense of gratitude should not cloud the many occasions when she confronts Nnaife with his own weaknesses. Often taunting him for his ugliness and lack of planning strategy, she exhibits a stubborn disaffection that unfortunately fails to make an impact on Nnaife. This is because her protesting voice is often tinged with cautious optimism, as if she

fears to lose the safe space of her matrimonial home. Clearly, her action shows a woman who places too much faith in the benevolent rewards of tradition. Other instances when Nnu Ego appears to be protesting are worth noting. For instance, she taunts Nnaife for taking up the demeaning job of washing white women's undergarments. In her discontentment she is supported by Cordelia whose taunts are directed at urban men in general.

Men here are busy being white man's servants. Their manhood has been taken away from them. (*The Joys of Motherhood*, 193)

Later in the text when Nnaife overstays at home amusing himself by twanging at the abandoned guitar, during an altercation, she hits him back with a broom, shouting: 'Go and get a job, who is your father that you can come and beat me?' (127)

Given that the tenor of her complaints do not transform her life, compared with Adaku, it can be said that she fails to break new ground. Nnaife learns not to take her seriously. Her attempts at voicing are often compromised by ambivalence. On many occasions her voicing degenerates into futile stoicism. It would thus appear that it is actually in the minor characters; Ona, Adaku, Ato, and Cordelia that Emecheta invests much of the secrecy and diversity inscribed in the interstices of female talk. Each of these articulates her own views in a manner of one knowing herself. Most of the women's perceptions are enunciated in this 'small talk', within which are lodged the pith of African women's sensibilities. These female discourses are also meant to foster women's solidarity and friendship. Thus, within the safety of their consciences the women share sensibilities deriving from their deep seated grievances. They also help relieve the emotional stresses inflicted by male companionship.

To note is the fact that it is Cordelia who confides in Nnu Ego, the view that men in a colonial setup have been emasculated by a political force they cannot confront; hence they often take it

upon their wives. In a moving incident, Ato consoles Nnu Ego on the loss of her baby, reminding her of the many therapeutic effects of laughter. Ato knows the psychology of a slighted or bereaved woman ; hence she seeks to soothe Nnu Ego's wounded image. To note here is Ato's reassuring words to her friend:

“You have the same look in your eyes, seeking something, yet not knowing what?” (76). In spite of this wise counsel and the warm companionship, Nnu Ego often chooses to listen to her chi instead of her supportive friends. Though assigned a very minor space in the text, Ato emerges as the voice of reason, whose patronizing words complement those of the more resourceful Adaku. For the protagonist, then, these women constitute a discursive space within which she must redefine herself. This she refuses, a regrettable stance that Adaku, seeing through her predicament, attributes to too much belief in tradition. A symbol of womanist vision and sensibility, Adaku's utterances and action attests to the importance of seeking and articulating an alternative route for women's liberation. Fed up with the cramped conditions as a co-wife , and having borne the brunt of Nu Ego's incessant bragging about the advantages of male children, she decides to walk into the wide expanse of freedom.

Conclusion

The major success of *The Joys of Motherhood* lies in its ability to cast a roving spotlight on the diversity of African women's voices on a spatio-temporal level. This is in spite of her overconcentration on Nnu Ego's misguided perceptions, ostensibly in a bid to evoke sympathy for the protagonist and to sound a clarion call for cultural transformation. Yet, by enacting Nnu Ego's double in Ona and Adaku, Emecheta not only succeeds in mapping out a complex cultural profile that cannot be predicted but she also envisions alternative transformative avenues for the African woman.

Given her hybrid identity as a London immigrant and as a Nigerian woman, it is easy to read ambivalent cadences in Emecheta's narrative. Neither would she commit herself to the political persuasions of western feminists nor an uncritical acquiescence to patriarchy. By drawing female characters who are still indirectly tied to or at the mercy of male oppression, Emecheta seems to have condemned African women, albeit inadvertently, to stereotypes of male patronage. This is unlike in her eponymous novel *Kehinde*, where the protagonist of the same name returns to London to reclaim her house, in the absence of her husband Albert, the latter firmly installed as a capitalist traditional chief back in Lagos. However, in another novel *Second Class Citizen*, where Adah is represented as an intelligent independent woman who is the breadwinner of the family, Emecheta seems to have made amends to her portrayal of characters in *The Joys of Motherhood*.

It can thus be said that Emecheta fails to create a character who stands for the ideals the black contemporary woman would wish to emulate in Nigeria or Africa. Both Ona and Adaku are relegated to the margins of representation. It is as if she was reluctant to portray a female character who would resemble those depicted by western feminists. If she really meant to depict the authentic voice of the African woman against dominant cultural forces, then the existential role she assigns them is not quite convincing. For, though Ona rebels, she dies early, like Nhamo in Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*; hence she only exerts a retrospective effect on the plot. As if this was not enough, her daughter, Nnu Ego only exerts the full force of her anguish posthumously through the spiritual realm. Such rendering makes me uneasy because it paints a negative image of the African woman. In the same vein, Adaku leaves, only to resort to prostitution to make a living, thereby invoking the moral outrage linked to the practice. While one may acknowledge Emecheta's intention to portray the African woman as male compatible,

such an agenda must not be achieved at the expense of the commercialization of women's bodies. It is from this standpoint that I share Stephen Robolin's (1988) concerns when she says:

Adaku's prostitution of her body works against the "custom of (the) people." (166), and flies in the face of the normative code of conduct- an infraction that earns her a certain degree of social ostracism. Moreover, to the extent that Adaku's relinquishment of social esteem is for the sake of her young daughters, the young mother unwittingly reproduces the dynamic she rejects in the first place: self sacrifice for the benefit of others. (Robolin,2004: 88)

The next chapter further explores the diversity of African women, especially in its examination of female discourse that exposes internal contradictions regarding issues of oppression, reverse racism and visibility.

Chapter Four : Kehinde, by Buchi Emecheta:

The motif of Space in female visibility and self representation

One of the discursive motors of difference that continues to gain currency in the postcolonial era involves frequent calls for gender complementarity, not necessarily in the same radicalist militant western tenor but one that seeks recognition of roles and respect for difference. Like her other works, Emecheta's *Kehinde* draws from, without necessarily being limited to, the womanist ideal, initiated by Hudson-Weems and touted by male and female critics alike. The novel addresses the need for cultural transformation and abrogation of some values which have seen women relegated to positions of inferiority. Given the fact that previous research in this area has confirmed that pre-colonial societies treated women with honour, it would seem that the need for African societies to redress the imbalance has become a more compelling paradigm shift. This feature is brought out through the writer's insistent calls for a revision of gender relations in Africa, a continent inevitably transformed by effects of modernization and globalization that has, as a result of space time convergence, brought about intersection of cultural values. It is from this standpoint that I agree with Monique Johnson's (2013:26) observation that the study addresses "the reflection of Africa through the eyes of a woman who is at once deeply entrenched in Igbo culture, yet seeking to free herself from oppressive aspects of it."

The novel's focus on cultural setting and geographical space as motors engendering the female characters' responses to their conditions is particularly significant in this part of my thesis. I argue that Kehinde's struggle for self recognition and visibility is enacted on the London and Lagos spaces. Both locations provide the critical "in-between spaces" for the protagonist's creative consciousness to contest cultural notions of 'fixity' (Bhabha,1994). Throughout, the

work refuses to endorse the notion of the African woman's image as a fixed reality. In its thrust on female cultural difference the novel calls for recognition of the multiple circumstances within which African women find themselves.

Emerging perceptions: diasporic oscillations of the African woman's quest for self recognition

Within the literary canon of diasporan literature, significantly little has been written to address the dynamics of female presence and desire in the imperial destination country. This is understandable, given that migrations to the former colonial country have always been voluntary and thus often conceived of in terms of temporary sojourns. In her astute analysis of such migrations Carol Boyce Davis (2002:112) remarks:

The Black women who are writing out of their experience of Britain articulate temporalities and locations outside the paradigms set by men, white society, British literary establishments.

While in the colonial era those who migrated to the western nations often returned to be greeted with new honours and prestige, focus has shifted and narrowed to been-to's who yearn to go back and settle in the foreign country, convinced that their natural motherland no longer has anything to offer them. Over the past decades African women of the post-independence era who have lived in Europe have expressed a desire to return to the Diaspora where they are less constrained by the patriarchal conventions that in many respects, still disadvantage women. This neither implies that England has become a paradise for the oppressed African woman, nor that there are no gender reforms in the sociopolitical landscape in Africa. The major challenge is that most women feel that such reforms are taking too long to permeate the ordinary African woman in postcolonial nations. This apparent disillusionment is captured by Toivanen (2013:12) when she attributes the unsuccessful homecoming returns to the Postcolonial

nation states' failure to "provide its female citizens with viable living conditions at home." This aspect is given further emphasis by Haraway (cited in Eagleton 1991: 347) when she notes that:

The new female subject is mobile and flexible, traversing all manner of psychological, linguistic and conceptual barriers. Along the way she embraces contradictions, ambiguity, irony, revels in her new legitimacy.

Emecheta's *Kehinde* details a tale of the eponymous character's broadening of consciousness in her journeys between her motherland and the metropolitan city of London. Though the text presents the London cosmopolitan setting as the desired destination for men and women of both races, it seems to portray African women as the more likely beneficiaries of the diasporic bait, even as they are caught up in the midst of contradictory intersecting cultural spaces. Kehinde's initial journey to join her future husband during the full blossom of their love, through the one where she follows him back to Nigeria, up until her lone return to London as a disillusioned woman, attests to Emecheta's concern over a different quest for recognition by the African woman. Seemingly contradictory in its portrayal of the romantic optimism that the couple enjoy in a foreign country, the text shocks the reader in its depiction of cultural conventions that tear the couple apart, psychologically, and physically from the values that held them together. What we witness here is a trajectory of youthful romantic optimism within a foreign country, a condition that gradually gives way to despondency and paradoxically culminates in self-fulfillment.

In her text, Emecheta suggests that Kehinde and Albert are affected differently by the culture of the Diaspora, in the same way their staggered return to Nigeria is marked by the contingent widening of differences that can only be attributed to their hybridized consciousnesses and

gender. Okonjo – Ogunyemi’s (cited in Omolola 2013:6) astute observation that “Emecheta’s been-to fiction straddles sharply contrasting worlds” makes interesting reading in our analysis of African women’s new migratory patterns. While the observation could have been valid during the colonial era, I feel that it is no longer in sync with the contemporary socio-political situation. Pauline Adah Uwakweh’s (cited in Omolola 2013:9) complaint about Emecheta’s cultural ambiguous position also makes me uneasy. In her critique she alleges that the writer is torn by her allegiance to African culture and her ideological commitment to feminism. Firstly, I want to reiterate that Emecheta has always denied that her works are informed by the feminist tradition. In any case, what brand of feminism does the critique want the author to espouse? Secondly, I believe that the writer is only using her protagonist as a representation of African women whose consciousness has been reawakened to a point where they have had to weigh possibilities of living in London or Lagos. This clearly depends on individual choice. It does not necessarily translate into a universal prescription for African women in the Diaspora. In its adoption of a new agency for African women, the text addresses a trend gaining currency in the new political dispensation. Over the past decade Zimbabweans have witnessed a similar trend in migration patterns triggered by the economic meltdown. The United Kingdom has been the preferred destination for many middle class African women seeking a glamorous lifestyle away from home. Many of them, like Kehinde, have since taken up permanent residence in the destination country.

Due to globalization, the notion of cultural purity, whether for religious, social or political expediency, is no longer easily sustainable. As Homi Bhabha (cited in Omolola 2012:5) argues, it is probably time to “challenge normative concepts of cultural purity and identity and question the tendency by Postcolonial theory to rigidly maintain binary or oppositional differences

between the colonizer and the colonized.” In another seminal paper entitled “*Homi Bhabha , Hybridity and Identity or Derrida versus Lacan* ” (1998:145), which is aptly an integral aspect of my thesis, Bhabha(1998) emphasizes that the notion of border line experience and identity necessarily gives way to ‘the possibility of cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.’ Bhabha (cited in Omolola 2013:5) goes on to say that such people ‘require a certain dexterity of living in-between.’ When interpreted from the perspective of African women in the Diaspora, these assertions call attention to the duality of cultural imperatives that women have come to grapple with. And broadly speaking, they capture aspects of contemporary cultural reality we can no longer ignore. Not only does Kehinde have to find ways of resisting racial prejudices in England in her attempt to adapt, but she also has had to guard against the Igbo cultural values that seek to render her invisible.

Albert’s long stay in London has caused him to assimilate some of the cultural values that are normally shunned by his Igbo kith and kin back in Lagos. The materialistic western world of London has transformed him to view children as a liability, hence his decision to coerce Kehinde to abort their unexpected child, much to his wife’s chagrin. The extent to which he has been hybridized is seen through his ambivalence; retrieving his African tradition to decide on matters affecting his wife’s body while using western values to justify his selfish actions. Even more disconcerting is the fact that his decision to go back to Nigeria and become a chief where Kehinde can have “as many children as she likes,” negates the main objective of keeping small the family budget. He is a lost man who knows how to cope with the London life yet wants to leave that same life and go back to Nigeria where chances of revelling in the company of friends and ingratiating relatives is the ridiculous reward for both him and his wife. According to Monique Johnson(2012:97) both Albert and Kehinde have been undoubtedly

shaped by migration, uprootedness and displacement. But Tosha Kabera –Sampson –Choma (2011) misses the point when she says that in emigrating to London Kehinde has forgotten the values and traditions of her Nigerian background. If that was the case she would have readily submitted upon her return to Lagos. But because the London environment has given her a new enlightenment about the condition of womanhood, she has had the audacity to question and reject those African values that demean her personhood. On the other hand, it is actually Albert who has not benefited from Diasporic displacement. This is because instead of exulting in some of the liberal values of his London experience, he seeks to revel in the old traditions that alienate him from his wife and children. Ultimately, his decision to embrace tradition when it suits him backfires because he ends up losing his job, his wife and property in London. When Tosha Kabera –Sampson (2011:102) remarks that “Kehinde and Albert fluidly but awkwardly manoeuvre between traditional Nigerian gender roles and westernized constructs of gender” she echoes Bhabha’s theory of border lands. However, she seems to be implying that this condition of hybridity is undesirable. I argue that borderland subjects are entitled to establishing permanent homes in lands of their choice. In fact we have all become hybridized in many respects. Given the globalization of the contemporary world, this phenomenon is as unavoidable as it is culturally and intellectually enriching.

Albert’s return to Nigeria ironically becomes an occasion for Kehinde to reexamine her life without her husband. Indicative of a swing in the migratory pendulum, it is a period of new insights, which had already been invoked by the forced abortion of her child. She learns that women who don’t work are trapped, yet she goes ahead to resign from her lucrative job in the bank. It is significant to note that though she feels lonely in London without Albert, her decision to follow him does not solve the problem. Lulled by the romantic life they had led after the

initial reunion in London, she dismisses Morimamo's suspicions that he was likely to yield to other women's seductive allure. When she finally realizes her mistake she regrets that she had been a fool not to have seen the bad side of Albert. This happens after she has gone through a traumatic experience. It is significant to note that it is Moriamo her friend and the voice of her dead twin who play a crucial role in raising her consciousness. Moriamo's advice that Kehinde goes back to Nigeria paves a way for the latter to see a transformed Albert in Lagos. Upon arrival she soon realizes she would not be able to live the westernized life she enjoyed with Albert in England. Reduced to staying in a single room in a house they now have to share with Albert's sisters, she finds that the Igbo life is more alienating than the London life and community she lived as a migrant. If she thought Ifenyiwa was the only one destined for a life of misery under polygamy she was living in a fool's paradise.

In Lagos Kehinde loses her identity except the cosmetic role of senior wife. While Rike remains contented to share Albert, Kehinde's new hybridised personality finds this revolting. The Igbo cultural environment renders all women, regardless of their educational qualifications, invisible. However, Emecheta also suggests that at least those with education are able to retain their independence through earning salaries. What we find here is that contrary to some western critics' essentialist perceptions, not all African women use formal education as a stepping stone or panacea for individual freedom. Rike's sense of self recognition does not lie in walking out of her polygamous marriage, as her co wife does. In fact she adopts a different stance, that of competing to retain her married status, through consulting the religious leaders. Hence, the writer seems to suggest that there can never be a universal panacea for female voicing because their circumstances and sensibilities are different. I argue that while there is a legitimate cause for Kehinde to return to London, the decision is driven more by a desire to recover her lost image

than a deliberate intention to break her marriage. The fact that she has lived the greater part of her married life in London is an unavoidable pull factor. Significantly, upon her return she is greeted by the voice of her dead twin's "Home sweet Home" (*Kehinde*,108). This return marks the final phase in her psychic transformation since she brings a new vision of her life with Albert and the life of married African woman. It is with this new vision that she dismisses her son's claims to the family house upon his return to London. Joshua meets a liberated mother who is no longer tied to traditional values that would have seen her surrendering the ownership of the house to her son.

Another consequence of Kehinde's oscillatory journeys is the plight of the African woman on the job market in Europe. Upon securing a job as a hotel cleaner, Kehinde realizes that women in the Arab world are also subjected to abuse and polygamous marriages. Though the author disappoints by providing snippets of the way Arab women are rendered invisible, her attempt to extend the plight of women to other marginalized racial groups is commendable. The Arab Sheik's abuse of his young wife as well as his humiliation of Kehinde illustrates that women at times encounter similar kinds of treatment from men. The sheik's ill-mannered behaviour highlights the extent to which masculinity has permeated motley western racial groups to the point where men perceive all women as sex objects. This misconception is illustrated through the sheik's ridiculous desire to feast his voyeuristic hunger on the African woman's nudity.

Negotiating male compatibility: the challenge of cultural imperatives

This section isolates male compatibility, one of the basic tenets of the African centred womanist theory, in the analysis of cultural difference in the text. It specifically looks at how Emecheta has constructed characters who grapple with cultural values that are regarded as essential to family cohesion and welfare. It uses two sides of the ideological prism to examine female cultural

difference. To begin with, I believe that the work makes it clear that conventions governing African family structures in England are often in conflict with those in Nigeria.

The London domestic space appears convenient to Albert as long as he is there. His sisters' invitation letters to go back to Lagos are an occasion to retrieve some of the values he had set aside. They are values steeped in the African tradition which privileges men. Not only does Kehinde have to concede to the practice of deferring to her man, but also her sisters –in-law such as Mama Kaduna. Paradoxically, the extended family confers a false masculinist status to aunts in a patriarchal society, through collaborative rituals that further enhance the man's authority. What we note in this text is that when African women enjoy privileges at the behest of men, they do so at the expense of their fellow women. This is one instance where women are divided even as they try to accommodate themselves within the masculine order. First, by asking Albert to come home, his sisters appear oblivious of its impact on his London family. Besides the insecurity it brings in its wake, through the couple's inevitable loss of jobs, it renders Kehinde invisible. Albert's desire to be chief in his home country is motivated by self interest since the life they have been living in London was characterized by mutual trust and compatible interests, an ideal scenario envisaged by the Africana – womanist philosophy.

Before leaving London, Albert's unilateral decision to coerce his wife to abort their child is a precursor to the skewed marital relations that await Kehinde in Lagos. Albert deals his wife a double blow by listening to his sisters (an extension of himself) and denying her the right to keep her unborn child. Given that he has often complained that the London society gave too much power to the women, he is happier to go and live a " life of relative ease for men" (Kehinde,144). Before departure, Albert tells Kehinde she will learn at home how she was supposed to behave. Albert's statement foreshadows the disciplinary code of ethics to which

Kehinde will be subjected upon arrival in Lagos. In her essay on Foucault, Sandra Lee Bartky (cited in the *Gender, Identity and Embodiment Reader*, 2003:107) asserts:

The disciplinary power that inscribes femininity in the female body is everywhere and it is nowhere, the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular.

By restating the cultural parameters of female deportment, Albert implies that neither he nor the Igbo society is prepared to accord women their voices. The demands on Kehinde to comply with her husband's and sisters' whims are a means of enforcing family companionship at the expense of women. At the end of the novel, when Joshua comes to London, he also tries to exert his authority over his mother, by demanding the family property and questioning her relationship with Mr. Gibson. Joshua's chauvinistic attitude to his mother attests to the fact that patriarchy 'aims at turning women into the docile and compliant companions of men.' (Bartky 2003:108).

Kehinde probably has a premonition of the women's expectation when she initially argues that she may not go back with Albert. Yet when she eventually leaves to rejoin him she seems not to have been psychologically equipped to cope with the joint onslaught of traditional demands and expectations she is confronted with upon arrival. Kehinde's vacillation; complying with the expectations of Igbo tradition during the London farewell party, when she changes clothes ten times, and her exasperation on arrival in Lagos, shows the extent to which the western cultural experience had alienated her. Just as she has believed that Albert cannot be changed by the African tradition, she fails to understand that the same cultural imperatives that her sister Ifeyinwa succumbed to have similar deleterious effects on her. The point I am stressing here is that Kehinde has always taken lightly the African man's propensity to take advantage of cultural

values when they suit him. One is reminded of the same fate that befalls Mirelle in *Scarlet Song*, when Ousmane hides behind Negritude philosophy to justify his renewed infatuation with Oulematou.

When Kehinde blames Mary Elikwo for failing to keep her man, it is with the disdain of a woman who feels contented with her own. Yet Emecheta warns against such hasty complacency, highlighting that African women are compelled to respond differently by various contingent circumstances. It is however significant to note that upon arrival in Lagos, Kehinde briefly slips into her old submissive role of husband worshipping. However, what riles her is the appearance of Albert's new wife Rike, already with a child and expecting another. She is shocked by the prospects having to compete for the same man with an even younger educated woman. Kehinde's shrunken domestic space, symbolised by the denial of privacy with Albert, and the undesirable possibility of having to share the house with Albert's sisters, attests to a different kind of invisibility and victimhood. Kehinde realizes that she has even lost the queen-size bed she had sent whilst in London. Furthermore she is denied the privilege of sitting next to Albert in their car. All these are indicators of the powerful cultural forces exerted on her in an environment where even highly educated women like Rike have their voices gagged. Through this scenario the author shows that sisterhood among African women is not a given. The cultural imperatives dictate women's perceptions of other women and of themselves, depending on their respective allegiances and upbringing.

Reclaiming lost identity: exploring the discourse of female solidarity and visibility

The question I seek to examine in this section of my thesis is how much of female discourse in the novel is constitutive of the African woman's sense of self worth, as opposed to discourse deriving from male expectations of female deportment. Here I use discourse in a

broader sense to include the behaviours and silences attributed and imputed to African women. I argue that the work occasionally captures female voices in particular social contexts where their articulations are valorized. To the extent that Kehinde's sensibilities are shaped, from childhood, by female characters who support and empathize with her, it can be argued that her claims for visibility are not engendered by individual propensities. Tosha Kabara Sampson-Choma (2011:3) asserts that:

The characters' journey towards empowerment and selfhood also requires an interdependent relationship between women, which includes a connection to a female elder or cultural bearer who transmits important cultural values.

In an effort to underline this connection, the writer uses flashback to trace Kehinde's family genealogy. The protagonist learns that Aunt Nnobogo who brings her up during her early childhood, is not her real mother. According to Brenda Cooper(cited in Omolola 2013: 13), "Aunt Nnebogo constructs for Kehinde a benign and Christianized imagination founded in male symbiotics." She plays the role of connecting the protagonist with her paternal family members in Sokoto, where she meets Ifeyinwa, the sister who later plays a crucial role in the development of her consciousness as a woman.

She stepped forward and hugged me, saying, 'My baby sister, I could pick you out even in a crowded market. Welcome. I am your big sister Ifeyinwa. (Kehinde, 78)

Through this supportive system of female voices Emecheta shows that the African woman's quest for self recognition is invariably entangled in patriarchal cultural practices. As is the case with *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta's portrayal of female talk captures the commonplace nuances that affect African women. Though such informative instances are often not fully developed in the text, they address typical concerns we would not want to question.

Kehinde's episodic encounters with Moriamo, because of their relaxed and frank tenor, are indicative of the freedom of expression African women yearn for. The two women are at their most ease when they switch over to pidgin English in their idle talk. Out of this idle talk emerges the major concerns affecting African women. For example, after Kehinde has confided in Moriamo over Albert's dismay upon hearing that she is pregnant, and her fear of losing her bank job as a result of pressure from his sisters, Moriamo replies, "We women no dey anything for this world." (*Kehinde*, 9). Concerned about her naivety over Albert's impending departure for Nigeria, she warns Kehinde not to take things for granted but to "think twice". Clearly Moriamo feels for her friend Kehinde, who risks losing Albert to 'those overeducated women dey thirst for been-to men as small baby dey thirst for suck?' (10).

From a wider perspective Moriamo speaks for all women who allow themselves to remain trapped in conditions of poverty, when they could alleviate their plight by looking for a job, even menial ones like cleaning. In reaching out for other women, Kehinde and Moriamo also show that women's circumstances and their responses to them are different. Yet Moriamo herself, in her opening up to Kehinde, reveals that she too is trapped in some patriarchal values. Ironically, her yearning to have a man child is motivated by a desire to please her husband Tunde, who is obviously not satisfied with the two girls they already have. This is another instance of contradictions in African women's sensibilities.

After Moriamo has been blessed with her baby boy, they confide in each other again, with the former warning her friend of the threat posed by Lagos women to Albert, justifying her reasons for encouraging her to go to Nigeria and save her marriage. Here Emecheta shows that despite the fact that Moriamo's marriage is one of convenience, she has greater depth in marital affairs than her friend. While Moriamo has coerced Tunde to father her boy child, Kehinde has been

coerced to abort one. These are apparently contradictory circumstances which attest to the diversity of African women. The text thus proves that women's experiences are made richer by their individual and collective perceptions of conditions within which they find themselves. Moriamo and Kehinde are living in London but the cultural imperatives that compel them to react the way they do are different. Hall (cited in Tosha Kabara Sampson –Choma (2011:116) alludes to this when he says:

There are critical moments and multiple variables that teach people to situate or constitute themselves, psychically, in the black identity.

Significantly, the London environment not only affords the two women moments for individual introspection into the condition of the African woman, but it also affords them freedom of expression. Paradoxically, the western values they have adopted have transformed their sense of agency. In her paper entitled "*The Abiku Mystique: The Metaphor of Subversive Narrative in Buchi Emecheta's Kehinde*", Omolola (2013:14) notes that "As Emecheta revisits cultural institutions such as patriarchal, heterosexual marriages, she proposes new relational models in which women are able to redefine their selves and spaces." The text provides diverse options for women to deconstruct power structures that undermine their social and economic positions.

A worrying feature of the conditions under which the two women's friendship blossoms is the writer's deliberate elimination of male characters from the discourse. Both women lose their husbands in different ways; Moriamo, when Tunde dies in a car accident, and Kehinde, after she comes back to London, having been exasperated by Albert's detached nonchalant chauvinism in Lagos. The novel stresses the strengthening of friendship after Tunde's death. This kind of rendering makes me a bit uneasy, especially as it gives the impression that African women need the elimination of their men in order to be free. This trend is also observable in

Mama Kaduna, whose vociferous behavior is traceable to her premature widowhood. In this vein, I would argue that Emecheta's portrayal of female characters and resistance is a reflection of her own personal bitterness regarding her failed marriage. This depiction of the post colonial African woman in the Diaspora is rather disappointing because not only does it detract from the womanist Afro-centric perspective, but it also betrays the author's inclination towards western feminists, whose position she has vehemently denied in previous interviews. For example, in the 1989 interview Emecheta declared categorically that she believed in womanism, because feminism is a western ideology which does not cater for the basic needs of African women such as water, health, shelter and school (Monique Johnson (2012:21). Most western feminist narratives depict single parenthood as though it were an ideal solution. I feel that this aspect has been overstretched and hence it's high time African women sought an alternative philosophical strategy that accommodates men. I have a feeling that when African female authors portray women coping with their male counterparts we would be closer to addressing the unique diversities among them. Given that in her depiction of female characters Emecheta goes to great lengths to make them visible, even to the extent of reincarnating the voice of the protagonist's dead twin, one notes a greater propensity to reinvigorate the African woman by lending her transcendental preeminence. It is in this respect that I think the text is more explicit in its exploration of female visibility and the discourse of African women's solidarity. Monique Johnson(2012:25) adds credence to this point when she notes that "Emecheta's art transcends feminist ideology, simply because in Igbo culture the power impacting the liberation of women predates the theoretical perspective of feminism."

From a cultural perspective, the novel traces and reinscribes Kehinde's fractured identity, in which her concept of home is erased by tradition. Growing up under the care of her aunt

Nnobogo, she has up to the time of her betrothal to Albert, constructed her image of home around the Igbo tradition. This initial dislocation in both the physical and psychological sense is a precursor to her adult life in England and Nigeria. Thus the constraints that come into play in her quest for identity formation manifest themselves in different guises. But what Emecheta also articulates here is Kehinde's resilience, agency and sense of purpose. Reflections of her childhood experiences with Ifeyinwa suggest how her patriarchal society tried to erase her identity as a girl child. The text abounds in moving incidents in which she constantly seeks to reconnect with her elder sister. Ifeyinwa becomes a symbol of the filial bond she needs to reestablish, in the face of invisibility engendered by patriarchy within the postcolonial era. While Ifeyinwa herself has succumbed to the submissive role of housewife, Kehinde emerges as victor, thanks to her relocation to England where she establishes herself in a home she can really call home. Ndadasvaran (2012:2) points out that:

The work reflects the complete transformation of the Igbo female character from the confined role as wife and mother to understanding and perceiving herself as woman. This transformation towards individual subjectivity is developed through the rejection of patriarchal conventional expectations of woman.

While there is scope in Ndasvaran's critical observations, I wish to point out that Emecheta is not necessarily calling for a rejection of male-female complementarity. Kehinde is not against marriage per se but demands to be accorded her full rights as an African woman, within the marriage institution. One only has to read her autobiography (*Head Above Water*) to see how far she had to go to accommodate her lazy and irresponsible husband. Ironically, it is in a foreign land that she finds sanctuary and to which she returns after the debacle of rejoining Albert for the second time on indigenous home soil, Nigeria. Both Lagos and London symbolize what

Bhabha(1983) calls ‘borderline spaces’ for the African woman, who can only assert her position in a foreign land simply because her very own continues to make life difficult for her. This phenomenon is endorsed by Mary Eagleton (1991:347) when she observes that ‘ the new female subject is mobile and flexible, traversing all manner of psychological, linguistic and conceptual barriers.’

What I want to emphasize here is that the writer assigns agency to Kehinde at various stages in the development of her consciousness towards self fulfillment. Despite retaining some traces of the African woman’s feminine deportment, the London space has produced a new identity for the protagonist. It is here that her earlier misgivings about the condition of the African woman are consolidated. Monique Johnson (2012:93) slightly misses the point when she alleges that women in the novel are trapped, because while this might be true of Kehinde for some time, she eventually refuses to live such a life with her husband in Lagos. Unlike Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood*, Kehinde has learned to define herself. In the words of Stuart Hall(cited in Mongia,1996:110), subjects take different ‘positions of enunciation.’ The implication here is that identities, which derive from culture , are not static although they have a historical origin. To give credence to the same point Hall argues that:

Identity must always be seen as a production which is never complete , always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation.’
(Hall,1990:110)

Reflections and portraits of Kehinde’s childhood years reveal a girl who is visibly revolted by some of the traditional values that deny African women self recognition. Ifenyiwa’s miserable marriage to a man who later marries another wife is another moment of awakening for Kehinde, who feels like ”erasing them all from [her] mind.” (84). Her problem, however, is

procrastination. It takes some time and a lot of warning from her friend Moriamo, that what is happening to Ifenyiwa and other African women can also happen to her.

It is significant to note that when Kehinde is in Nigeria, it is Moriamo who revives her hopes of retrieving her lost identity in a country where men enjoy a monopoly of power. There is a twist of irony here in the sense that Moriamo is the same woman who had advised her friend to go and save her marriage in Nigeria. It would appear that this time she becomes the instrument for saving Kehinde from enduring a marriage that degrades and denies her agency. Lagos is the ugly site of discriminatory male discourse dominated by Albert's aunts whose aim is to put Kehinde in her "right place". It is unfortunate that they connive to foist on her a traditional femininity that is now at variance with her new identity. We must recall that in Lagos Kehinde is not only denied property ownership but also her marital status and conjugal rights. In fact, she has been relegated to a piece of property to be owned and revalued by the aunts in the interest of patriarchy. Yet she seems to draw inspiration from the condition that part of her insecurity and invisibility derives from the fact that she is not as educated as Rike, her new rival who boasts a PhD degree in Literature and a job at a university. Ironically, her rival's personal elevation is the motivating factor for her own personal advancement, as she reflects. "The saving grace is the big E Education." This view is shared by Moyo and Kawewe ((2002:170) who acknowledge the fact that African women who acquire education and skills have the advantage of using their new status "to move into new areas of activity within the colonial economies." Both Kehinde and Rike benefit from education as it transforms them into more flexible role players in decision making and enhanced opportunities for formal stable employment, a condition that frees them from domesticity engendered by patriarchy. But the novel also suggests that unlike Rike, Kehinde would need to relocate to fulfill her ambition of

attaining a sociology degree as well as salvage her lost image. Hence the two women's life chances are plotted differently on the narrative profile. On the contrary, lack of education severely limits Ifenyiwa's chances for self enhancement. Her plot to ugly Rike's life and to avenge her sister's ill-treatment on Albert is a desperate effort by one who has learnt too little too late. It is however, worth noting that though Kehinde feels her victimhood seems irreparable, she still retains a strong filial attachment to her sister.

The work presents Ifeyinwa as her younger sister's foil in the process of identity formation. Severely limited by lack of education and condemned to unrestrained childbearing, she succumbs to the traditional dictates of the patriarchal order, long rejected by Kehinde. Fanon (cited in West:1990:143), writes:

The colonized learn to stay in their place and participate in a process of consent where they enact violence against each other, are constantly anxious due to the violence they experience, and establish myths and religious systems that relegate their fate to the will of the Gods.

To bend Fanon's assertion to the central concern of my thesis, I am inclined to argue that in the text Ifeyinwa is brought up in a patriarchal system that socializes her to submit to male authority as natural, to the point where she plots to inflict violence upon her younger sister's co-wife, Rike. It boggles the mind that instead of confronting her husband over his decision to abuse her fecundity, apart from marrying other wives, she remains silent about her own marital problems. In this case she is the complete antithesis of her sister who questions and resists her husband's errant decisions. Convinced that Albert's actions are no longer consistent with their original ideals of family compatibility, Kehinde opts out to freedom.

Immortalised voices: navigating through the contours of female presences in the postcolonial

In her novel *Emecheta* has inscribed a mythical dimension into the condition of womanhood in the changing postcolonial space. The writer deploys, in an intriguing narrative, a nexus of female characters to augment the protagonist's protesting voice and that of her dead twin Taiwo. An incisive reading of the text reveals that the female sensibilities encoded in the text are directed at the cultural structures that have relegated African women to positions of inferiority. The novel depicts a conflation of the discourse of the living and disembodied voices of the dead. Often adopting the mythical style reminiscent of African oral tradition, the text conveys the message of female resistance in different ways. Drawing largely from African cosmology, Emecheta invokes the spectral presence of Taiwo's voice at crucial moments of her struggle for self fulfillment, to revive a filial alliance broken by death. Omolola (2013:11) observes that:

Taiwo's voice is the unscripted narrative of Kehinde's more revolutionary but subliminal self, subverting the identification of victimhood and marginalization assigned to African women.

It is the ubiquity of this voice that gives weight and mystery to the novel's liberational agenda. Taiwo's timely interventions serve to link the past with the present, the dead and the living in a continuous discursive network that highlights the plight of the African woman. The voice often dispels Kehinde's doubts at crucial moments by pointing to her the right decision regarding her marriage and its complexities.

Serving an advisory and prophetic role, Taiwo's voice clearly complements those of Ifeyinwa and Moriamo. Through a complex structuring of the text, the living and the dead are linked spiritually, providing the much needed anchorage for Kehinde's emancipatory agenda. Both Ifeyinwa and Moriamo lend invaluable support to the protagonist at different stages of her

journey towards selfhood. The location of these pillars of the protagonist's strength in Lagos and London is strategic. In Nigeria Kehinde needs the filial support of her big sister who, as tradition demands, also doubles up as her little mother. In her childhood reminiscences, Kehinde shows appreciation of the special love and closeness she felt with her sister, to the extent that she wished nothing would happen to separate them from each other. The novel reveals that besides Aunt Nnebogo, it was Ifenyiwa who opened up the protagonist's world, through her sisterly nurturing and information about their family history. In a sense then, Ifenyiwa is the basis of Kehinde's developing consciousness. Kehinde's early socialization however ignites her consciousness against polygamy as she resolves never to lead the same kind of life experienced by her sister.

But Kehinde's London experience is the site of her transformation, this time at the hands of Moriamo. As has been emphasized elsewhere in this thesis, the protagonist benefits from her friend's deeper insights into the condition of womanhood. It is significant to note that not even distance can break their love and friendship. When Kehinde writes to confide in her about the situation in Lagos, Moriamo sends her the airfare to fly back to London and reclaim her freedom.

Significantly, the same London space is the site of intermittent timely intervention into the protagonist's life by the voices from the spiritual realm. Kehinde's fears and problems are often echoed and confirmed by this conflation of voices. The hospital scene becomes an occasion for the intersection of the different voices. As she reflects on her failure earlier to listen to the voice of her conscience, the result of this blunder manifests itself through the image of her father, reincarnated through the aborted man child. In fact, though the spirits of her parents are silent,

their presence and impact is felt through Taiwo's intrusions and even through Kehinde's dreams. Omolola (2013:12) notes that:

The ubiquities of her twin and mother figure in Kehinde's life and psyche as continuities of the past in the present; they feature as alternative sites of meaning, producing new knowledges and inscribing themselves in the narrative of their hostess.

What is further implied in this depiction is that Kehinde's chi or guardian spirit constitutes a double voice that demands equal treatment, moral restitution and freedom in a louder voice than the living Kehinde. While Kehinde, in her living presence, cannot discern Albert's infidelity, nor decipher her own fate, Taiwo is invested with her triple vision of reading into the sins of the past, the present and the future; the spirit of Taiwo is at liberty to straddle these temporal spaces and chart a new discursive map for Kehinde and African women. That Taiwo's voice is able to conflate time and space is seen through her presences in London and Lagos. It can be said that she is always in the shadow of her living sister, monitoring her movements, commiserating with her, and affirming her position.

In *Kehinde*, therefore, Emecheta recreates the power and role of African women both in the diasporic context and in the postcolonial African society, interrogating, subverting and deconstructing social structures that threaten to silence them. I insist that the work articulates the transcendental role that African women must assume in gender relations. In this sense, the text adds depth to the politics of female cultural difference, especially in its articulation of diverse female supportive mechanisms.

The complementary nature of female voices of the living is particularly insightful. While in London, Moriamo advises Kehinde against over-trusting Albert in Lagos. A similar warning that

her husband was likely to be seduced by the young Nigerian women is issued by the disembodied voice of Taiwo.

Have you forgotten that in Nigeria it is considered manly to be unfaithful? Even if he didn't want women they would come to him. (*Kehinde*, 46)

As can be deduced from the voice's tone, the initial intention is to save its sister's marriage. Interestingly, Taiwo and the living Moriamo seem to be engaged in some kind of pathological telepathic discourse, watching over, indicting and protesting against patriarchy on the protagonist's behalf. Taiwo's advice about Albert's inevitable fall into sin comes at a time when Moriamo is too busy nursing her new baby boy, to provide the necessary counsel and moral support she desperately needs. It would seem then that Kehinde is never left alone, at least spiritually.

Emecheta's mobilization of reincarnated voices of the dead to bolster the protagonist's efforts at self recognition and enlightenment mirrors Vera's call for voicing in her novel *Under The Tongue*. The significance of this "mystical bonding" (Muchemwa (2012), is actually stressed by Vambe M.T. (in Mponde and Taruvinga, 2012), when he observes that in the Shona ancestor worship, " the link between the departed and their living descendants is brought out through spirit possession." The subversive strategy of spirit possession is directly encoded in Emecheta's work as seen in the vengeful reactions of Nnu Ego's spirit in *The Joys of Motherhood*, and indirectly in *Kehinde* through the use of dreams and memory to inscribe the language of the dead upon the living . According to Maggie Phillips (cited in Muponde, by Vambe (2012:127) :

Dream activity is a valuable storehouse of experience with which to explore narratives and question the nature of knowing across the breadth and depth of the unending human history.

Emecheta uses several incidents to probe into the liminal space between her character's subconscious and dreams, the latter being an extension of the former. Taiwo's voice intervenes with its wise counsel, reminding her of the sacrifices that she and their mother made to make her live. Moments before the abortion operation the voice warns, 'Are you now going to kill your child before he has a chance to live?' Here one is reminded of a similar scene in *The Joys Of Motherhood*, when Nnu Ego nearly commits suicide after the death of her baby Ngozi. It is significant to note that in both instances the protagonist is nearly driven into a desperate act of self annihilation by patriarchal conventions that impose their will on women. Taiwo's warning voice is a stark reminder of the hierarchy of victimhood inflicted retrospectively on their mother's and her own death. Hence Kehinde's aborted baby completes the spectral presence of the hand of death she could have avoided. The dead man child also symbolizes her own father who was coming to protect her. "See our father was coming to protect you from this but you killed him." (17). After the forced abortion of her baby Kehinde goes into a dreamlike trance in which she hears the voice of her sister, this time expressing its regret over her blunder.

From a wider context, the voice from the spirit world connects the dead with the living, showing how African culture is constructed around this symbiotic spiritual relationship. Throughout the text the writer reveals that the Igbo people always live under the shadow of their departed relatives. The disembodied voice of Taiwo, aided by that of their mother, enacts a parallel narrative of resistance, despair and optimism that Kehinde's life symbolizes. Omolola (2013:7) observes that:

As she carries with her the memorabilia of the past entombed in the dark recesses of her mind, Kehinde is like an Abiku who carries with her the

proverbial charmed circle of her beloved ones. She is never free from the haunting presences of her loved ones, their portentous presences. She is able to escape into them, accessing their multiple layers of wisdom with which she can controvert the oppressive hegemonic discourses around her.

The second crucial time when Kehinde hears Taiwo's hidden voice is upon arrival back to London. The voice breaks its long silence to welcome her with the song "Home Sweet Home" (108). Sensing her ambivalence, the voice replies with a reassuring echo of "We make our own choices as we go along"(108). Here Emecheta suggests that when women take agency they afford themselves the freedom to live anywhere. Kehinde might be a foreigner in London but this is a space where her mind is most free. Hence beneath this existential nature of the African woman resides the voice of reason which must not be suppressed. Omolola (2013:11) further observes that :

Though disembodied, Taiwo's voice is strong enough to subvert the culture of silence and invisibility, it is Taiwo who advises her never to accept humiliation or defeat. (11).

At the end of the novel the writer affirms that the voice of Taiwo had become "a permanent part of her consciousness." (*Kehinde*,135). Convinced that she has made the right decision in falling in love with Mr. Gibson, Kehinde confides in her dead twin's voice that she is exercising her right to love; that this actually makes her more human. That the novel ends on such an optimistic note attests to the intersection of the living and the dead in the black woman's cultural world. Besides, it urges a new vision regarding the African woman's identity and sensibilities in the new dispensation.

In the novel Emecheta has incorporated the silent voice of the dead twin to retrieve the buried discourse of Kehinde's childhood. The narrative in many respects implies that the profile of the

protagonist is incomplete without her past. One is reminded of novel *Under The Tongue*, where Yvonne Vera adopts the same narrative strategy to retrieve Zhizha's sad memories of rape by her father.

Motherhood and the matrimonial paradox: traversing the confluences of home, exile and domesticity

Though not treated as extensively as in *The Joys Of Motherhood*, motherhood and marriage are the salient motifs that give Kehinde its authentic credentials even as the work articulates the precarious condition of African womanhood. In the novel Emecheta depicts marriage as potentially problematic by presenting a character who straddles two different geo-cultural spaces in time. Through Kehinde Emecheta suggests that the romantic period that precedes the consummation of the marriage is secure only as long as Albert and Kehinde remain in England. Reminiscent of a writer who seems to have lost faith in her country's cultural traditions, the work laments the problem of family interference and silencing of women. This is emphasized by the novel's opening, which is clearly intended to shock the reader by foregrounding domestic rupture in the protagonist's marital circumstances.

Despite having lived happily as a couple for eighteen years, Albert feels obliged to adhere to his sisters' call to come home to Nigeria and claim his traditional position of chief, even though the status does not necessarily guarantee monetary accrual. Given that he has always expressed his misgivings over the English society's policy of gender equity, the letter gives him recourse to go and claim the patriarchal status he has always felt he forfeited by living in a foreign country. It therefore comes as no surprise when he breaks the news to his wife with the nonchalance of one who knows his mind. No attempt is made to discuss the issue with Kehinde, his wife. The text suggests that though Kehinde was earning more money through her job in the bank, than Albert who worked as a storekeeper, she has faithfully retained some of the cultural values that

still arrogate a measure of deference to the male spouse without necessarily making him exercise dominance. Both Albert and Kehinde consider the London house as “our house” even though it was bought through the wife’s employment.

Emecheta’s castigation of the African man’s insensitivity and arrogance is brought out through Albert’s naivety and failure to enlist the opinion of the faithful wife who provides sustenance to the family in exile. While some may criticize Emecheta for idealizing the woman’s status as not just complementary but crucial, it is important to see where the slant of her argument leans. The Diaspora can serve as a sanctuary for the African woman as it gives her visibility by allowing her to remain independent while ensuring marital stability. Not only that, the author suggests that even where spousal conflict leads to marital breakdown as is the case with Mary Elikwu, the African woman can still live her own life. Mary Elikwu might be single but she does not live with the cultural albatross of a failed woman, as Kehinde eventually learns. In another attempt to broaden the reader’s perception of the matrimonial problems Emecheta uses Leah, the younger woman Kehinde meets in the hospital ward to which both are admitted, to enlighten the protagonist’s vision of her rights. Leah has made her choice to abort the child she feels will be a burden to her freedom. Her justification of this widely condemned immoral act, is that she is homeless; besides, she does not love the father of the foetus.

While the case of Leah provides the dimensions of choice denied Kehinde, Moriamo’s condition is the reverse, because she uses her sexuality to blackmail her lazy husband to father another child with him. Even though theirs is a marriage fraught with problems, Moriamo is the first to find her voice, in what she wants to do with her body, compared with Kehinde, who is coerced into terminating her unborn man child in order to suit Albert’s whims. The novel thus navigates, in a subtle manner, the condition of motherhood and marriage as the African woman construes

it, by presenting it as both a right and choice to hold and cherish. It is in this regard that I feel that the work fans out the multiple sensibilities of women. While the impact of African culture to motherhood is suppressed by the metropolitan country's liberal policies, it is, by contrast, given prominence in the Nigerian context. One can detect an ambivalent tone in Emecheta's treatment of this subject, that she does with consummate skill in *The Joys of Motherhood*. I want to argue that it is this ambivalence that gives the text its literary strength in so far as aspects of female difference are concerned. In his essay on cultural identity for black people in the Diaspora, Stuart Hall(cited in Mongia 1996:113), opines that there is no fixed cultural identity, because people are affected differently in specific locations and time periods. In the same vein, we note that Emecheta's female protagonists are affected variously by the circumstances of their locations. From this perspective, one can see how Kehinde's western socio-economic environment cannot be regarded as a model of what happens to African women in the Diaspora. In the geopolitical spaces within which Emecheta deploys her characters, there were a lot of socio- cultural changes even as she was writing her text. Emecheta had to grapple with the problem of depicting marriage in the country of exile, as well as its manifestations in her home country, whose cultural traditions she might still be holding dear, even as she laments the impact of their excesses on the contemporary African mother. In her autobiography, *Head Above Water* (1986:3-10) Emecheta shares wistful memories of her mother's life under a patriarchal system and Christian religion that jointly enslaved her.

The importance of motherhood is emphasized early in the novel through flashbacks that enable the reader to retrieve the cultural and experiential circumstances that the protagonist represents. From the depiction of Kehinde's miserable childhood as an orphan who sorely misses her mother, Emecheta's narrative addresses some of the cultural practices from the position of a

“cultural insider” (Mukherjee1990:3). The work features the extended family structures that nurture children to feel accommodated within the domestic cultural space that mitigates the misery of a missing mother. Yet the conditions that brought about Aunt Nnobogo to assume the role of surrogate mother on Kehinde mask the traditional rules that dictate the fate of the surviving twin. The text reveals that the Igbo tradition regards twins as a curse, hence the decision by aunt Nnebogogo to take Kehinde away. Unlike in *The Joys Of Motherhood* where the maternal spirit of Nnu Ego returns with a vengeance to punish the living, in Kehinde Emecheta invests the dead mother with a benevolent spirit that watches over the living twin, providing the wise counsel that she desperately needs to maintain her self respect, dignity and independence. Though it is the disembodied voice of her dead twin sister Taiwo that takes centre stage, the mother’s spiritual presence is always felt. Indeed there is something unique about how the text speaks of a mother whose travail of childbirth is easily erased by the patriarchal power structures. The work deconstructs such values through the voice of Taiwo. It is in this historical context that the text urges a greater awareness of the condition of African women. In its allusion to the displacement of female subjectivity by a patriarchal system that believes in the substitution of mothers, it highlights the impact of such change on the surviving girl child. When Kehinde is taken to Sokoto to see her father for the first time, she is introduced to “other mothers” who have come to fill a void left by her mother’s death. These mothers are domesticated within a male hierarchy. It is at this stage of her awakening consciousness that Kehinde confesses that she never missed her father, thereafter. In many respects therefore, the text performs a crucial role in unravelling realities that typify African mothers and their children in the postcolonial context, whose cultural landscape is however changing. In its insistence on graphic details about cultural conditions that consign African mothers to

domesticity and their transformation, it speaks of realities that concern African women. This is what Achebe (cited in Mukherjee 1990:6) sees as “doing work on its home ground.” Hence from the perspective of motherhood and marriage, the novel traverses what Cornel West calls “The ragged edges of the Real, of necessity... something that one cannot know” (Mukherjee 1990: 5).

The concept of motherhood is paradoxically viewed differently from the masculine and feminine perspectives. While male characters narrowly conceive of motherhood as a procreative process, female characters are invested with unique transcendent sensibilities. As Omolola(2013:14) observes :

Kehinde transcends traditional bounds of victimization to refashion for herself psychological and physical spaces which destabilize traditional concepts of African motherhood.

This is evident in almost all the characters. Rike might be the rival to Kehinde but she endears herself with Bimpe and Joshua, the latter’s children. In a maternal gesture reminiscent of Adaku’s care for Nnu Ego’s children in *The Joys of Motherhood*, Rike has learned to separate issues of wife rivalry from the children, who the writer feels must not be dragged in. Yet, in some instances Emecheta suggests, through the younger woman, that the home cultural environment always places the African woman in a complex web of domesticity that she can only try to mitigate through education and a professional job. In other words, Rike is an embodiment of alternative coping strategies women can adopt to assert themselves and become self-reliant. It is in this vein that I feel that the work explores female cultural difference by deconstructing essentialist homogenizing notions of African women as collective victims of male chauvinism. Indeed, while it portrays characters such as Ifenyiwa as victims of polygamous

marriages, it refuses to universalize this trend, by presenting a protagonist who fights for her rights. Though Rike embodies slightly different sensibilities, the young woman has cushioned herself against the cultural syndrome of depending on men. To note is that when Albert eventually loses his job in Nigeria, Rike supports him with her secure job as a university lecturer. This is a mirror of the London situation where Albert's income is merely supplementing Kehinde's more stable higher paying job. Interestingly, in her autobiography *Head Above Water*, Emecheta recounts details of how she supported Sylvester, her lazy domineering husband when he was a student in England, only to be disappointed by him later. Significantly, in all these cases the women embrace agency and remain visible on the domestic and wider economic spheres. This rendering is Emecheta's way of advocating for women's independence through a reversal of conventionally assigned roles. Endorsing this view, Monique Johnson (2012:65), in her thesis says :

Emecheta demonstrates the tools necessary in breaking the chain of traditions that hinder freedom for women. In Emecheta's art, these tools are largely western education and economic independence.

Another point to note here about the author is that for African women, while motherhood must retain its dignified role, it does not constitute the pinnacle of an African woman's aspirations. The text provides several options for African women's responses and experiences within a marriage setup. Either they stay in marriage, managing their own lives or they succumb to patriarchal dictates, or they can opt out. The case of Ifeyinwa who has had several children and lives a life of obscurity with co-wives is, in Emecheta's view untenable. She thus presents Ifenyiwa and her ilk, as the antithesis of female characters who pursue a liberatory agenda in the matrimonial matrix of the post colonial era. Albert's glorification of his masculine status in Nigeria, including prospects of benefiting from the proceeds of the oil boom, turns out to be a

pipe dream. Not only does he lose his job but he also loses out on the London property that his wife goes back to reclaim as her own.

In some respects however, the text reveals Emecheta's ambivalence towards patriarchy. The fact that Rike gets along with Kehinde's children is a moot point because it somewhat isolates Kehinde, even as she is geographically separated from them. To some extent, Emecheta suggests that a radical stance is not always the way forward for the African woman. That Kehinde eventually ends up getting hooked to the Caribbean man, Mr. Gibson, shows the importance of male companionship, as enunciated by the womanist philosophy. The same aspect is acknowledged by Adaku in *The Joys of Motherhood* when she opts out of the Owulum family. It is however, disappointing that Emecheta once again fails to develop her agenda of single motherhood in this text. It is against these observations that I feel that the text endorses the view that while the path followed by most western women and those African women in the Diaspora is an option among many others, there can never be a universal panacea to women's problems. Upon returning "home" to London Kehinde realizes that her life in England is no longer transitory but permanent. This reversal of living space is a new phenomenon that reflects changing trends in the politics of female cultural difference. But the complexities surrounding this new trend are also succinctly expressed by Moyo and Kawewe (2002:175), when they cast doubts on the sincerity of policies of receiving countries to support 'women trying to survive the shifts in the global economy when women emigrate to centres of wealth.' In light of this observation the work does not glorify life in the Diaspora as seen in the fact that Kehinde has to settle for a job as a cleaner when she returns to London.

Conclusion

In my critical engagement with the novel I have argued that Emecheta depicts diverse features of female cultural difference by presenting characters who straddle specific spatio-temporal spaces. This perspective is particularly crucial to our understanding of the multiple identities and images of African women, given that we are not talking about a static cultural position to which they must all relate but contingent circumstances that engender their responses. I have stressed as I have done elsewhere in this thesis, the issues of transformation and diversity. The womanist thrust that informs the work also bears elements of the postmodernist conventions as seen in the novel's refusal to define a specific position for African women in the postcolonial era, even as it traces the protagonist's transformation towards individual subjectivity. Kehinde gradually develops into a self-consciousness that empowers her to reject polygamy as well as the Igbo society's demand for women to conform to rigid patriarchal conventions.

For this text, female friendship, education and the power of the guardian spirit become the main motors of difference that motivate the protagonist to eventually realize her full potential. Yet it is important to note that diverse as they are, there can never be a single yardstick by which African women's agency and developing consciousness can be measured. Part of the reason for this problematic resides in the operational spaces within which the women find themselves, including the cultural tenets to which they are initially exposed. There is no doubt that Kehinde's metamorphosis is mediated through the changed action space and education, both of which trigger the capacity for her to redefine herself in the new dispensation. It is from this perspective that I endorse the view that the protagonist represents a new cultural identity by which African women can be perceived. This view finds relevance when examined against an interview conducted with Emecheta, in which the author affirms that 'Kehinde signifies how Nigerian women coped with the changes from one culture to another and survived.' (Nadasvaran

2012:143). This remark, however, is not necessarily prescriptive but intended to open up alternative avenues for African women's sensibilities.

The next chapter continues the subject of female cultural difference but this time from the African-American perspective. It uses Zora Neil Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God* to look into the women of the diaspora's divergent responses to racial and patriarchal conventions.

Chapter Five : Their Eyes Were Watching God, by Zora Neale Hurston

Exploring Hurston's vision of the African American woman's subversive potential

Their Eyes Were Watching God occupies a unique space in the genealogy of female cultural difference. As a representation of the African American literary corpus, the text draws attention to similar discursive features with those of its African antecedents. In its allusions to racial problems faced by black Americans, it captures memories of their dislocation from Africa, the original home of their ancestors. Of particular significance has been the African Americans' desire to reconnect, to recreate their history, which for almost two centuries the imperial powers had systematically tried to erase. Not surprisingly, the African American works are embellished with legends and oral traditions. The intention is two fold : to celebrate African aesthetics and to write back to the Empire. These writers seek to subvert racial, supremacist and patriarchal ideologies of the dominant western powers by reinterpreting their history from the purview of the African lens. Because they share similar historical experiences of oppression with their African counterparts, works by African Americans exhibit an incessant quest for belonging, identity and self fulfillment. But more specifically, these features are replicated in Hurston's text, which appropriates the mule metaphor to register the author's feminist credentials, as well as to articulate her protesting voice against hierarchical social structures that condemn the African American woman to perpetual victimhood. Haurykiewiz (1997:2) contends that "the mule image functions on multiple levels in the text, allowing [Hurston] to comment on numerous types of relationships based on unequal distribution of power." In this thesis I focus on the aspects of race, class, and gender as the main motors of female cultural difference.

For Henry Gates Junior, most of the acts of subversion and articulation of African aesthetics are retrievable through legends, myths, oral traditions, songs and mimicry. Together with Africana –Womanism, Gates’ theory of *The Signifying monkey* finds particular relevance in the interpretation of this novel, including those by other female writers in Africa. These texts mirror each other particularly in terms of theme, character portrayal and discursive practices. Central to such signification is the notion of double talk, or multiple meaning, both of which are intended to deconstruct, in a subtle manner, conventional power structures that denigrate marginalized members of the society. In the words of Sanchez (2011: 35), “oral narratives are an important means of maintaining the continuity of traditional African culture.” This consideration is echoed by Cooper (2008:17), who describes *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as “a speakerly text” because of its appropriation of rhetorical strategies that borrow from oral tradition. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston structures her text around such narrative devices, not only for purposes of retrieving and lamenting vestiges of racial stereotypes but more importantly to champion the African American woman’s cause for claiming visibility, self definition and independence from patriarchal dominance.

Race, class and historical contingency in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* : a Womanist perspective of signification

As a text that is set within the framework of the post slavery era, the novel depicts characters whose whims and attitudes are informed directly or indirectly by race relations and class consciousness. Though it is not Hurston’s intention to treat these themes as extensively as she does others, they provide a firm basis upon which to locate and analyse female oppression and voicing. To begin with, Nanny’s tale of her oppression by white racists left indelible psychic wounds on her, to the extent that she is now convinced that the future of her granddaughter lies in submitting to the dominant oppressive powers.

Allusions to the vestiges of racist ideology are often brought out through innuendos to black people's physical characteristics, the vernacular discourse of the African Americans and the segregatory judicial system. Hurston's intention seems to be to undermine not only the racist laws but also more importantly to trash the patriarchal conventions through Janie's voice. Nanny's story at the beginning of the novel invites attention for black women to subvert the status quo. Though it is largely a tale of her submission, we need to reflect on the historical and political conditions of her time. The tale mirrors those by other African American women such as Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* and Harriet Jacobs *Incidents in the life of a slave woman*. In both texts black women are victims of their white slave masters. Hurston thus uses her text to expose the double oppression to which Nanny had been condemned. (The writer's own outrage against slavery is intermittently documented in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*.) Stripped of her humanity, Nanny's only recourse had been to run away from her mistress, if only to save her daughter from being sold as a slave. Yet the very daughter she manages to save becomes a victim of a black school teacher's sexual violence. I argue that by running away from her mistress, Nanny engages in her own subversion of white brutality since she manages to deprive the white woman of commercial benefits accruing from the sale of black babies.

The denigration of the black woman is most poignantly brought out through Nanny's tale, in which black women are portrayed as beasts of burden. The tales' relevance to the black woman finds an echo in Dilberk's (2008) lament that historically black women were treated more or less like animals. Dilberk interprets this mule tale as a clarion call for black women to rise above their situation, to embrace the militant attribute of the mule. Not surprisingly, the novel begins on such an empowering note, when Janie resists Killick's attempt to enforce the obnoxious convention on her. Janie answers back to her husband's complaints:

You don't need my help out there Logan. You're in your place and Ah'm in mine. (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 30)

This is the beginning of the protagonist's attempt to name herself, and ironically, affirm her preferred class position. The narrative in many instances shows that class and history are critical motors for determining the black woman's status in America. It would appear that Nanny's acceptance of an inferior class and racial stereotyping provokes Janie to claim her right to exercise her judgment. As Dolores (1985:6) rightly interprets it, "Nanny is against women who select male companionship on the basis of love." It is noteworthy that she has been socialized to appreciate white values and those who emulate them. Dolores (1985) uses this misguided perception to castigate black men who give preferential treatment to black women who most resemble white women. This concern finds further emphasis in the black community of Eatonville. The men at the porch yearn to touch Janie's long hair because it resembles the white woman's characteristic features of beauty, which they mistakenly regard as the standard of femininity. It is their unsolicited male gaze which eventually makes Jody instruct his wife to cover her hair with a cloth. But it is not only men who admire Janie for her Caucasian characteristics. Mrs Turner openly admires her lighter skin and long hair, to the extent of persuading her "to class off" with her. Ironically, by so doing she undermines any attempts at black women's sisterhood, one of the necessary requirements for debunking patriarchy. Indeed her uncharacteristic behavior is akin to what West (1990: 102) referred to as 'cultural degradation of black diaspora people.' By aligning herself with the white race that oppresses her fellow women, Mrs Turner's actions amount to undermining sisterhood solidarity across race.

In her novel Hurston subverts racial stereotyping and contradictions. Through the protagonist's marriage to Logan Killicks and later, Joe Starks, she seeks to show that male companionships based on class and property are not a guarantee for the black woman's self fulfillment. Furthermore, she also seems to attack black men for capitalising on their wealth to relegate their wives to domestication and inferiority. In the text Janie revises her protesting strategies with the three men who come into her life (Delores 1985:14). Jody's acceptance of white stereotypes is particularly exposed through the way he treats his wife. He wants to class off Janie in a similar way whites classed their women. Paradoxically, he wins her heart by distinguishing himself from the poorer unpropertied blacks. For instance, Eatonville comes to life through Jody's appropriation of white standards. While I do not see anything wrong with adapting to a modern lifestyle, I object to the tendency by Jody to install himself as 'God', as indicated by his favourite swearing phrase "I God". For Cheryl Wall (1927:185) 'Joe's appropriation of religious reference is a mask for self aggrandizement.' Yet what we must note is the fact that for a time Janie seems bewitched by Joe Stark's wealth. Hattenhauer (1994:12) has used this contradiction by Janie to argue that she does love class, that Jody remains her meal ticket even after she falls out of love with him. In addition, Hattenhauer observes that "Janie is attracted to Jody because he looks as attractive as white folks" (1994: 9).

Miller (2004) concurs with the above assessment of Janie when she castigates her vacillation, as indicated by her earlier objection to Killick's intention to buy her a mule. Here is one instance of the protagonist's ambivalence that seems to weaken her perception. If she felt that the mule would deprive her of her new status, why then does she raise eyebrows when Jody classes her by ensuring that she does not work, that she does not associate with the common women in Eatonville? The same question can be asked when she agrees to join Tea Cake on the

muck, picking beans, a job that is probably as demeaning as using her own mule and chopping wood on Killick's farm. While I agree with Miller's (1994:4) contention that Janie's acceptance to work alongside Tea Cake is "an opportunity for gender and class parity", I feel that her inconsistency and actions exposes her ambivalence with respect to class identity. Not only that, she seems to be lacking consistency in love too. Indeed at the end Hurston appears to be endorsing this inconsistency in her protagonist through the white community's support when they rule in her favour during the trial for the murder of her last husband. Yet such inconsistencies should also be measured against Janie's evolving consciousness and growth as a woman. In as much as she remains an individual with a zest for an ideal relationship, Janie's development through time is characterized by continual revisioning of her status vis – a –vis her relationship with the men who come into her life. Evidence from her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* attests to the fact that she never settled to a fulfilling relationship, that she kept revising her perception of what it really feels to be in love. Reflecting on her personal views on love, Hurston writes :

Love is a mighty wakening thing with me...I did not just fall in love. I made a parachute jump. (*Dust Tracks on A Road*,182,184)

What seems clear is that in the text the various decisions Janie makes are informed by the womanist ideals that Hurston invests in her. To note is the fact that after the burial of her third husband she comes back home, a free woman, to tell her friend the story of her struggle.

From a cultural perspective, the narrative attests to a common feature that runs through African American female works, one that distinguishes them from the African woman's conceptualisation of African -womanism. The influence of race is particularly shown through

Mrs Turner's attempt to persuade Janie to opt out of her marriage, for her lighter skinned brother. Clearly, her prejudices against the black race make her feel that she has the right to destroy a legitimate relationship, hence prompting Tea Cake to advise his wife to 'treat her [Janie] cold.' (138).

Hurston's deconstruction of class structures of the post slavery era are also enacted through her construction of Tea Cake, who, as Cheryll Wall (1927:188) puts it "exemplifies the aesthetic principles Hurston set forth in characteristics of Negro expression." It is worthy to note that though both Jody and Tea Cake are suave talkers, the latter is the one who affords the protagonist the opportunity to know herself through her culture (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*,107). Significantly, Tea Cake's playacting is reminiscent of the Signifying monkey of the African American legends and traditions, whose original source is Africa of the pre-colonial era. Imbued with all the characteristics of trickery and double talk, he subverts all the western values that Janie had come to associate with Jody. Hurston has denied him power, money and position, to equip him with a new political ethos that is consistent with African American Negro aesthetics. It should also be noted that Tea Cake is invested with the ability to represent such aesthetics through his taste for music, as is seen when he comes to entertain Janie at the porch. The relevance of the theory of signification is worth appreciating here, given the author's anthropological research and knowledge of oral African traditions. Considering that Negro folk tradition originates from Africa, it is easy to identify aspects of intertextuality between Hurston's works and those by African female writers on the continent. Evidence of her extensive anthropological research in Haiti can be gleaned from her published play *Jonah's Gourd*. According to Henry Louis Gates Jnr (cited in Coady et al 2011: 3), Hurston relies on

the strategy of signification and retrieval of the female voice to “subvert established power structures” (Coady et al 2011: 3).

Although Tea Cake on occasions exhibits masculinist authority when he beats his wife, he remains her charming darling because he is endowed with a superior brand of black vernacular rhetoric that Jody only parodies, often to his detriment. The text shows Janie as more mesmerized by Tea Cake’s talk than she has been by Joe Starks’ bourgeois flamboyance, because it derives from the couple’s individual circumstances. In other words, Tea Cake and Janie remain compatible partners because there is always room to resolve their differences through amicable talk. When Tea Cake asserts his masculinity it is never articulated with the finality of authority as is evident in Jody’s speeches. This aspect, as Cheryl (1927), makes plain, allows Janie to constantly negotiate spaces within which to claim selfhood. (Cheryl 1927: 180) goes on to argue that it is because Janie is inspired by love that she agrees to pick beans on the muck.

Marriage and Choice: the motif of time in the genealogy of female cultural difference
Their Eyes were watching God resonates with the historical timbre of the slave era from which the black Americans emerged in the mid19th Century. It maps a temporal trajectory that the female protagonist traverses in her journey to selfhood, and in the process delineates Hurston’s deconstruction of the diabolical systems of slavery and patriarchy which continue to haunt the African American woman in the post slavery era. For Laudau (2004:12) “the novel meanders with various sorts of time, especially the external and circular, as is typical of fairy tales and legends.” This perspective is an important point for explaining vicissitudes surrounding the journey motif that structures the protagonist’s life. To note is the fact that Janie evolves from a

state of innocence to one of self consciousness and independence when she comes back to the community after the death of Tea Cake.

The portrayal of Nanny early in the novel is significant. Nanny is a living testimony of how the black woman was doubly oppressed by a callous system that denied her rights to choice of a marriage partner as well as the right to decent living conditions. While the novel is not necessarily structured around slavery, Hurston's depiction of characters who belong to a different generation is critical in the manner it allows us to evaluate the ways African American women of different generations react to the ideological conditions affecting them in time and space. Duck (2001:5) endorses this observation when she reminds us that Du Bois in *Souls of Black Folk* (1903), "argues that all African Americans experience multiple temporal forms, swept by the currents of the 19th Century while yet struggling in the eddies of the 15th Century." I get the sense that such an impact had more serious effects on the black woman than her male counterpart, as implied in the text.

The work suggests that there is a clear conflict of interests and perception between the young Janie and her grandmother Nanny especially regarding marriage and choice. Because of her prolonged association with the white folks, Nanny has internalized most of their traits to the point of considering them natural enough to pass them to her grand daughter Janie. It is in this sense that I see the novel as a contrast between Nanny's passivity and Janie's potential to question male female relationships from a transformative perspective. Following the double tragedy of her experiences with the white master who impregnated and dumped her, and the subsequent rape of her daughter by a school teacher, Nanny is the epitome of a demoralized, traumatized woman who has succumbed to the narrowly defined prescribed role of a black woman as a housewife. It is from this perspective that we come to understand her decision to

preempt Janie's sexuality by marrying her off to Logan Killick. As Dulberk (2008: 3) observes, "Nanny provides Janie with old fashioned insights while trying to explain Janie's place in the world as a woman." It is a place where a black woman should accept her role as the mule of the world. Yet Nanny forgets that the time for subjecting women to such servile roles is gone, that the post slavery era is a new phase characterized by the woman's quest for gender equity.

The novel therefore points to the fact that Janie's decisive moment is when Nanny compels her to marry Logan Killicks. She justifies herself by saying she wants Janie to marry decent, and more importantly to forestall chances of being raped, a cruel twist of fate that her mother suffered. What we note here is a woman who has been denied a chance to value love, a woman who has been made to subordinate her black femininity to male interests. Hurston debunks this spurious notion of love by investing Janie with a vision of love and romance denied her mother and Nanny, through the symbolism of the pear tree. The awakening of her sexuality through the "dust bearing bee" is not only an occasion to mark her own developing sexuality but it is also a call for the American hegemonic society to accord the black woman the right to participate freely in the natural cycle of their sexuality. Livie Howard (cited in Barr 2003: 5) asserts that Janie gets her definition of marriage from nature. Yet, like her mother, she is not allowed to have her nature reach full bloom. Hurston bemoans the fact that black American women are denied the natural sexuality God bestows on all creation. In a similar response Dilberk (2008) concurs that Janie desperately wants the love and affection from a man that the tree receives from the pollen bearing tree. Hence she wistfully remarks "Oh to be a pear tree." (11). The contrast between Janie and her grandmother is that while she yearns for love and romance, Nanny yearns for a secure marriage, regardless of whether it guarantees mutual love or not. In

the words of Duck (2001:16), “Nanny obtains property and status for Janie through the discipline of Janie’s own body.”

In considering Janie’s transformation, it is pertinent to note how time has a telling effect on her journey towards selfhood. Throughout her three marriages, she is afforded opportunities for assessing the viability of her relationships, a condition denied her mother and grandmother. Each successive marriage becomes an occasion to evaluate her plight on her psyche, to make independent decisions about her future. While for Nanny choices of husband were nonexistent, Janie can afford the freedom to discard husbands who do not suit her. The post slavery era is thus depicted as a period for black women to assume agency. Interestingly, Janie’s love life parallels that of Hurston’s own. Her first failed marriage was followed by one with AWP, whom she was passionate about but later left on demands similar to those made by Joe Starks. (*Dust Tracks on a Road* 185). It is from this standpoint that I view the novel as transcending conventions of patriarchy and national hegemony, given that it empowers women with a unique fighting spirit.

Secondly, the novel arguably insists on a character who demands to be heard and appreciated. A close look at some of the reasons for the breakdown of Janie’s first two marriages reveals that in each case she is denied quality time and opportunities for free self expression. Logan Killicks might be rich but, as Janie remarks, “some men are never meant to be loved.” This assessment alludes to the veritable quality time that Janie as a woman expects from a man. Killicks appears to be more concerned with his property, to the extent of undertaking a long journey to buy a new mule for her to use. Hardly has the marriage been consummated than he decides to leave her to fate, to the predatory whims of adventurous self seeking characters like

Joe Starks. Fate again interposes to allow Janie time to make her own choice of husband, when Nanny dies.

Hurston in this respect paves the way for her protagonist's exploratory journey with male relations, firstly, by killing Nanny, who embodies the silenced refracted images of a passing era, and secondly by metaphorically killing Killick through his prolonged absence from home. Paradoxically, both characters represent antithetical poles of the bourgeois capitalist conventions; the one submission, the other unbridled authority of male power. But Janie's breakthrough is registered when she defies Nanny's conventional view of love. While Nanny feels she has secured a lifeline for her, Janie perceives it differently; she needs a man she can bring herself to love. Sensing this lack of reciprocity in her first love she complains:

"I want to love him sometimes. I don't want him to do all the loving (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 22). This remark highlights her desire to have her sensibilities of womanhood recognized in a marriage. Through Janie, Hurston suggests that marriage that only privileges a man's sexuality is doomed to fail.

The coming of Joe Starks into Janie's life initially carries prospects of fulfillment of her dreams. Unlike Killicks who looks up to being assisted in manual work by his wife Starks wants to make amends to the farmer's weakness of looking up to his wife as an equal partner in family chores. Dismissing the practice with the nonchalance of one who knows his mind, he tells her that it is not her business to be behind a plough, nor to cut potatoes. Yet while he means well when he undertakes to transform her into a lady, Joe Starks unwittingly misconstrues the African American woman's perception of love, marriage and romance. He forgets that time when women were treated as mere ornaments for the male gaze is gone.

Not surprisingly, Jodie's romance with Janie is short lived, mainly because it is constructed on the artificial borrowed lifestyle of middle class whites. Duck (2001:16) suggests that "he is the link between bourgeois and patriarchal values." It is clear that Joe Starks wants to define his wife through essentialist white middle class values. What is however problematic with this perception is that the appropriation of such values compels him to mistakenly view all women as having similar traits. In his preoccupation with impressing Janie by flaunting his elegance and wealth, Jody fails to read through Janie's individual desires. The narrative seems to suggest that what she needs is equal participation and attention at the store porch, not the flamboyance that comes with middle class elevation. Janie gets the feeling that she is being excluded from the exhilarating activities that bring life and exuberance to the whole community. Dilbeiko (2008:3) astutely observes that besides being "treated with respect and dignity", a woman needs "freedom to experience life." Ironically, while Janie does get these honours as the mayor's wife, she is denied freedom of movement and self expression. As revealed in her musings and sulking, Janie yearns for quality time with her husband and the community of Eatonville. The community talk provides the sensual shared experience that becomes a source of entertainment for all, women included. Janie resents confinement to a life of "sitting on a front porch to rock and fan" (28). In her essay '*Can the subaltern speak,*' Gayatri Spivak (cited in Carol Boyce Davis (1994:21) attacks patriarchal conventions where "a woman as subject is already positioned, represented, spoken for, or constructed as absent or not listened to in a variety of ways."

Given the circumstances under which Janie allows herself to run off with Jody, one is inclined to agree with Barr's (2003:5) assertion that she had been saving up her feelings for some other man she had never seen. Yet the discrepancy between her choice and the long period of

disaffection with her second lover raises questions of Janie's empowerment and quest for fulfillment, often given much emphasis by most critics. A good number of such critics who applaud her fighting spirit and protesting voice overlook the point that if she is indeed invested with powers to challenge Jody's chauvinism and authority at the time, why would she have to endure twenty years before breaking free? The point I am stressing here is that in her journey towards fulfillment, Janie is sometimes overwhelmed by exigencies of the situation. As Miller (2004:11) contends "in order to be free Janie must locate the temporal circumstances, that is, the man best suited for freedom. To do this she has to adopt a different strategy, that of negotiating oppression predicated on gender" (2004:11). Surprisingly, the text suggests that when Tea Cake appears on the scene, Janie is too excited to wait for the end of the mourning period as convention requires. Could this be the man she has been saving up her feelings for, one wonders. Or is she mesmerized by his youthful age?

The motif of time is also enacted through Janie's last marriage to Tea Cake. Beginning on a controversial note [at the store porch] after the death of Joe Starks, Hurston calls attention to the community's complaints about Janie's failure to respect the mourning period. The Eatonville folks complain, through her friend Phoebe, that Janie is already hooked up to Tea Cake before Joe Starks is cold in his grave. But Janie's romantic gesture of dressing in blue and entertaining Tea Cake attests to one who had been longing for change, for freedom. When advised by Phoebe to be more cautious, lest she succumbs to the same fate of young men's seductive allure like Hugh Flung, she confides that she had always wanted to be independent, but Jody would not allow her. Disclosing that he always classed her off, she declares :

I want to utilize myself all over. Tea Cake loves me in blue. Jody never in his life picked out no colour for me. (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*,107)

Again what we read from this revelation is Janie's aversion to sitting on the porch like white women, a practice she also associates with slavery. This yearning for self definition and agency typifies most works by African American women after the Emancipation. The author's autobiography actually illuminates this problem of being confined to the home as the major cause of the breakdown of her own marriage with 'A.W.P.' since it is triggered by his masculine demands on her:

I wouldn't want my wife to do anything but look after me . Be home looking like Skookums when I get there. (*Dust Tracks on a Road*,185)

Ironically, Janie needed a man like Tea Cake to liberate her from that kind of entrapment. And yet while she feels free from Jody, it is on the strength of his estate that she is able to indulge in a love game with Tea Cake at the end of the novel (Baker, in Sorenson 2005:14). As I have argued elsewhere in this thesis, Hurston does not sufficiently invest her protagonist with the kind of agency that would enable her to act independently. Compared with other African American characters like Celie and Harpo in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Janie lacks the radicalism often associated with African American female characters. However, this, in my view, makes this text conform to the political path preferred by most African female writers on the African continent. Writers such as Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Ba, and others acknowledge the complementary role of men in male relationships. In Janie, the novel presents a character who benefits from and empowers herself with material possessions of one man, to secure her more fulfilling last relationship. The paradox of this marriage is that it is one from which she gets most quality time, albeit for only a few years. Time is most poignantly played out through the romantic scenes in the Everglades, where they pick beans together. Janie's constant appellation of Tea Cake as the "Son of the Evening Sun" reflects her yearning for this

relationship to last, an ideal situation that symbolizes the compatibility and natural rhythm of their love.

While I concur with Barr's (2003) contention that the novel deifies Janie in that she is the one we are watching all the time as carving her own destiny, I also feel that Janie's eulogy on Tea Cake highlights her appreciation of his role as husband. Yet, as fate would have it, she has to kill her lover in order to save herself from the rabies he contracted while trying to save her. What is tellingly clear is that it is with Tea Cake that Janie has been able to expand her social, erotic and emotional space. As the text makes evident, she participates freely in every activity with Tea Cake. In the words of Barr (2003: 6), "Janie learns to become a player, a participant, rather than an onlooker." This relationship is not tied to any conventions but is created by the participants in accordance with their desires. In the words of Derrida (cited in Williams, 2011:4) "All our colloquial ways of positing the origin of meaning....are essentially caught in an immediate pre/re/gression, as a series of differences and deferral, so that no origin can be determined as presence." Janie and Tea Cake find fulfillment because their acts of signification are freely chosen.

Subjectivity and identity: Challenges for the black woman's empowerment.

One salient feature that emerges from my reading of the text is the question of female subjectivity in a patriarchal environment that constantly seeks to undermine it. Nancy Coh and Elizabeth Pleck (cited in Kurks 2001:85) define female subjectivity as "how a woman herself sees her role and how she sees that role as contributing or not to her identity and meaning." Like most African American female narratives, Hurston deftly draws a character who relentlessly grapples with challenges of gender and racial stereotypes in her quest for identity and personal empowerment. The novel highlights women's responses to men and dominant

power structures as motors of difference. In this respect it interrogates the black woman's subject position by opening up spaces for her potential empowerment. The fact that the novel opens with the protagonist's sense of discovery, a break from childhood innocence, through a photograph which marks her out as black and different from others, is significant. This realization of her color as a distinctive feature of racial difference is the genesis of her evolving consciousness about herself as an individual. Here one is reminded of Stuart Hall's (1991) observation that identities are constructed out of difference.

When the novel unfolds, Hurston introduces Nanny, Janie's grandmother, by invoking the former's harrowing experiences of the institution of slavery, which continue to haunt the African American woman, condemning her to the lowest rung of the human social hierarchy.

The link between history and the African American woman's subject position is brought out through flashback early in the novel, to show that women have been the worst victims of gender and racial discrimination in America. It is from this standpoint that Hurston has constructed a female character who constantly reinterprets the woman's prescribed position in the face of the respective demands of her three different husbands. Willet (1995:11) sees the female project as involving "reasserting the identity of women in manners that transform stereotypes into liberating modes of selfhood." In its portrayal of the protagonist's husbands, the text however, does not suggest a monolithic view of masculine stereotypes. Rather, it presents men whose interpretation of female roles is different, allowing Janie to judge them in her own terms. To note is that in all three marriages, the men deploy different methods of silencing her, on their mistaken assumptions that women deserve similar treatment. I argue that each of them silences a different woman, a transformed Janie in time and place. This dialectical relationship manifests itself in complex ways, prompting Janie to adopt liberatory and survival strategies of a

transcendental nature. Critics such as Myers (cited in Temple 2012: 1) have formulated survival theories adopted by black women such as immortalization theory, intergenerational stewardship and cognitive framing. Temple advocates what she calls “a dynamic liberatory exercise to acknowledge ways and possibilities African women” invoked such as supernatural intergenerational powers to “lead the race into wholeness and prosperity.” While I concur with Myers on the efficacy of these strategies, my grounds for appreciating them are informed by a different perspective. There is evidence that with Killick Janie learns early enough that marriage without love is sterile. In fact one feels that Hurston uses Janie at this stage to register her own personal philosophy of love. The text shows that Killicks thinks that his word is law. Because he belongs to an older generation, he has internalized similar bourgeois ideas about marriage that Nanny has failed to question. Like Nanny who has pinned his eligibility on property and wealth, he has erroneously focused on Janie’s potential to contribute to the family income instead of the romantic bliss that marriage entails. This shifting of priorities is also noted in Jody, her second husband, who is overly preoccupied with his new found wealth. He is keen to live the life of his former white racist employers. Each of these reactions is based on a wrong perception of the African American woman’s subject position in the post slavery era. Haurykiewicz (1997:3) reminds us that the African American woman today is likely to adopt the subtler connotation of the mule metaphor when she contends that:

Because of its stubbornness the mule functions as a site of resistance...it illustrates the black woman’s defiance of conventional gender expectations and male authority.

While the store porch to which Janie is restricted symbolizes her domestication and silencing, it can also be interpreted as a battleground for her resistance. It is the site of her potential

freedom to participate in the mule talk and the social life of the community. But for Joe Starks it is a symbol of his elevation into the bourgeois life style enjoyed by only a few blacks.

Instances of Jody's silencing of his wife abound in the text. For example, he forbids her to make a speech at his election as mayor. This is followed by his denying her the opportunity to attend Matt Bonner's mule's funeral. As Miller (2004) intelligently interprets the incident, both Jody and Killick insist on restricting Janie where they want her to be. Yet, I argue, it is Jody to whom Janie is most tightly tethered, to the extent that her rights to her body are also violated. In fact he is the one who relegates her, together with other womenfolk, to the position of pigs, chickens and other animals. Jody also insists that she wears a head rug to cover her hair (51). Added to this is the emotional torture to which he subjects her, culminating in the physical assault over a poorly cooked dinner (67). This in my view is sufficient provocation for Janie to adopt the militant character trait of the mule; stubbornness and counter resistance.

While Miller (2004) contends that Jody's violence on his wife is motivated by jealousy, we need to realize that at no point do the men pose a threat to his marriage in the manner that Mrs Turner does when she tries to wreck it in order to make way for her brother. For most of the altercations between the couple it is worthwhile to note that Jody is the perpetrator. What is also apparent is that Janie's responses are pronounced or acted in self defense. In other words, we often find her guarding her subject position. I submit that the reason why Janie treats Starks with patience and restraint, up until the breaking point of their marriage, is that he is the man she practically chooses for herself. Thus when she insults him about his failing manhood it is to reassert her selfhood, to even up with him, or check his dominance. Hurston's point here, which rings with a feminist tone, is to portray men as violent, inconsiderate, and unnecessarily abusive. Hurston also intends to show that African women can no longer take it silently. They

are prepared to speak out, to defend their subject position. It must be recalled that the need for women to take up agency against patriarchal domination gained currency in the United States after the emancipation and the Harlem Renaissance.

One other motive for Jody's oppression of Janie is the desire to assert his male ego. Bouyed by his newly acquired economic power, he wants to use position as a leverage for exerting power over the community and his wife. He feels that his status authorizes him to pose as the standard, as the one solely responsible for assigning hierarchical positions, using sexual orientation and class as the major criteria. The men at the store porch complain that he has raised himself to the status of a God, a remark that Janie picks up too in her protestations against his insults and dehumanizing reactions. While Tea Cake is also implicated in similar traits of dominance, his language is less caustic, as he always finds a way of reconciling their differences.

In keeping with the thrust of my argument as articulated in the foregoing, I am insisting that the text presents a variety of female responses to patriarchal, racial and class domination, each of which is designed to champion the cause of women's demand for self representation and autonomy. In the text Janie's strategies for resisting domination are tactfully deployed to achieve her aspirations. As far as gender politics is concerned, the strategies constitute what Cornel West (1990) called "creative responses to the precise moments of [her] time." That the text refuses to universalize women's responses is also seen through the portrayal of female characters who conform to the systems that engender female oppression. Nanny and Mrs Turner are both victims either through their acquiescence or eulogizing of the oppressive institutions. This rendering is Hurston's way of endorsing the contention that there is no monolithic agenda or response to female subjectivity. The variety of subject positions that women take in their quest for personal fulfillment are a consequence of personal choice, not

group insularity (West 1990). In fact the novel's epistemology in many ways mirrors Janie's actions against her men. It is clear that Hurston uses her to undermine established power structures that have condemned African American women to servitude. In Janie she turns around Nanny's tale of the mule as a total misrepresentation of the definitions and images of black women.

Turning now to the protagonist's relations with her last husband, it is pertinent to pick up the debate surrounding his eligibility as her ideal husband. There is need to weigh his contribution against her liberational course without overemphasizing his shortcomings. First it is important to note that Hurston never intended to construct a saint out of Tea Cake. Rather, I feel that Tea Cake represents a version of masculinity that is more versatile, one that allows what West (1990) calls "options and alternatives for transformative praxis." In this vein I want to submit that despite his economic instability, Tea Cake makes up for the emotional erotic and psychic losses incurred by the protagonist in her previous marriages. With him Janie's romantic world is transformed and revitalized. It is a kind of fulfillment to her previous yearning of seeing to it that she revives herself. What is particularly intriguing is Tea Cake's ability to act out the marriage game to the advantage of both of them, for the most part. Though Hattenhauer (1994) dismisses him for being rootless, gambling, love of parties and extravagance, I refute this moralistic perception on grounds that with Tea Cake, Janie finds love that is mutually satisfying because it is constructed around their individual passions. Both are comfortable around each other to the extent that each makes sacrifices for the other. The text suggests that Janie's love grows naturally and is liberating.

Janie looked down on him and felt a crushing love. So her soul crawled out of its hiding place. (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 122)

Tea Cake comes to Janie's life to dramatise the idyllic love scenes that the narrative foreshadows, symbolized by the pear tree and the bee but truncated in her own relationships with her first two husbands. Yet that early symbolic scene is re-envisioned through the appearance of Tea Cake later in the novel. While I am equally outraged by the physical assault on Janie by Tea Cake, in a similar way as I do the one by Jody, I feel that critics who concentrate on such issues elide the more positive features of this relationship. I argue that Tea Cake performs a more egalitarian role of male relationships desired by most African American women. This is an instance of signification in which Hurston deconstructs patriarchal practices. Through Tea Cake the condition of domesticity and exhibitionist adornment of women to which they were consigned in Victorian times is jettisoned, to be substituted by one where lovers are passionate participants in a love game. During one of her frank discussions with Phoebe, Janie herself admits she has been rejuvenated.

If people thinks de same, they can make it alright. So in the beginning new thoughts had to be thought and new words said. After Ah got used to dat, we gits long jus' fine. He once taught me de maiden language all over. (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*,109)

Significantly, the couple afford themselves quality time through sharing moments of laughter, playing games, going out and reveling in idle banter. Hence, construed within the wider spectrum of African American female representational practices, this marriage locates a lacuna for female empowerment. The couple freely construct a context for discovering themselves, and finding meaning in their love. Michael Akward (cited in Barbato et al 1998:18) writes, "meaning does not exist a priori but is created by the particular context of its articulation." The text shows that the protagonist discovers herself through her relationship with Tea Cake, both within and outside the parameters of their love.

To a woman who began her life on a blank (as suggested by the name Alphabet) Janie rewrites a script for the African American woman to name herself. Tea Cake is the culmination of that quest, not only towards making her physical identity visible, but more importantly her spiritual fulfillment.

Some critics have used isolated incidents in the text to dismiss Tea Cake's marriage with Janie as unsuitable. Firstly, I want to contend that it is unrealistic to look for a perfect marriage. Miller's contention that Tea Cake rules in the marriage is probably indicative of such perceptions. Miller bases her argument on Tea Cake's beating of Janie, his bragging to Sop de Bottom that his wife goes wherever he wants her to be, and on his suggestion soon after their marriage that he be the sole breadwinner. While there is reason to judge Tea Cake on these incidents, I feel that Miller overlooks the overall effects of the marriage to Janie. The text is replete with evidence that Tea Cake does not rule in the relationship. For instance, he never becomes the sole breadwinner, as his income is reduced to the uncertainties and risks of gambling, compared with Janie's secure inherited wealth. Again the bragging must not be taken at face value. In fact Janie emerges to be the one who dictates where Tea Cake should be. His invitation to go out fishing at night actually dovetails with her yearning to go out; he is compelled by his passion for her to fulfill her desires. And when they go out picking beans on the muck it is always Tea Cake who comes back to assure her of his love. Here we note that the demands for work fail to separate the couple. "He w'd come home and tease and wrestle with her for half an hour and slip back." (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 126)

Thus it must be noted that their being together picking beans in the field is by mutual agreement. As for the beating, it is only a single incident, prompted by Tea Cake's desire to recover his waning masculinity in the face of her self empowerment. Hence it would be a gross

misrepresentation of facts to link her first two husband's violent and indecorous disposition with her last. Miller (2004:11) therefore appears to contradict herself when she writes, "At the end she is the dignified, empowered woman." Janie gains her subject position as a result of her own subversive actions, not because she fortunately marries the right man. For Miller the strategy of negotiating oppression allows Janie to win power by appealing to patriarchy that Tea Cake represents. Her observation that Janie uses submission which she later abandons when his violence causes her to shoot him, as a source of power, attests to the protagonist's versatility and sense of discernment.

According to Sorenson (2005:16) "Janie reverses the structures of gendered power, violence and ownership that he had mobilized in beating her." However, this interpretation makes me uneasy as it tends to radicalize their relationship. It is simplistic to reduce the circumstances leading to Tea Cake's shooting to matters of revenge in gender violence. Such rendering overlooks the mutual sacrifices enacted at the end of the novel, before Tea Cake succumbs to the rabid dog bite that subsequently maddens him. The text constructs a near blissful relationship between the two when they are on the muck, with Janie constantly reassuring Tea Cake that despite the dangers brought by the hurricane, she is more contented with him than ever before. In her reminiscences of experiences at the store porch she realizes with full satisfaction that at Tea Cake's house "she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to. She got so she could tell big stories herself from listening to the rest" (128). In other words, at the muck, the power of speech suppressed by Joe Starks returns, and with it her self assertion and identity.

Janie's sense of contentment is endorsed by Barr's (2003: 15) observation that her subject position has been transformed. "She becomes a player, a participant, rather than an onlooker."

While I do not deny that there were moments when she would be silenced, I feel that such actions were merely strategic, intended to ensure that they remained compatible. This is in keeping with Hurston's agenda of depicting her heroine's process of identity formation and empowerment. As Barr (2003:15) would concur, Tea Cake might be having his own imperfections, but they never detract from the protagonist's new found freedom "to participate in the life of the community on the muck where she does what men do." Ironically, Tea Cake also empowers her physically: the shooting practices he has allowed her come in handy. When occasion presents itself she uses the same skills to kill the man she loved. I would therefore argue that the anticlimax at the end of the text undermines the gains that the writer might have achieved. As I have highlighted elsewhere in this thesis, the elimination of male characters tends to weaken the black woman's agency. by giving the impression that fulfillment only comes through their absence. This is one of the blemishes that proponents of the Africana womanist ideology try to ameliorate, particularly through their frequent calls for male compatibility.

Rediscovering a female cultural discourse : diversity and challenges for a transcendental project

The critical strategy which informs and directs my analysis in this section is Africana womanism, melded into Gate's theory of signification. The latter is particularly relevant for the examination of female discursive features that permeate the text. The novel occupies a unique space in African American literature in its skewed structuring towards speech, particularly female discourse. Hurston appropriates vernacular speech patterns to capture the temporal and cultural nuances that ground her narrative. In a manner reminiscent of Emecheta's presentation of Adaku, Nnu Ego and Mama Abbey in *The Joys Of Motherhood*, Hurston suggests that the woman's protesting voice is lodged in the interstices of their typical

discursive spaces. In addition, Hurston sees the need for African American women to unlock their creative potential by envisioning a new liberational path for black women, even as she appeals for divine intervention. To note is that female cultural discourse in the text is brought out in three dimensions: through Janie's and Nanny's reflections of their personal lives, the protagonist's altercations with her husbands and exclusive social contexts that allow the women to engage in esoteric female talk. In the first dimension, female discourse is mostly articulated through the prism of psychoanalysis - cum autobiography. I argue that the text's preoccupation with female discourse and difference is particularly illuminated through the characters' frank engagement in what Adam Phillips calls "therapeutic conversation." (265).

For purposes of recovering a female aesthetic and transcending conventional discourse Hurston often invests her female characters with multiple voices. Indeed there is scope for reflection in Cooper's (2008:18) appreciation of the novel as a "speakerly text." The work's preoccupation with female voices subsumes an otherwise subdued uneventful plot structure. This point has been identified by critics who charge that the novel is flawed in this respect. Yet, viewed from an African womanist perspective, one is inclined to acknowledge the reason for the prevalence of passages that capture female talk. In fact, Cooper (2008) elevates it to one long sermon. Given the historical and social context within which it is set, we note that it is a text in which sensibilities of women of different generations raise issues that have affected them as individuals and as groups. The aspect of diversity is most poignantly captured in Hurston's autobiography where she contends:

Our lives are so diversified, internal attitudes so varied, appearances and capabilities so different, that there is no possible classification so catholic that it will cover us all. (*Dust Tracks on a Road*, 172)

Such diversities are enacted through generations and even within specific social groups in various contexts. While Nanny speaks the language of submission, the language that derives from the social conventions of the slave era, Janie embodies the voice of one seeking to be heard. In a subdued tone, Nanny recounts her harrowing experiences during the slave era culminating in the tale of the mule.

Honey , de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. De b nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 14)

For Sorenson (2005:7 “the tale’s context and form offers a critique of the social silencing of women.” It is this tale that she uses to rationalize the imposition of an unwanted marriage (Sorenson2005: 8). But an interpretation of the tale should also connect us to history through the allusions of oral African traditions. Hence the mule metaphor also captures the African American’s interpretation of the black woman’s subject position as a cultural legacy that needs to be redressed.

Contrary to Nanny’s expectations, her tale becomes a turning point for Janie’s self awakening and articulation. Huston assigns a different, active voice to empower Janie against the patriarchal conventions that have marginalized and denied women freedom to choose their own marriage partners. Janie’s rejection of Logan Killick on grounds of lack of passion has already been highlighted elsewhere in this thesis. What we learn is that Janie becomes an instrument not only for discovering herself but also other marginalized women. Her quest enacts what Miles calls ‘moving from pained or marginal existence’ to personal freedom.’ The text systematically traverses a trajectory of female rhetorical speeches, structured in a manner that demonstrates her widening vision and growing aggressive spirit against gender oppression. In other words,

Hurston allows Janie to write her own speech, one that repudiates the black woman's servitude. This explains why the female voices in the text are always articulated in direct opposition to the male patriarchal ideology. The text abounds in incidents where Janie registers her objections to her husbands' chauvinistic attitudes. Each of them is caught up in some kind of altercation with her but for different reasons, and with different consequences. Unlike Nanny who succumbs, Janie arguably triumphs over the challenges that assail her, either by speaking out before leaving or allowing for concessions when it suits her. In a sense, she embodies the new black female fighting spirit, which is at liberty to transcend all manner of social conventions that subjugate women.

In the text Hurston shows gender conflict to result from male arrogance. Again, this feature is clearly brought out in the protagonist's three marriages. The multiple social contexts in which the text is set allows the writer to establish discursive spaces for other black women such as Mrs Turner, Mrs Robins and Phoebe. The divergent voices of these women indicate that black women do not necessarily share the same sensibilities. Either they negotiate a liberatory path or affirm their allegiance to the dominant power structures. For Audre Lorde (cited in Carol Boyce Davis 1994: 41), black women are constituted in terms of "multiple subjectivities" which give way to a variety of discursive positions and agency. In contrast with Janie's quest for female visibility, Mrs Turner betrays sisterly solidarity by attempting to break Janie's marriage in order to fix a relationship for her supposedly more eligible brother. Again, instead of extolling the beauty of the African American woman, she elects to appreciate only those features of Janie that resemble the white race. Here Hurston demonstrates that sisterly solidarity among black women is not a given. While Phoebe is a willing listener to Janie's tale and counselor to her plight, Mrs Turner hates her own race. As is evident in her language, she embodies qualities of a

disillusioned alienated woman , especially through her conspiratorial call for lighter skinned black women to class off.

You'se different from me. Ah cant stand black niggers. Ah don't blame de white folks from hatin' 'em cause Ah cant stand 'em mahself. Nother thing, Ah hates tuh see folks lak me and you mixed up wid 'em. Us oughta class off. (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 135)

Responding to similar sentiments, Williams (1985:60) laments the fact that “black women’s self esteem is undermined by the use of alien aesthetics to assess black women’s beauty and value.” Female talk, mostly conducted in black vernacular, constitutes a subtext of the novel’s meta-narrative because it captures specific idiosyncrasies, those that, in the words of Barbra Christian(2001), “ we would not want to question.” The preeminence of this subtext attests to Hurston’s desire to assign a voice to the silenced black woman. According to Carol Davis Boyce (1994:41) “subjects who are subjected to multiple discursive influences create modes of resistance to those discourses out of the very discourses that shape them.”

It is important to note that Janie’s marriage with Jody begins on a hopeful note, only to be spoilt by his silencing of her. Haurykiewicz (1997:14) observes that Janie has been calculative in her responses to Joe Starks. While in the initial stages she ‘ learns to restrain herself from speaking’ , it emerges that ‘like the “Talking Mule”, she is actually saving her verbal powers for a surprise attack.’ Hence when she begins to feel the full weight of his dominance she answers back, thereby drawing sympathy from the reader.

The first instance of Janie’s voicing is when she categorically reminds Joe that women are different. ‘There’s some women dat aint for you to broach” (37). This is followed by her resistance to confinement in the home. And in an apparent attempt to make him reassess their

respective roles as a couple she says: "I feel like I'm just marking time" (43). Yet Jody interprets her protests by denying her the fun of mule talk and the community discourse, and warning her against "getting too moufy" (113). The implication here is that he has assumed the authority to control her speech and actions. The climax of Janie's protesting voice is when she scorns him for his manhood. According to Coady et al (2011:5) when people engage in obscured mock gestures of authority figures this constitutes some kind of signification. Echoing the same view on the effect of the rhetorical device, Barr (2003:5) observes that "Joe's turn to the male world of play at Janie's expense leads her to play the dozens on his sexuality and this leads to his death." In an apparent reference to Janie's eventual triumph in the war of words between the couple, Barr (2003 :123) concludes that the novel "subverts the apparent social myth of female weakness." She goes on to argue that Janie's castigation of Joe's manhood allows her to "write herself into being by naming, by speaking herself free." Janie's rejection of the sexist image imposed on her by her husband is also enacted through her rejoinder when Jody derogatively attacks her physical image: "Talking about me looking old! When you pull down your breeches , you look like de change uh life" (75). By hitting back using more lacerating language, Janie wins the war of words. Her vitriol has the effect of damaging his male ego to the extent that his health is adversely affected. Joe is so mortified that he decides to move out of their matrimonial bed to sleep in a room downstairs. His subsequent physical deterioration, attributed to this incident, is described in graphic terms that portend his end.

Then she noticed how baggy Joe was getting all over... A little sack hung from the corners of his cheek bones ; a loose -filled bag of feathers hung from his ears and rested on his neck beneath his chin. (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*,77)

One other important strategy used in the text is the depiction of Janie and Phoebe as consenting supporting voices. This construction is similar to Buchi Emecheta's characterization of Kehinde and Moriamo, (in *Kehinde 1994*), who share secrets of how to cope with male oppression. As the protagonist's confidante, Phoebe endorses her friend's protesting voice, by listening to her story. According to Cheryl Wall (1927) by sharing her story to Phoebe, Janie demonstrates that the resources she summons for her journey are available to others. It is also within this context that Sanchez (2011) views the text as a magic realist text because of its depiction of real conditions of speech that capture the dialogical nature of female discourse.

At the end of the novel Phoebe says "I been to the horizon." The notion of a horizon, which in my view represents unexplored frontiers, is also captured in the writer's childhood observations within her family. "It grew upon me that I ought to walk out to the horizon and see what the end of the world was like" (*Dust Tracks on a Road*, 127). Hence both women share, as they confide in each other a similar quest, a new female vision, the same transcendental voice that challenges and subverts patriarchal hegemony. The intersection of their female voices and sensibilities is crucial as a narrative strategy when viewed from the perspective of oral folk tales within which female discourse is anchored in Hurston's text. Sanchez's (2011:27) astute observation that black women writers "create specifically female spaces from which they can confront their own cultural heritage together with their identity as women", provides a useful basis for a more scholarly examination of female discourse in the text. In the words of Cooper (2008:19) the text represents an oral performance because the narrative enacts the story that Janie tells Phoebe. 'We can sit where we is and talk.' (7). Carol Boyce Davis (1994:155) adds that "The narrative Janie gives to Phoebe becomes the speech after Janie's closure." But more importantly, Hurston does not limit the audience to Phoebe only. It

is clear that Phoebe is a representation of many readers and listeners of several generations of silenced black women, in the diaspora and on the African continent. The narrative is also authenticated by many biblical allusions, which in my view constitute the supernatural supporting voice for women. As Cooper (2008:25) emphasizes, “The narrative endows Janie’s own story with biblical authority.” In fact it is clear that throughout her narrative Hurston enlists divine intervention for the silenced black woman to transcend her underprivileged position. This aspect is also noted in Nanny’s remarks to Janie early in the novel “I been praying for it to be different with you” (14). It is through momentary prayers that Janie often seems to be dialoguing directly with God and miraculously receiving immediate response. For example after Tea Cake disappears, leaving her temporarily without love, she appeals to God for his safe return:

But oh God, don’t let Tea Cake be off somewhere hurt and Ah know nothing about it. And God please suh, don’t let him love nobody else but me . Maybe Ah’m is uh fool, Lawd , like dey say , but Lawd , Ah been so lonesome, and Ah been waitin, Jesus. (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 115)

It would appear that God had to lull her into sleep while preparing for her answer. For it was upon waking up that she hears the “ lovely “ music from Tea Cake’s guitar. The blues connects their souls together, reassuring her that she was not going to fall victim of male treachery like Annie Taylor after all. Earlier in the novel Janie appreciates the value of her discourse with the Almighty when she says “Sometimes God gets familiar wid us women folks too and talks His inside business” (70). Her remarks seem to acknowledge the fact that God finds favour in women than He does in men. In her view, God reaches out and penetrates the inner sensibilities of women to rescue them from male oppression. A similar attempt to dialogue with God is

enacted in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, in which Celie constantly writes to God to intervene in her plight as an oppressed woman.

Again the issue of female divergent speech and perceptions can be evaluated through contradictions between Janie and Mrs Turner. The two women differ on their perceptions of the white race. While Janie firmly believes in and communicates with God, the latter is so misguided as to think that white people and their physical characteristics are representations of divine essence. Her obsession with whiteness betrays "the quest for white approval and acceptance" (Wes 1990:103), since it reinforces racial stereotypes that privilege whites. In the novel Hurston portrays Mrs Turner as an embodiment of some black women who discriminate against their own gender, once again to emphasize that women do not necessarily share common pursuits. The author seems to be calling upon the reader to reject Mrs Turner for her misguided perceptions and "white Gods."

For Hurston, therefore, black women must speak out and act to subvert dominant power structures that threaten their subject position. She has skillfully blended a variety of discursive strategies to capture the voice of the African woman in the post slavery era. In particular the novel shows how self telling has a therapeutic effect on the teller and readers/hearers. Nanny dies a contented woman, while Janie confides in Phoebe that she is a fulfilled woman. More importantly, by giving prominence to Janie's story the author implies that black women must be afforded opportunities to chart their own destiny.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to broaden the discursive arena of female cultural difference by foregrounding issues of race and class while positing a unique form of female transcendent empowerment. Other critical dimensions that underpin this critique are its historical and

geopolitical settings, both of which interface with the cultural traditions of the African people. In my analysis I have also demonstrated that in its focus on black women's quest for empowerment, identity, freedom and voice retrieval, the novel occupies a unique literary space. For Hurston the black woman's fight for recognition has to take into account the historical circumstances which consigned black women to double oppression. My argument in this thesis has therefore proceeded from an evaluation of how slavery left no option for women to contest the hegemonic power structures. I have used this initial perspective to advance the argument that while the narrative begins with the silenced old woman imploring her granddaughter to conform to her narrow definitions of womanhood, it is structured around a protagonist who vigorously pursues her own revolutionary agenda. For this reason, I have stressed explicitly or by implication, the fact that Janie's evolving capacity to voice out against oppression is the main motor of female difference. This part of the thesis also asserts that the strength of the novel lies in its ability to retrieve and inscribe traditional folk culture within the modern culture that Janie's husbands represents. It has been emphasized that Hurston adds authenticity to her novel by "employing a female folk teller to undermine negative assumptions about black women held by both black and white cultures" (Haurykiewicz 1997:3). Hence by adopting the role of story teller, Janie takes centre stage, thereby empowering herself and other silenced black women.

Chapter Six : Bitches Brew : ‘Stirring the frothy brew of gendered discourse in the urban townships’

Bitches Brew grapples with a host of cultural, demographic and historical factors that have impacted negatively on black women’s attempts to define themselves. The novel is written against a background of political violence that continued to rattle the black urban townships during the last decade of Apartheid rule in South Africa. But what the narrative particularly probes is the exploitation of the female subject as a result of breakdown of moral principles that attended rural urban drift. According to Mark Hunter, (2002:86), “the 1980s reconfigured expectations, emotions, dreams and intimate relations that for generations had been profoundly shaped by the joint but contested project of *ukwaka muzi* (to build a home).” Interestingly, the Zimbabwean version of “*musha mukadzi*” (it is a woman who defines the epistemological concept of home) reminds us of the woman’s central role in African culture. Given the loss of family structure that characterizes lifestyles of the urbanites, it can be said that the novel engages us into the plight of black women in a society where they are more vulnerable by virtue of gendered shifts which have eroded the concept of home that gave the African woman a measure of security. Mark Hunter further warns of the precarious position posed by the women’s drift into cities:

The agrarian economy was languishing and women had less expectation of marrying and being supported by a husband. Important new connections between rising unemployment, declining marriage rates and increasing female mobility became apparent. (Hunter, 2002: 86)

While rural urban drift is inevitable in the new dispensation, it has had a more deleterious effect on black women, given their relativ suppressed women’s aspirations.

The greater part of *Bitches Brew* poignantly incorporates masculinist discourse within the more circumscribed female heteroglossia, through Zakes. It is Zakes, whose arrogant revelations of male violence provide a counter discourse to that of women. The work uses women's experience with men to put them under a microscopic gaze too. Khumalo uses the epistolary mode to provide a window through which we can access the private lives of the two lovers. Letti's and other women's testimonies render contemporary public utterances of female empowerment, mere window dressing rhetoric. It is in this vein that Pumla Ggola (2007:6) contends that discourses of gender in South Africa are not transformative, since there is overwhelming evidence in the private sphere, to the effect that women are not empowered. Perhaps what also makes the work particularly intriguing is the discursive crossing of gendered discursive boundaries between the lovers' shared memories of each others' experiences. Every communicative act constitutes an emotional intersection of the world each character inhabits. For Lettie, the crossing of such discursive boundaries has enabled her to see through the evil and corrupt world of men. Zakes invariably plots a mental map of their monstrosities as they violently live off each others' wealth or ravage women's sexuality. But besides Zakes, through whom she has been able to step into and out of the masculine psyche, Lettie has also done research to arrive at a conclusion that though they are all bastards, men are a sine non qua to women's sexual needs.

But we love these bastards. We give them our hearts knowing how they are bound to tear them to pieces. (*Bitches Brew*, 10)

From Lesotho to Chesterville: a woman's epic journey towards love, security and fulfillment.

Whereas *Bitches Brew* invites immediate attention through its philosophical ruminations of the female protagonist, it also inaugurates an intriguing tale of love, anguish and recrimination.

Significantly, the novel begins at the end of an aggrieved woman's journey in life (She is 59.), by giving her a voice to recover her past experiences with men. Empowered thus through memory, Lettie is privileged to launch her attack on men in hindsight.

This foregrounding of emotionally charged female discourse establishes the salient voice of protest that resonates within the text. The opening chapter is dominated by a relentless attack on the male organ, as if to emphasize the oxymoronic aspect of pain and pleasure it invokes. The attack is also a response to the condition of women as victims in heterosexual relationships. In her castigation of men, Lettie speaks on behalf of other women too, showing her concern about sisterhood solidarity:

Trust a man to always go back to what he really is, a bastard.

My friend Esther feels indebted to the guy who deflowered her. She even remembers the shape of her first man's thing. Oh it was so ugly and twisted like a banana. I almost ran away in horror and disgust. It was shiny and angry like a snake from a bygone era. (*Bitches Brew*, 10-11)

Yet, far from being a mere work of deconstruction of male sexuality, the novel performs a more profound psychoanalytic probing of individual women's quest for love and self fulfillment in the black townships. Hence Khumalo uses the epistolary mode to allow his protagonist to retrace her physical, spiritual and emotional journey(s) of her relationships with several men who came into her life. Further, the work also uses Lettie's imaginary letters and those she receives from Zakes as alternative avenues for uncovering several of her fellow women's grievances in their own relationships with different men. By expanding the field of female discourse through other women's mouthpieces, even as they remain connected to Lettie, Khumalo shows that he is skillfully conscious of the diversity of female experiences.

As a place of her early childhood, rural Lesotho signifies Lettie's innocence within an environment ravaged by poverty and sustained by traditions that inhibit the awakening of female sensibilities, ostensibly to protect them. What is surprising is that the same cultural environment is often silent when a girl's sexuality is violated. In an act that indexes female deprivation of their rights, Thabiso nonchalantly deflowers Lettie, prompting her to follow him to the city. The text gives the impression that Basutho culture does not allow the girl child to define nor own her body. This society's apparent trivialization of the period of courtship has engendered situations where girls are socialized into seeing marriage as the only option for security in a woman's life. It is no wonder then that men capitalize on their culturally privileged status to short circuit the courtship period by stampeding young girls into matrimony. Not surprisingly, rather than seeing Lettie's violation as a moral transgression, grandmother and Maki feel that it is an opportunity for her to get married, even as such a move signals the end of her chances to continue attending school. And it is in the same spirit that Lettie hopes to secure a modern lifestyle with Thabiso.

In keeping with his conflation of the narrative modes of memory retrieval and the epistolary, Khumalo uses the text to usher the protagonist into unprecedented challenges of the urban space. For the black woman this space poses serious ontological crises. And Khumalo insists on individual women's experiences to reveal their sensibilities and reactions. The Durban city scape charts the process of Lettie's and other women's self awakening. Without the security of home, Lettie soon learns that she will have to depend on male patronage for survival and security, albeit at a cost. Before arriving in Chesterville, her search for Thabiso is eclipsed by the visibility of the more suave and enterprising Zakes. She admits that Zakes, "like all city people you had that sweet smell about you" (*Bitches Brew*, 67). She becomes so enchanted by Zakes definition

of himself as a seller of music and love that her reply to his entreaties is itself an inviting gesture for him to enter his life, thereby indexing an intuitive desire to erase from her mind the man who was the initial reason for her to leave the rural area. Not surprisingly, by the time she is warned by Sis Jane that Zakes is “a shark”, she has already made up her mind, and no amount of the man’s vilification will make her change.

Paradoxically, upon arrival she is ushered into Zake’s boxed room, which emblemizes a different kind of confinement, in terms of female security. Her journey, it would seem, has just begun, only that it will take the dimensions of looking for a more compatible male partner. The search for male compatibility is a critical motor of female difference in the novel, as evidenced by the challenges and contradictions that attend to the female characters. For a variety of reasons, all seem to be preoccupied with the search. Love is always the point of convergence or divergence in the novel. But as alluded to in the first chapter, the protagonist has to be wary of the possibility of being “chewed for a while and then spat out into the gutter” (*Bitches Brew*, 9).

In the city Lettie engages in pendulum like journeys between Chesterville and Clermont. While these journeys carry the promise of a settled and secure life for her, they are also places of uncertainty and rupture. It should be noted that she cannot regard either as home as they are owned by Aunt Lizbeth and Sis Jane respectively. Significantly, it is while staying with her aunt that Lettie gets raped at gunpoint by Bhazabhaza, her aunt’s husband. This unfortunate incident precipitates her departure for Chesterville. Writing to Zakes about this incident she confides:

I went back to Chesterville where I walked into Sis Jane’s welcoming arms. By that time you had left for Johannesburg. I heard you were running a shebeen in

one of the townships up there. Sis Jane and I were soon going strong running our own shebeen. (*Bitches Brew*, 204)

What is apparent is that each departure is triggered by threats of insecurity from men, even where there are strong female support systems.

The protagonist's return to Sis Jane's place in Chesterville, apart from being an occasion for cementing sisterly partnership relationships, also paradoxically raises issues of competition for male partners. It is in this sense that the narrative weaves a threesome for Sis Jane, Lettie and Rose in their secret affair with Dieter. Lettie confesses later to Sis Jane that her half white son Prince is the product of that stolen relationship with Dieter, the man at the centre of multiples that culminate in the deaths of all those embroiled except Lettie. If there is anything lecherous men capitalize on it is women's weakness regarding matters of sex. Dieter takes advantage of the three women's circumstances to fulfill his sexual desires.

While the three women seek fulfillment through a satisfying relationship with men, there are undercurrents for other women. In essence, the work portrays female partnerships in the presence of men in urban townships as insecure. Rose's story provides a lens through which we see the exploitation of girls by men in the city, capitalizing on their slim chances to live a decent life. This observation is corroborated by the fact that African women in the Apartheid era were literally forbidden to seek formal employment in urban areas. The colonial laws particularly disadvantaged them by restricting their participation on the labour market. Hence they remained invisible, confined to the domestic space. I am using this standpoint to argue that the novel is an indictment of both the Apartheid regime and patriarchy. They are the cause of women competing for men, and breaking whatever sisterly bonds that exists between them. In her show of contrition after being caught in bed with Dieter, Lettie remarks "What also collapsed was my

bond with Sis Jane.” Both Sis Jane and Aunt Lizbeth, together with Zakes, constitute destinations in the protagonist’s psychological journey into self fulfillment. But while she finds comfort and security in the older women, her quest for the man who stole her heart remains a mirage.

Khumalo invests his female characters with unique sensibilities and a diversity that is not so discernible in male characters. Despite writing from a male purview, he skillfully steps into the female psyche, probing into its deep recesses in a manner that makes the reader to empathize with women’s plight. In essence, each woman is afforded her own moments of introspection. Whether in Chesterville or Clermont, we are often taken on a narrative detour from the protagonists’ personal experiences, to discover Aunt Lizbeth’s or Sis Jane’s encounters with men. Chesterville constitutes an operational space where Lettie discovers Sis Jane’s true identity, through the latter’s tale of men who have entered and departed from the shebeen queen’s life, and the numerous scars that they have left on her. To note is that both Chesterville and Clermont are women’s destinations in their quest for self determination and survival. Significantly, Lettie’s fate seems to be forever tied to the older women’s physical spaces up until she secures her own house, courtesy of the white couple.

The last lap of Lettie’s psychological and physical journey towards self fulfillment is more illuminating in its poignant delineation of female diversity and complementarity. The narrative continues to map the protagonist’s search for security, love and fulfillment. And apparently Lettie finds that she can’t have her cake and eat it. With Sis Jane, her most reliable pillar of strength gone, she faces challenges of living an independent lifestyle, apparently buoyed up by prospects of developing her entrepreneurship in the shebeen business. This is revealed in one of her testimonies:

I worked hard at reviving the shebeen. I had bought a new music system to entertain them. I had over the years developed a good ear for music. I knew what sound was in, what sound was out. (*Bitches Brew*, 261)

But the novel somewhat disappoints by its failure to allow Lettie to stick to her business ventures. She is still depicted as unsettled, starved of love. Feeling strongly that there is something missing in her life, she responds positively to Zakes' call for a physical reunion. In fact, through her cooing and complaints, she is the one who invites herself back into his life, just as she had done when they first met on the bus to Durban early in the novel. What the novel plays out here is the susceptibility of African women to the lure of male patronage that carries prospects of marriage and security by virtue of the man's materialistic standing. Women, observes Peter (2002:132), "enjoy being in relations with men who are in positions of economic power."

This is in spite of the fact that Lettie has known her lover's lifestyle as characterized by violence and debauchery. Her naivety about male behavior is demonstrated by her failure to restrain Zakes from involving himself in an affair with Jennifer. By simply substituting Jennifer for herself in the sex act, as the official lover, she betrays an ingratiating desire to please him. Hence by agreeing to step physically into Zake's life she allows herself to be trapped like a butterfly, into his flashy life at home in Siyjabula, where he is virtually in control of Sibiso's business empire. Yet the move is not only short-lived but disastrous. The wedding is called off, following her discovery of Zakes' orgy of murder and crime, which culminates in the disappearance of Sibisi's son Sibusiso and Mokoena.

With Zakes descending into the dark alleys of crime, Lettie's sense of the moral outrage it engenders finally compels her to leave him. This marks the ending of her journey in pursuit of

men. Particularly important about the novel's ending is that it restores her sense of independence. Lettie's metaphoric last journey is also interesting in that she is afforded a chance to live a morally fulfilling life when she assumes ownership of a house previously belonging to an old couple. Free at last, she invites aunt Lizbeth to live with her as shebeen queens. The two women's reflections on their past show that though they do not share similar perceptions about male companionship, they have been grappling with problems that affect women in general. In addition, each has followed her individual insights. Together, they have come to realize that every man who comes into a woman's life opens an avenue for understanding the world of men.

Transcending Cultural frontiers: Challenges to women 's subjectivities in the changing South African socioeconomic terrain

In the genealogy of South African female cultural difference, the impact of politico-economic conditions engendered by Apartheid laws up until 1994, though not part of the narrative, cannot be ignored. Beginning with the portraits of rural women, *Bitches Brew* seemingly deconstructs conditions that led to the reconfiguration of gender relations in the urban townships. Also of significance is that the novel explores women's entrepreneurship and sisterhood as avenues or motors for a transcendent lifestyle. Khumalo's characterization of African women demonstrates an insightful awareness of their individual sensibilities and capabilities in a variety of circumstances. In his depiction of Lettie, Palesa, Rose and aunt Elizabeth, he makes a point that there is no monolithic explanation to their plight in time and place. This view is also shared by Stuart Hall (cited in Mongia, 1996: 112) who observes that:

As many as there are many points of similarity there are also deep and significant differences which constitute who we really are.

The argument I am pursuing in this section of my thesis is that while the movement of African women into the urban areas has extended their interaction space, it often creates conditions

whereby they are forced to compromise their moral integrity. In the townships, the concept of family centeredness founded on the Africana –womanist philosophy is virtually non-existent. Beneath the story of love and passion between Lettie and Zakes, the novel deploys images of women struggling to come to terms with men who have adopted predatory tactics as means for survival and pleasure.

The critical question begging to be answered in our analysis of the text is, what possibilities for survival, self assertion and independence for black women are explored in the novel? Given the abject poverty obtaining in the rural areas, African women cannot resist the pull factor that has attracted their male counterparts into the cities. Eagleton Mary (1991: 347) broadens our understanding of this phenomenon when she asserts that “the new female subject is mobile and flexible, traversing all manner of psychological, linguistic and conceptual barriers.” To note is that Lettie’s assumption of agency takes immediate effect the moment she gets onto the bus heading for the city of Durban. In her chance conversation with a male passenger, Zakes, aka Peace Ndaba, Lettie is quick to disown Thabiso, the father of her unborn child. Her reply to Zakes’ enquiries regarding her status, “ I am pregnant but he is not my husband “ (*Bitches Brew*. 68), is a clear signal that she is free to engage in a new relationship. Her world seems to be opening up for new frontiers, unlike that of her grandmother, whose interaction space has shrunk amid allegations of witchcraft. The prospects of escape or sinking into oblivion is also alluded to in the figure of Lettie’s mother, who goes to the city after a short stint with a man who had inherited her, in accordance with the traditional practice intended to perpetuate the rule of patriarchy. But upon arrival, Lettie soon discovers that the city is actually an arena for different kinds of female embodiment and transformation, in the sense of rendering women more

vulnerable and unsettled. In fact, it is a place where black women have to contend with the more circumscribed roles in an environment that privileges men.

In *Sis Jane*, however, Lettie sees opportunities for forging sisterhood and female solidarity. In spite of her ruined past, the former has found a measure of self recognition in the urban space. Yet *Sis Jane* has her own challenges. In a culture where women still have to define themselves in relation to men, she is living a life of frustration, having failed to find fulfilling heterosexual relationships. Her tragic end, when she drives a stick into her private parts, encodes a twist to female entrepreneurship. While Lettie voluntarily withdraws from a relationship that denies her agency and freedom to question her lover's acts of violence, we notice a divergence in the two women's challenges. It does not take long for Lettie to discover the plight of women's invisibility in the townships, as revealed in one of her ruminations.

It's rare for black women to turn down marriage proposals, especially if these come from a well heeled 'catch' such as MaSharps. ... No matter how kind and soft-hearted you are, life in the cities hardens your resolve in whatever you do. (*Bitches Brew*, 168)

This statement implies that ironically, urban black women ironically also prioritize marriage other than career opportunities that would help them compete with men on an equal footing. *Sis Jane's* challenge is that economic independence earned through the shebeen business still leaves a void in her life in terms of love and marriage prospects. But part of her victory is that she has emerged from being a victim of a callous tradition that socializes older women to accept the diabolical practice of genital mutilation as natural. What it means is that her subjectivity has been undermined as she carries permanent scars of her mutilated womanhood, scars that have robbed her of femininity, rendering her desirability a mere façade to a ravaged youthful past.

In her moments of introspection, Sis Jane regrets having lost the power to have her own children like Lettie's "choice assorted." This explains why she continues to pine over her ruined womanhood, which would have guaranteed her reproductive rights and a possible stable heterosexual relationship. It is in this sense that the text engages the reader in contradictions that attend to women's desires for fulfillment in a changing society. For all her attempts to become economically independent, Sis Jane remains a frustrated woman. Though she owns a shebeen from which she realizes a lot of profit, her social life is miserable. And when she takes her own life she plays into the stereotype of African women as suicidal. This is unlike Lettie who has had several liaisons with different men, each of whom she has had to freely judge and break up with by responding freely to her conscience. She chooses men when her sensibilities tell her to do so but refuses to bow to their conditions. When MaSharps sets conditions for marrying her she dismisses him for a life of independence with her children. In one of her confessions, she discloses the secret behind her strength of character. '

No matter how kind and softhearted you are, life in the cities hardens your resolve in whatever you do. You become suspicious of everyone. I had always been a strong-willed person, but the city only hardened me. (*Bitches Brew*, 168)

It is precisely this strength of character that has enabled her to endure the challenges of city life all the way, even though she has her own weaknesses. For example she realizes that education is what she needs to make a breakthrough, but she fails to pursue this goal. 'With some education under my belt, I could find a better job and even earn a decent salary that would enable my children and me to live a decent life' (*Bitches Brew*, 277). Significantly this is the second time she makes a blunder of prioritizing her sexual urge over the security in education. At the

beginning of the novel, after an encounter with Thabiso, she abandons school on the ill advice of her friend and grandmother.

In the novel other key female characters also face challenges that threaten their visibility. Though Aunt Lizbeth is married to Bhazabhaza, she too seems to harbor false notions of a fulfilling relationship, in that she thinks that by mothering the thug's children she has achieved something great. Like some of the female characters, she has accepted her lot. It would seem that the writer has been unkind to female characters in whatever circumstances they find themselves, because they are continually groping for ontological existence. By portraying urban men as sly and elusive, Khumalo shows how difficult it is for black South African women to sustain genuine relationships in the current dispensation. In view of limited opportunities for diversifying their entrepreneurial skills, black women find themselves surrendering their precious bodies to men. Perhaps black women need to devise new avenues for independent sustenance other than economic ventures that consign them to narcissist escapades with men. It is disappointing to note that Khumalo's urban businesswomen are nearly all shebeen operators, an enterprise that restricts them to male patronage. This perception finds an echo in Chitando's evaluation of male authors whom she attacks for routinely portraying women in "disempowering ways as loose, dangerous, weak and dependent on men" (Chitando, 2011: 93). There is need for the South African socioeconomic system to open doors for more diversified arena for women's entrepreneurship. In the novel Lettie still wants to benefit from Zakes' estate, even though she has repudiated his criminal activities. Somehow she does not quite succeed in living a fully independent life because she is still lured to his sphere of influence. It can be said that in part, her success rides on the material wealth of men; through the money saved from Sibiso's empire.

This is unlike her son who openly declares that he will have none of his deceased father's ill-gotten wealth.

In defiance of his mother's claims that her lover had changed he declares:

No he hasn't! He's still talking about revenge. Look, I don't want to inherit anything from his dirty belongings. I don't need his money; I will make my own money. (*Bitches Brew*, 324)

In the urban townships of big cities like Johannesburg and Durban, chances for women to transcend cultural inhibitions that domesticate and manipulate them are available but limited. It would seem that one of the reasons is that heterosexual relationships have become more diffuse. This scenario is attributable to urban masculinities which are characterized by a mercenary and insensitive attitude to female sensibilities. Young girls seem to have been particularly vulnerable to popular culture. The absence of strong family support systems that uphold moral values has negatively affected the girls' image of themselves. In the novel they are characteristically portrayed as mere singers and dancers led by men. They are identified as groups acting in common, a homogenizing arrangement that deprives them of their individuality. Neither of those contracted to perform in Zakes' Zeppelin band, nor Vivian Qunta's music academy ever rises beyond their assigned roles of mere performers. On their part they seem to be contented to play the triple roles of beauty pageants, singers and prostitutes. At no time does anyone of them contemplate ever starting her own band to become an independent entrepreneur. In fact, they allow themselves to be manipulated and exploited at will, until they are relegated to the streets, after losing their lustre on the stage. What we note here is that at a time the young girls are preoccupied with their sexual appeal to men, they ironically forfeit the chance to take advantage

of group insularity and initiate new survival projects that create leadership positions for themselves. In the novel when Bhazabhaza and Zakes plot to outsmart Bra Viv their sponsor, Girlie and her crew are excluded.

We were now working over our specifics; when to start rehearsing, how often, which Vivian Qunta script to focus on. Later Girlie and her women were driven away by Bhazabhaza himself. (*Bitches Brew*, 191)

This is one instance in which the women in the novel are denied subjectivity and self recognition.

One other salient feature militating against women's transcendent potential is that most of them lack a groundbreaking chip in heterosexual relationships. Somehow they often find themselves conforming more and more to the male symbolic order. This is unfortunate, given that most of Khumalo's men are not family builders. One feels that somehow their deaths are a form of retributive justice to the many wrongs perpetrated against humanity. By eliminating men, Khumalo lends an optimistic vision to female visibility. However, Lettie and to some extent Sis Jane, are invested with some transcendent vision. Though they fall into the same trap of using girls as agents of prostitution, at least they treat them humanely by paying for their services and taking care of their health. Their manner of exploitation is mitigated by moral restraint. For instance, Lettie's philanthropy is shown by the fact that she does not exploit Rose's sexuality. Instead it is Rose who turns against her benefactors by eloping with Dieter.

Gendered discursive strategies: mapping fractured identities through self telling.

To most discerning critics, *Bitches Brew* is a penetrating search into the African woman's psyche. Subtly multivocal in its narrative, and framed within a female voice, the text's dualistic narrative engages the reader in an introspective exploration of black South African women's

experiences. The complexity of its discursive features is particularly brought out through a conflation of self telling, a technique deployed to recover the narrators' past experiences, particularly that of Lettie. In this context the novel inaugurates a psychoanalytic analysis of its own, and in the process, fusing a rich divergent minefield of African women's experiences.

The narratives weave a gendered discursive trajectory that often undermines black women's attempts to define them. Beginning with Lettie's grandmother, a silenced woman hounded by the community for alleged witchcraft, the work portrays a society that denies its women a sense of self worth. Grandmother's invisibility is confirmed by her forced hibernation.

In all the years she had taken exile in that gloomy bedroom, not once had she left the bed, except to relieve herself in the chamber pot that had been placed at the foot of her bed. I served her meals in the morning and late in the evening. I also left her something for lunch before I went to school.
(*Bitches Brew*, 28)

Heald (in Peter, 2005:170) confirms that "females, who are victims of stereotypical accusations of bewitching other people, are in many cases, burned in their houses or isolated in communities." Significantly, the only time grandmother features again in the text is in Lettie's dream, as a spiritual spectral seer, without any power at all. Ironically, grandmother and Lettie's friend Maki participate in the denial of the latter's freedom of choice. By advising her to prioritize pursuing Thabiso in the city, ahead of school commitments, the two characters stampede Lettie to the urban lifestyle where she will have to depend on men rather than herself. In their efforts to instill a sense of feminine deportment, grandmother and Maki chart a fractured identity for the protagonist. Again, by abandoning school, which would have afforded her opportunities for self actualization, Lettie renders herself vulnerable to manipulation by men. Needless to say, she eventually becomes trapped in a man's world, without an identity, as

symbolized by Zakes' boxed room. Beneath the city scape she finds so alluring lies violence, immorality, exploitation of women and death. Beneath the smooth talking Zakes lies a potential killer, hustler, rapist and extortionist. Significantly, her story is a story of confinement, spiritually and physically, to male gender boxes.

The individual women's fractured lives are often told in retrospect, through memory retrieval. Each woman's story is a testimony of scars sustained at the hands of men, and the apartheid laws that have denied women ontological rights in the cities. It is in this sense that each woman's testimony constitutes a specific heteroglot (in the Bakhtinian sense) by which we come to know her true self and by which we come to understand the nature of men. Further, the different stories the women tell about themselves highlight the challenges African women face in their bid to forge and sustain lasting heterosexual relationships. It would seem that families are almost non-existent in the urban townships. This unfortunate development has been aptly captured by Masemola (2015:25) in his paper:

The breakdown of families in the anti-apartheid struggle or indeed their radical reconfiguration in response to their reterritorialisation by design of laws of the territorial machine, made the conditions of triangulation as described in Gilles Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (1987) impossible.

Indeed the text decries the absence of families by reason of erosion of institutional moral values that would hold members together. Lettie's testimonies constitute a basis for mediating wider female discourse involving Sis Jane, Rose, aunt Lizbeth, Palesa and others. Sis Jane's testimony is particularly revelatory in the sense of shocking the reader through the way her body was violated by the village matriarchs. Their action attests to the extent to which African women are prepared to go to please men. All the women who inflict permanent damage to her private parts

are ignorantly complicit in an obnoxious tradition that deprives one of their kinds the right to her body. This is the tragedy of a society in which patriarchal values get so entrenched in the women's psyche that the victimized gender begins to see the whole process as natural.

Constructed in the form of imaginary letters, the discourse between Lettie and Zakes often assumes a surrealist tone by the manner it probes the deep recesses of their minds. One gets the feeling that there is always something elusive in their yearning for each other, something akin to a desire for the sublime. What is also surprising is that though Zakes is a typical "tsotsi", Lettie is always attracted to him, almost to the point of desperation.

Significantly, the mapping of women's individual experiences through self telling approximates a psychoanalytical discursive mode, and a sense of shared victimhood that is characteristically cathartic. At the same time the women's stories of themselves constitute a damning indictment of African masculinities in the South Africa of the 1970s and beyond. Given that the victims often find a sympathetic audience in other women, it can be said that the novel's narrative strength lies in its psychoanalytic depiction of African women. According to Adam Philips, "Psychoanalysis is self telling to and in the presence of a particular person, the analyst. Interpreting the patient's life story means, among other things, revealing the implied reader to it", (MAEG11, 2003:263). In the context of South African society's masculinist values encoded within the narrative, all black women are patients in a perpetual quest for psychic therapy. If we accept that that there are elements of psychoanalytic self telling in the novel, whereby interlocutors believe that there is nowhere else to go to but themselves, then the juxtaposition of such female discourse must be construed as therapeutic. Lettie, Aunt Lizbeth, Rose and Sis Jane all benefit from each other's audience to their personal stories. As they tell and listen to each others' stories, they engage in a discursive process that Linda Alcoff and Laura Rosendale

(in Knadler Stephen, 2004:2) refer to as a “remaking of a self through access to a discourse different from the dominant patriarchal view.”

Part of the narrative’s complexity in the process of self telling is the intermittent shifting of perspective to bring out the individual woman’s sensibilities. In the novel there are several confluences of such self telling. In the chapter entitled ‘Some day my prince will come’, Lettie interrupts her own testimony of how she had been raped by Bhazabhaza at gunpoint while staying with her aunt at Clermont, to assume the role of analyst and counselor to Rose, whom she allows to tell her own story of abuse by her father. “I wanted her to tell the story at her own pace” (*Bitches Brew*,209). It would appear that Rose’s confession of the murder of her own father as a retaliatory act, shows how mothers and daughters react to patriarchal violence when pushed to the wall.

Before sunrise the following morning Rose had gone back into the house. Her father was still breathing. Possessed of an insane energy, the girl rushed outside. She gathered scoops of mud into the house to where her father lay breathing in long tortured gasps. She stuffed dirt into his mouth. He gagged. She forced in more of the dirt. She stuffed some of it into his nostril. He spluttered weakly and was still. (*Bitches Brew*, 212)

Ironically, when Lettie resumes narrating Rose’s story, in which both are guilty of betraying Sis Jane, our sympathy for the perpetrators seems to dissipate. This is because not only does Rose eventually jilt Dieter, her short lived wedded husband, but she had also been the major culprit in Dieter’s decision to call off his planned wedding to Sis Jane. Khumalo deliberates complicates the tales by depicting women turning against each other to show how women’s alliances can easily be broken. In her moments of introspection, Lettie is continually remorseful, for she knows she had stupidly yielded to a fleeting moment of passion that had eventually

led to a tragedy in which all players except herself, lost their lives. What is also ironical about this horrifying incident of retaliatory violence is that Rose later falls victim to a similar crime of passion when Dieter pours concrete on hers and Marc's bodies, in a cynical act of revenge. The extent of his wounded jealousy is summed up in his suicide note:

Rose and Marc wanted to concretise their relationship in matrimony, so I helped speed up the process. Now they are as concrete as concrete can be with a honeymoon awaiting them in heaven. (*Bitches Brew*, 218)

Here Rose is made to swallow her own bitter medicine of the same mocking words she pronounced against her father after finishing him off. The deliberate imbedding of the women's personal experiences into the main narrative serves to provide a more complex canvass within which African women should be understood, that each is a victim in her own way. But while these stories about women's experiences are illuminating in terms of raising consciousness about the condition of women in urban townships, they betray a lack of serious commitment regarding the plight of women on the part of the author. I find the work's subjection of abused female characters to a life of dejection or death rather unsettling. It would seem that the women are trapped between the Scylla and the Charybdis of remaining silent (Leonardo and Porta, 2010:140). While there are sporadic attempts by aggrieved women to contest patriarchal impositions through counter violence, they lack agency to assuage the painful experiences they willingly reveal in their testimonies. One feels that they are in dire need of what Fanon (cited in Leonardo and Porta, 2010: 142) calls "educative psychic violence" to catapult them into a new era of social transformation, one that is characterized by "liberatory possibilities", (Leonardo and Porta 2010:141). While Sis Jane and Lettie partly engage in such endeavors through the shebeen business, lack of educational opportunities still stand in their way of reaching new frontiers where they would really compete with men on an equal footing.

The masculinist discourse within which the text is framed undermines women's sensibilities and attempts to name themselves. It is unfortunate that the women's self narratives remain tied to men's stories, represented by Zakes, because they are aggravated by men who never empathize with the female victims. All the women in the novel are overwhelmed by the rampant violence that sucks them into a vortex from which they find it difficult extricate themselves.

In Sis Jane's story, told to Lettie, Khumalo engages the reader in another instance of self telling and disclosure of a woman's broken and wasted life. Like Lettie's own testimony in the main narrative, Sis Jane's heteroglot is central to the text in the sense of retrieving memories of her childhood experiences, how she has been a victim of cultural practices that privilege men. What is most painful is that the male relative who was supposed to protect her womanhood is the very culprit who violates it, yet he remains protected by the traditions. Lettie reveals that though her grandfather who committed this incestuous crime against her body was well known in the village, there were no cultural sanctions to punish his animalistic behavior.

This part of Sis Lettie's testimony highlights the vulnerability of the girl child in a society where old men can break the law with impunity. The testimony itself is as much a psychoanalytical exploration into an African woman's wounded spirit as it is a subtle deconstruction of oppressive African traditions that nurture girls for matrimony for presentation as trophies to men to celebrate their virility.

It came to pass then , that my grandmother got tested , and my mother after her , and my mother's sisters, and their cousins. It became an acceptable practice. Mothers took pride in the chastity of their children, - even though the subject was never discussed openly. (*Bitches Brew*, 2006:236)

We see here a flagrant perpetuation of a gendered social system that permeates all generations. Told at a time after Sis Jane was trying to come to terms with the trauma of an aborted marriage with Dieter, whom she lost to a younger woman, the testimony is also intended to serve a therapeutic purpose to the narrator. Yet surprisingly, it seems to exacerbate the victims' mental torture, since it leads to suicide. In another sense, the testimony is a clarion call for the modern society to break the cycle of female oppression, and restore acceptable human values.

Jazz vibes for Boozers' Shebeenites : the monstrous complicities behind black South African social life

A close reading of *Bitches Brew* shows that it is constructed around a musical ambience. The various jazz bands and the shebeens' solicitous environment often complement each other in providing the much needed entertainment for the township people, after the debilitating work in mines and industries. On many occasions the author uses music to explore its effects on both male and female characters. The text resonates with different musical refrains which are often linked to the survival strategies and exploitation of black women during the Apartheid era. In fact it can be said that there is always a sinister streak in all the music concerts; either in the form of violence or immorality. Not surprisingly, even the maRashiya women, originally from Lesotho had fashioned a lewd dance (Famo Sesh), which they promoted in Johannesburg.

In the cities, we were told, Famo Sesh was sold to the gullible public as a traditional Sotho dance routine. We were disgusted that these people had the temerity to misrepresent the essence of Sotho culture in the cities. (*Bitches Brew* 43)

Apparently in almost every concert, women's sexuality is exploited for the men's voyeuristic or commercial benefit. While the girls who dance at a traditional wedding entertain the audience with their "flashing pants", those in Zakes' and Bhazabhaza's bands sing and dance for the

enrichment of their male bosses. Hence for the female characters there is always a negative effect. The only exception is Palesa who subverts the male order by cornering Zakes and taking full command of the sex act throughout the night, forcing him to sing her own love music. “She rode me until we came to the King’s Messengers and they were singing ‘Ride on Moses, Ride on King Emmanuel. “ (*Bitches Brew* 172). Needless to say, the greater effect of music vibes is played out through Lettie and Zakes.

Upon her arrival at Sis Jane’s place, both Zakes and their host take turns to psyche her up by warning that violence lurks within the musical concerts. She is told that Zakes is a shark and that “people all over the place like killing each other” (*Bitches Brew* 71). The connection between violence and music is further invoked through the woman in black, with her snakelike swaying as she dances to the accompaniment of the Blues. “More sleepy sorrowful music was played. You explained that this was called the Blues” (*Bitches Brew* 71). Significantly, the scene foreshadows Lettie’s and other women’s life of sorrow as they seek relationships with men who treat them as mere sex objects. Later in the text we discover that Zakes’ female singers have been so brainwashed that they now worship the God of music and money. Towards the end of the novel Lettie admits that life at Sis Jane’s place has become an endless dirge, a condition that links her suffering with the blues. The only instance when music seems to serve a useful function for women is when aunt Lizbeth and Lettie revive a joint shebeen business, during which they demonstrate their taste in jazz songs. Lettie says her shebeen Paradise road was named after her favourite song, taken from Miles Davis. Ironically, though economically empowered, the shebeen queens, says Pumla Gqola (2007:7), are still constrained to “submit to the patriarchal cult of femininity.” This is because men are basically in control of the women’s private and public spaces.

But the narrative is also intricately spun around the private, “ silent music “ of the lovers, Lettie and Zakes. It is particularly in this sense that the text, written in the form of love letters, alternates between the private lives of the lovers and the public lives of township revelers. Even more, beneath the jazz band lies something deeper, something eerie and uncanny. Indeed every activity in *Bitches Brew* is traceable to the jazz sounds. For example, the breaking of Zakes Zeppelins band indexes a plethora of competition for operational space and clientele that has become part and parcel of the township people.

Part of Khumalo’s intention in the text is to depict the plight of women as either silenced players in the music concerts or as shebeen operators. The work portrays women as characteristically entangled within these two operational spaces. The prospects for Lettie’s entanglement is foreshadowed earlier in the novel; first when she is visibly enchanted by Thabiso’s poetic and musical voice. On her journey to Durban, Lettie finds Zakes well-groomed face even more alluring. The passion for music by which Zakes goes on to define himself also becomes the same taste by which the protagonist defines herself throughout the novel. But Zakes’ jazz band, with its specialization in music, is suffused within the realm of tragic relationships. It can be argued that the whole text reads like a hymn of sung and unsung vibes of love and despair. Both lovers admit to naming their letters after each other’s favourite songs. Zakes writes asking his lover to listen to “the unsung songs of my heart” (*Bitches Brew* 85). The incantatory tone in Letti’s songs often makes them sound like silent blues to her lover. The reciprocal correspondences are therefore an affirmation of their love towards each other. From the tone of their letters, the lovers have become part and parcel of each other. What is enacted here is a yearning for the sublime, an ideal relationship which belies the real world of love obtaining in the townships, a world where women are regarded as mere sex objects. Surprisingly, Lettie

admits to preferring this kind of ethereal love because it keeps her safe from the unpredictable behavior of men in relationships.

In its depiction of township people the novel also reveals how music is used as a bait to attract and exploit women. When Big Hugh first thought of the plan to make money out of music he confided in Bhazabhaza that “you attract those bitches with your saxophone” (*Bitches Brew*, 118). Driven by greed and a rabid sense of immorality, the band leaders manipulate girls who come into their employment, by making them occasionally switch roles from dancers and singers to sex providers. Clearly, these girls lack agency as they seem perpetually condemned to an exploitative routine of switching roles. Ironically, the girls’ belief in the God of money and leisure has rendered them more pliable to manipulation. The point I want to stress here is that whether they are used as trophy girls at glamorous parties or for any other task that necessitates subjecting their bodies to the male gaze, the girls are scarcely the main beneficiaries of the proceeds. The narrative depicts the Clermont girls as so blinded to their exploitation that they even fight over men. One complication in this scenario is that female entrepreneurs are also involved in exploiting fellow women. In one of her letters to Zakes, Lettie admits to a malevolent joint venture where she runs a brothel and shebeen with Sis Jane.

But what we did do, like male pimps, we put the girls on the streets every evening, and drove around, making sure they worked hard, take the money from them and give them heir share. (*Bitches Brew*, 207)

What is clear however, is that while both male and female entrepreneurs thrive on young women’s bodies, the latter appear to be more compassionate. Girlie and her crew are invited into the Zeppelins band not as equals but as mere singers. Furthermore, none of them ever contemplates starting their own band. Again, for all their efforts in boosting and gracing the

music shows with dances, the Clermont girls are still characterized as freelance sex perverts. This is one instance on which the text betrays the writer's masculinist bias. Much as he tries to paint a negative picture of black men, he often leaves them within the mould of unrepentant heroes. For all his life of violence, Zakes dies a rich man, with only scars as testimony to a life lived "on the mean streets of Durban and Johannesburg, the tough cities of South Africa" (*Bitches Brew* 319). Even more disheartening is the fact that on his death bed he is still thirsting for human blood, and would want his "boys" to defy the course of justice represented by the Asset Forfeiture Unit. We note that Zakes' death is in sharp contrast with that of Sis Jane, who takes her own life in spite of her relentless efforts to live an independent life in a world where women are given slim chances to fulfill themselves.

The text uses the scenes behind the music concerts and nightclubs to explore the plight of black women. In its portrayal of social relations between shebeen queens, music fans and women, the novel highlights the extent to which nightclubs have become flashpoints of violence, debauchery and drug abuse. But whereas female shebeen operators concentrate on beer selling for survival, male musicians, because of the more glamorous business they are involved in, are more aggressive and malicious and have a greater predisposition to violence as they compete against each other and for women.

The business of shebeens is often eclipsed by the more mobile and glamorous music concerts. For both businesses, women are used as pawns, either as prostitutes under the watchful eye of male pimps, or as dancers. Zakes' Zeppelins band, Vivian Qunta's Music Academy and the joined owned BP (Bhazabhaza Peace Ndaba) band, all thrive on the pulsating jazz vibes and the girls' sexy gyrations to make money. Significantly, in all these contexts, female visibility is characterized as precarious by virtue of male dominance. Wherever they are staged, jazz

concerts thrive on the young female dancers to attract fans. In one of her letters to Zakes, Lettie tells of how Ziyasha Nightclub, renamed Paradise Road in honour of her favourite song, became the centre of conflict between Zakes and Sibisi's son. In spite of her protestations, Zakes continues to use the premises as a distribution centre for mandrax drugs. Lettie is completely powerless to voice out against the underhand deals and her only recourse is to leave. This is a decisive moment where the protagonist demonstrates her sense of independence. Unlike Aunt Lizbeth who clings to an incompatible relationship where she is silenced by a man who uses music as a smokescreen for concealing the violence in him, Lettie refuses to stick to a relationship that is not fulfilling.

Inside the BP (Bhazabhaza Peace) lair: Confessions of sadistic male and female victimizers

As I have alluded elsewhere in this chapter, black women's representations have been characterized by silences and male impositions on their subjectivities. For bell hooks, (1989), the women's silence amounts to complicity. Nearly all women are victims at one point or another, though the severity of victimhood varies with individuals. The male characters' penchant for violence in the text enact what Barthelme (cited in Ionica 2015) refers to as " the pervasive violence of contemporary culture." Given the novel's historical setting during the interparty violence that rocked the country following the end of Apartheid, Barthelme's observation provides a relevant basis for exploring the ontological monstrosities of the South African society.

In the text the author shows how the South African political violence has spawned male alliances and rivalries in the form of hustlers who thrive on violence to amass wealth and fame, either by exploiting women's sexualities or engaging in corrupt shady deals. While insights into male violence is not the main focus in this section of my thesis, it is pertinent because it

provides a socioeconomic context for understanding the South African black woman's response to her situation. Indeed all black female characters, especially those in urban townships, are inevitably caught up in a vortex of violence in one way or another. The city is portrayed as a place where men prey upon women's bodies and trample upon their male adversaries.

Up until their male partners' deaths or disappearance, the women's visibility is blurred or non-existent. They can only name themselves or find strength in the presence of men. To borrow from Jonathan Culler (1997:111), they are subjected to various regimes (psychological, social and sexual), dictated by men. For example, Lettie defines herself by the sweetness and seductive fragrance of her city suitors. Later in the novel we find more instances of women's tendency to depend on men. Aunt Lizbeth continues to cherish her husband's power even after his death. And Sis Jane longs to possess Zakes by protecting him from the seductive threat posed by Lettie. On the contrary, the men define women collectively by their sex appeal or as property. Bhazabhaza boasts of how he used to enjoy his wealth and women:

I used to drive the best, drink the best, and fuck the best ladies around. Ek, was Bhazabhaza, man. The one and only. Everybody knew me; everybody worshipped at my feet. (*Bitches Brew*, 201)

In another arrogant confession, Zakes says Bhazabhaza entertained him and his friends with booze and women, highlighting the extent to which men deny women ontological status. This aspect finds an echo in Sue Best's observation that:

Man is positioned as the transcendent subject whose only connection to the corporeal is his imprint left upon his subject, the body of woman.' (Maeg11-249: 2003).

Indeed in the text men seem to be deriving pleasure in exerting their erotic authority on the women's sexuality. This is despite the fact that all women are entitled to their bodily integrity. For Pumla Gqola (2007:7) this behaviour amounts to violent intrusions into their spaces, bodies and psyches. Pumla Gqola's call for violent masculinities to be exposed with the same disdain with which men treat women are indicators that its time for female victims to resist, to confront their oppressors. It is disheartening to note that Lettie's men seem not to care about the children they fathered with her. What is also very clear is that women in Bhazabhaza's, Zakes' bands and those in Sibisi's vast business empire are all psychologically domesticated for consumption and ornamentation by men. Gqola's list of violations on women's freedom provides a more damning picture of the condition of women even in present day South Africa:

We know that today women do not feel safe in the streets and homes of South Africa, that women's bodies are seen as accessible for consumption-touching, raping, kidnapping, commenting on, grabbing, beating, burning, maiming-and control that women are denied the very freedom that empowerment suggests. (Gqola,2007: 11)

The novel enacts a scenario whereby all women seem to be enclosed in men's liars from which they can only escape after their men's deaths. What is more, they appear to be willing victims of male exploitation. I am inclined to attribute their lack of resistance to a preoccupation with gaining visibility and self recognition through their partners' material wealth, which they might forfeit if they claim equal status. It must be noted that while Zakes is free to move in and out of the dangerous business enclosures of Vivian Qunta, Bhazabhaza and Sibisi, the female band members can only exchange roles by being thrown into the streets to fetch more money for the gangsters, under the hawkish eyes of male pimps.

Bhazabhaza's commercialization and exploitation of women's bodies is a brainchild of Big Hugh, his onetime inmate. Having graduated into a hustler, Bhazabhaza uses music shows to prey on women's bodies. In his violation of Thandi's body he shows that beneath his saxophone lies a sadistic monster. It must be noted that in the text all men admit that they enjoy victimizing women or their rivals in business.

From the proceeds of our beauty pageants and music concerts we had become so rich that we could buy for cash, a spanking new minibus. (*Bitches Brew*, 145)

Often Bhazabhaza and Zakes only make obscure references to female contributions to the business. They are content to exult in acknowledging themselves and self congratulatory discourse. On the invitation to perform on the stage, Zakes is upbeat about his "Drive's" prospects of mesmerizing the "the entertainment starved townships around Durban" (*Bitches Brew* 145). He is only interested in his and Bhazabhaza's flamboyant appearance on the stage.

Bhazabhaza and I gave each other a high five, and started sauntering to the stage where our instruments were waiting for us. There were cheers from the audience, and a resounding drum roll from the band on the stage. (*Bitches Brew*. 146)

This seemingly vibrant reception belies several sordid scenes where one's conscience is galled by callous behavior of men towards women or other men. Bhazabhaza's ruthless bludgeoning to death of young men who had been accomplices in the burning of the hall is an example of such violence. Further, incidents whereby gangsters quarrel and share spoils that have been largely generated out of the prostitutes' immoral trade attests to the men's insensitivity to the female sex.

One other effective means by which Khumalo addresses the issue of female victimization is through the use of unremorseful confessions by male perpetrators. On the night Zakes is assisted by Bhazabhaza to escape arrest for killing the young accomplices in the burning of the hall,

Zakes lapses into a moment of introspection in which he recalls how he had distanced himself from his mother. He is still visibly tormented by this misogynist attitude, which has transformed him into a sadistic victimizer of women who come into his life.

I would go hunting for them when we were hunting out on beauty pageants; would cajole them into taking part in the contests, make money out of them, then move on. Sometimes I would get them when there were pressing carnal needs to be fulfilled, sweat with them, scream with And finally kick them out of my bed the following day. (*Bitches Brew*, 158)

In another outrageous show of rabid masculinity turned into a competition of female victimisers, Zakes unashamedly exposes and casts Bhazabhaza as the most callous:

He would have as many as ten women attached to him at a given time - that's excluding the girls who were walking the streets for him. He would squeeze every little drop of enjoyment from their company, from their suffering. He drove his prostitutes hard, even when they were sick or even when they were experiencing women's monthly troubles. (*Bitches Brew*, 158-159)

These confessions of gratuitous multiple partnering of women by men highlight the fact that the city has become a dungeon for young women, doubly victimized as prostitutes and beauty pageants. In deriving pleasure and commercial gain out of women, the men of the townships exhibit total callous control of their subjects' bodies. The confessions echo Lettie's observation that men only consider women as loose items of flesh waiting to be devoured by sex starved men, chewed for some time, and then thrown into the dustbin. But if men have sunk into such levels of debauchery, what difference is there between them and dogs? And if women willingly succumb to sexual abuse, what difference is there with bitches? These questions are critical to our understanding of the nature of female cultural diversity in South African cities. Questions of

women's lack of agency to haul themselves out of this furnace are pertinent to the study of gender relations in urban setups today.

Given the urban space as the main axis around which African women must assert themselves, it would seem that they still lack a firm economic base from which to launch their struggle against male dominance. While Khumalo appears to assign women with a measure of power as entrepreneurs, the majority of them are still vulnerable to male exploitation of their bodies. Though Khumalo's women exhibit a tendency towards filial bonding, they lack the kind of agency that would help them break new ground by way of transcending the female image beyond sexuality and motherhood. The text ironically shows how men capitalize on their bands and businesses to operate gangster syndicates which become formidable and from which women are excluded but consumed as canon fodder. When the girls succumb to being bedded by the same men, they literally surrender their individuality. Not only that, they also confirm male stereotypical views that they are only good as sex objects.

The notorious hustlers in the BP Sibisi empire all engage in an orgy of violence against men or women. In one of his confessions Zakes reveals that "he and his men had killed viciously to protect themselves and the many businesses they ran" (*Bitches Brew* 319). Also, in her letter to Zakes, Lettie tells of a horrifying incident in which she is raped by Bhazabhaza at gunpoint. Commenting on a broader but similar scenario, Cristine Ionica, (2007:67), deplors what she calls "male violation and consumption of the female body." What is most disheartening is that Bhazabhaza takes advantage of his wife's absence to violate a defenseless young woman under his custody. It would seem that the urban environment has nurtured a morally bankrupt animalistic breed of men who are too eager to kill. On many occasions Zakes confesses to

enjoying killing those he perceives a threat to his empire. His cynical sense of exultation after killing Mokoena is a case in point.

The novel's masculinist discourse, concretized through such wanton murders, also accentuates the vulnerability of women, who are often reduced to their male partners' cannon fodder, which can be devoured with reckless abandon. In her essay entitled '*Foucault, femininity and the modernization of patriarchal power*, Sandra Lee Bartkey (2003) bemoans the fact that "women's bodies are subjected to coercion and disciplining for the benefit of men." She further notes that modernization "defines how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes but so that they may operate as one wishes" (Maeg11-5, 2003: 95).

The male dominated businesses of music concerts, beauty pageants and shebeens, typically thrive on women's seductive allure to make money. Significantly, in these businesses, women play second fiddle, largely because of their physical vulnerability and a culturally conscious deference to feminine motility even outside the domestic sphere. The text deploys images of men as obsessed by a macho mentality that has turned them into human beasts who deprive women of their independent control over their bodies. Cristine Ionica (2015:68) deplores such insensitivity by castigating "male characters' inability to produce viable relational dynamics as they cling to atavistic notions of masculinity." The sexualisation of women's interaction space in the Durban and Johannesburg townships is an extension of patriarchal practices in rural areas, where the mutilation of women's genitals is selfishly intended for the pleasures of men. In the urban areas, the diabolical patriarchal power dynamics have become institutionalized under cover of commercialized business ventures. The brazen Peace/ Bhazabhaza empire is a microcosm of the intricate network of warlords who thrive on spilling blood and semen to fulfill their insatiable thirst for fame and pleasure. For the majority of black women, this scenario seems inescapable.

As already noted, the novel incorporates aspects of South African historiography of interparty violence during the pre-independence era.

Women in the novel either suffer quietly or try to conveniently accommodate themselves within the social system. I argue that female cultural diversity must be measured and understood in terms of the extent and the manner in which each suffers, and less of how individuals resist or confront patriarchal rule. The configuration of female characters largely follows a sociopolitical transition phase that parallels the period before the demise of Apartheid, a period that necessitated ideological adjustments to the changed action space dominated by men. Aunt Lizbeth has learned to acquiesce, to remain invisible. This is why she feels Lettie made a mistake when she walked out on Zakes, her lover.

Then she said: ‘You missed out on the greatest challenge of your life, girl. That man needed you as much as you needed him. I wonder what he is up to now, but you certainly missed out on an opportunity to wean him off his obsession with crime...’ (*Bitches Brew*, 312-313)

It is clear from Aunt Lizbeth’s sentiments that she has a different perception of men’s roles. As for Lettie, after fleeing from Bhazabhaza, she later reconnects with Zakes for a short lived reunion, only to leave him upon realizing that she can’t cope with his life of violence. In the case of Sis Jane, her sense of independence is marred by constant reflections on her past life, in which she was victimized by the village matriarchs. In the words of Cristine Ionica, (2015:74), “all patriarchal social arrangements are shown to be repositories of abuse that need to be put six feet into the ground in order for their nagging call for violence to be silenced.” While the patriarchal institutions in urban areas have been blurred by a discrete social order, they retain vestiges of masculinity, perfecting its malignant edifice beyond the limits of tolerance. Like the

baron in Barthelme's "The Dolt" (Cristine Ionica 2015:67), Bhazabhaza is paranoid and sadistic, after an injury inflicted on him during a raid on his premises. Significantly, Sis Jane also falls victim to the same violence-induced paranoia, when she almost goes berserk, following the betrayal by Lettie and Rose. Both Bhazabhaza and Sis Jane eventually violently take their own lives.

But Wosken (cited in Mongia, 1996: 178) advises against defining women as archetypical victims. Instead he calls for a way of theorizing male violence. He says "Male violence must be theorized and interpreted within specific societies in order both to understand it better and to effectively organize to change it." Though the novel reveals that African women do not always turn the other cheek, as in the case of Lettie's mother, Rose and Palesa who retaliate violently to male provocation, the work suggests that the urban environment is still too much under the control of men for women to make a meaningful impact on moral values.

Conclusion

In my analysis of the text I have shown how representations of female and male characters are a mirror image of the contemporary South African society. Indeed the work reveals how current reforms on gender relations have not yet yielded the desired results, particularly with respect to the rights of black women. For Pumla Gqola (2007:6), "there are silences and gaps" which constitute what she calls "the puzzling South African contradiction." In his exposure of the moral transgressions that black women are subjected to, Khumalo has raised critical awareness on the need for gender transformation in the new dispensation. The text's depiction of African women in the townships has demonstrated how often their voices are gagged, in defiance of official legislation against female abuse.

The novel alludes to possibilities of middle aged women gaining a measure of autonomy through the shebeen businesses. By portraying them as striving for self sufficiency, Khumalo suggests that when women explore other avenues, they wean themselves from the masculine orbit of control. What seems indisputable is that the urban space entails the adoption of a paradigm shift in gender transformative praxis. The work shows that while the emergence of female headed families may appear a deviation from normative social patterns that typify most African families, its liberatory potential for women to fully realize their potentialities, untrammelled by patriarchal parameters of power, is a worthy cause. I believe that in his depiction of Lettie, Khumalo is not necessarily calling for the dearth of the family. Rather, he uses her to express the view that African women should be responsive to their unique situations. But what the novel also seems to gloss over is that women must be able to initiate projects for sustenance. In the novel all the women are reactive instead of being proactive. Lettie always waits and prays for the next man to bring the promise of a fulfilling relationship. She never takes a bold stance to assess them before rushing them to the bedroom. The sad thing is that when women allow men to prompt their sensibilities, they unwittingly remain within the ambit of patriarchal dictates.

Chapter Seven: Seven Steps to Heaven: Fred Khumalo

Exploring dimensions of female visibility through the male author's purview

Introduction

Seven Steps to Heaven joins a growing corpus of deconstructionist works that inaugurate female visibility of a unique kind. Of significance is its deployment of a post-modernistic womanist theory to reconstruct the lives of black families and individuals in the townships at the onset of South African independence in 1994. The text's narrative structure largely derives from the meta-narrative of South African historiography whose political path intersects with that of its neighbours. It is within this context that the novel, through its characters, continually probes into new elusive meanings for South African black families as they grapple with socio-economic changes of the contemporary era. In her introduction to *The Womanist Reader : The first Quarter Century of Womanist Thought*, Layli Phillips (2006:4) observes that postmodernism, among other things, implies "cultural and economic globalization, cultural hybridization... moral indeterminism, the increasing impact of simulacra on psychological processes, and the increasing indeterminacy and complexity of identity." It is precisely this theoretical and historical background that informs Khumalo's work, and upon which my analysis of female representation in the text hangs. Within this broad framework, my argument singles out the urban space, marital status and women's age differentials as motors of cultural difference that either drive the female characters as agents of socio cultural transformative praxis or victims of a patriarchal system seeking to maintain a precarious hold on a value system that has been eroded by the ideological state apparatus.

In its empowering of shebeen queens of the erstwhile African townships, the novel renegotiates gender relations that establish more visibility for black women to cope with urban challenges than their emasculated male counterparts. The shebeen queens have defied the racialised,

genderised economy by exploiting younger women's sexuality as psychological baits for boosting their business. Sis Joy's fame as a shebeen queen takes place in an environment that has denied black women opportunities for advancement and self recognition during the Apartheid era. Having been restricted from participating in the mainstream labour economy which confined them to the Bantustans or condemned them to the lowly paid jobs as housemaids in white suburbs, the black women have demonstrated their entrepreneurship skills by operating shebeens. This is what Fred Moten (cited in Masemola 2015: 21) refers to as "brutal conditions under which many black people live as well as the existential interdictions all black people are forced to live."

For Khumalo, responsible parenthood is one of the litmus tests black couples have to pass in the new dispensation. He shows how as a result of economic pressure and the lure of sexual pleasure, men are losing their traditional grip on the family. This aspect, given emphasis elsewhere in this thesis, is a manifestation of waning African masculinities in the South African socioeconomic landscape. On the other hand, through the depiction of black women of diverse interests and disposition, the novel attests to the fact that their responses to cultural conditions affecting them are a reflection of their individual sensibilities, even though nearly all of them lack agency to challenge the sociopolitical edifices of the current dispensation.

Identity, memory and Difference: Insights into family dynamics within the contemporary black urban society

By the time South Africa attained independence in 1994, Apartheid, which had entrenched itself in every sphere of the black community, was beginning to thaw. However, the vestiges of its devastating effects on black families would continue to be felt even as the nation braced itself for the birth of a new era. Though the text through its ironic title alludes to the euphoria that accompanies independence, the novel paints a grim picture underneath black family structures

even as it points to the developing consciousness of individuals in the new dispensation. It is the historical background that informs and resonates with Khumalo's narrative which also splinters into other narratives, giving it a poly-vocal postmodernist framework. Indeed in the Derridian sense the ontological social profile of South African society remains elusive, because as the novel attests, almost all the characters in the text are constantly searching for survival and identity.

The urban black townships of Exclusive Park near Durban, and Hillbrough in Johannesburg, provide an appropriate setting through the depiction of the socioeconomic conditions affecting the black families. It would appear that the writer's intention is to partially highlight the extent to which Apartheid laws had dislocated Africans by undermining the indigenous cultural system that held them together and to explore contemporary issues confronting individuals. In an interview with the internet editor Mary Corrigan (June 2014), Khumalo reveals that after Apartheid "the writer is free to explore other things...issues of identity and issues confront individuals rather than groups."

The novel thus calls for a different way of analyzing the condition of black women and men. Through the presentation of shebeen queens, married women and their children, the work provides an ideological platform for probing into the ontological reality of black people. And more pertinent to my analysis, Khumalo has inaugurated new insights for a transcendental portrait of female cultural difference. In this sense it pursues a deconstructionist agenda that arguably gives the African women preeminence while undermining the conventional role of black men as traditional custodians of a patriarchal system under threat. By experimenting with motors of female cultural difference mediated through the urban space, Khumalo uses his text to offer the women wider interaction space. The female characters in the novel, in spite of the

negative image attached to their trade, have transformed themselves into business entrepreneurs by defying both political and cultural factors that have always militated against black female advancement. Gaidzanwa's (cited in Moyo and Kawewe(2011: 168) observation that "during the early colonial capitalism the law prohibited African women from engaging in the urban labour market except as nannies for whites," provides a basis for appreciating such strides. That the novel opens with a focus on Sis Joy, the shebeen queen, is a moot point. Euphemistically named, Joy's Oasis, her house has transformed into a space where moral values are undermined. Her depiction as a physically strong imperious woman provides evidence of a new image of female visibility, one that challenges, overtly or covertly, conventional power relations in the urban operational space. Given that Sis Joy has earned her powerful position, it can be said that she typifies the survival strategies adopted by black women in the urban areas during the colonial era. She embodies the black woman's desire to define herself in the face of a system that seeks to silence her. It must be recalled that for a long time the South African economy was propped up by African men who worked in the mines and factories while the women were restricted to the Bantustans through a statutory instrument known as the Group Areas Act. This scenario is aptly captured in Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*, where women such as Gertrude lived a life of tramps and prostitution. In the text Reverend Khumalo laments the social abyss that his sister has fallen into:

You have shamed us, he says in a low voice, not wishing to make it known to the world. A liquor seller, a prostitute, with a child and you do not know where it is. Your brother a priest. How could you do this to us? (*Cry the Beloved Country* 1948 : 26)

In his text Fred Khumalo's elevates the image of some women beyond that of the colonial era. Sis Letty has come a long way, from being a factory worker to a rich woman owning the popular

Paradise Road Park. It is against this background that the female presence and identity has been reconstituted, as a reaction to national segregatory statutes and patriarchal conventions that confer authority on women as natural. Though Khumalo's portrayal of black women is done in a rather perfunctory manner, the text does help us to identify motors of female difference within the same setting. On the one hand the author uses the shebeen queen's success story as evidence of black women's self empowerment, recognition and destabilisation. On the other, it casts a grim picture of those women who grapple with efforts to restore family compatibility. All the shebeen queens: Sis Joy, Sis Letty and Lovey her daughter are images of the femme fatale because of their seductive allure. Masemola (2015:7) makes a note of Sis Letty's appearance : 'The grand appearance of the femme fatale character of Sis Lettie is pinned on the erotic masts of a temptress whose moving presence inspires the dejay to stop playing a Brenda Fasie number and in its place, put on the queen's favourite, "Paradise road." But the description elides the fact that she is also an embodiment of female headed families. I wish to point out that such internal contradictions are pertinent to our understanding of the novel as a work of deconstruction with respect to female subjectivity.

Though indicators of female marginality are sporadically evident in the text, it is the emasculation of men that leads to family dislocation and paralysis. Paradoxically, the men who prey on women's bodies while lavishly patronizing their businesses, are responsible for wrecking their own marriages. These men of the townships have long been dislocated from their traditional moorings that held the family together. So serious has been this fracturing that it has even eroded the morals of Christian custodians. Reverend Tembe's behavior shocks the reader through his wayward lascivious search for meaning outside the religious ethics of which he is a revered custodian. I find his cavalier and lustful behavior significant in two ways : first it

indexes a betrayal of his religious calling; secondly, it highlights the black man's vulnerability in an economy which denies him leverage to assert himself as the family head. It can be argued that both Reverend Tembe and his friend Dube are examples of how men have lost their status in the family. Not only is the reverend lost in his pastoral duties but he also gradually abdicates his masculine role as father figure in the family. It boggles the mind to find that the reverend seeks to define himself and his calling by reconnecting with the people he is supposed to shepherd back into the safe haven of Christian religious doctrine.

While many priests played the holier than thou, the Reverend Tembe was direct-down there in the streets with the unholy, the unwashed, speaking their language, drinking beer with them. (*Seven Steps to Heaven*, 26)

The reverend's rebellious character is first revealed through his preference to be served beer instead of tea on the occasion the Dube couple pay him a visit. Somehow he feels that drinking beer restores his masculinity and self worth. Significantly, this seemingly minor incident foreshadows his physical withdrawal and estrangement from the same house and family when he disappears with Sis Lovey. The unsavoury gesture, to be emulated later by his son Thulani, albeit for different reasons, underscores the extent to which African men have been defeated by the discriminatory laws of Apartheid. This is unlike their female counterparts who have remained strong. Masemola (2015:25) draws useful insights from Gilles Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* :

The breakdown of families in the anti apartheid, or indeed their radical reconfiguration into their reterritorialisation by design of laws of the territorial machine, made the conditions of triangulation as described in Gilles Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* (1987) impossible.

A significant feature of cultural change in the novel is revealed through the submerging of male characters. It is a process that deconstructs the patriarchal order by elevating women to greater visibility and self worth. Mandla, who is a mere factory worker, gains status to live in Exclusive suburb via his wife who is a school teacher. As if to accentuate her earned dominance, Thoko even finds courage to physically assault her husband, in addition to forcing him to go and confront the Tembés over a previous attack by Thulani on their son Sizwe. It is also worth noting that she has a more progressive vision for their son than Dube, who still exults in the anachronistic idea of passing on his patriarchal authority onto Sizwe through training in Zulu martial arts.

One other point worth noting is the contrast between the married women and the single ones. In many respects the novel depicts marital status as a determinant of male control of women. While women only make feeble attempts at self assertion or remain loyal to their errant husbands, men exhibit characteristics of independence. Yet while this profile resembles a certain degree of female diversity, I feel that it sometimes betrays structural weaknesses in the narrative. For all their visibility, the shebeen queens are often denied opportunities for self articulation. One is often rankled by the paucity and simplicity of their discourse as well as the timing of authorial intrusion where direct voicing by the characters would have had more literary impact. Similarly, the married women's discourse is disappointingly controlled and restricted to minor incidents which do not really afford them space to express their inner sensibilities. Most of the time they are spoken about instead of being allowed free expression. Sizwe's complaints about his parents' frequent fights is echoed by Thulani's own disillusionment with his mother's failure to voice out against her husband's domineering behavior towards her. Even more disappointing is the fact that at times the women's roles are restricted to caring, as

seen when the reverend's wife encourages her friend to get more involved in welfare issues by visiting the sick. The only exception is when Sis Lovey dismisses Reverend Tembe after she tires of him after their short-lived romantic hideout. Reminding him of the moral obligation to his family role she says, "I never gave you my hand in marriage, your wife did. You owe it to her, your family and your congregation to do the right thing. Go home." (*Seven Steps to Heaven*, 96).

For male characters in a family setup, it is significant to examine how their identity is undermined through satire. For example, the Dube's visit to the Tembés is an occasion for castigating the former whose physique appears like a grotesque figure intruding into the holy man's house. The writer makes a point that the friendship that develops between the two men is unholy as it is founded on misguided social principles that have alienated urban men from their families. Here again, the work reveals how the township lifestyle has become a powerful motor of cultural difference. But the text also shows how the underlying sociopolitical conditions have had a more devastating effect on religious leaders. The escalation of political violence by political parties has made them financially insecure since they can no longer depend on their warring members of the congregation. It is against this background that Father Tembe's cavalier behavior can be described as an act of deterritorialisation. While Masemola (2015:18), aptly appropriates Deleuze and Guattari's (1983:23-24) notion of the term to refer to the "crossing of thresholds and borders", I find it also useful for describing the holy man's voluntary severance of family and religious ties that conferred a respectable image and honour upon him.

Dube, like his wayward friend, also lacks focus in life and can only hope for a better future through horse racing bets. Both men are the cause of their wives' fretting and despair. Hence while Khumalo remains ambivalent on the root causes of immorality in urban townships, his

attack seems to be directed at men, who always appear to be willing victims of their own misdemeanors. Not only have these men lost their power to exercise their masculinity but they also have lost faith in achieving anything meaningful in life. On the contrary, the female characters are portrayed as more enterprising and focused.

Sis Lettie successfully graduates from being a factory worker to a shebeen queen with property and cars. We also read that the women's shebeens are the most preferred and hence successful. While the men who patronise the shebeens do it as a means of satisfying their individual sexual desires, women who run them have a more transcendental view. Sis Letty, Sis Joy and Lovey all look beyond their individual aspirations and satisfaction. For Sis Lettie, women's survival in the townships lies in their ability to run an efficient business. Hers is also a mother's quest for a guaranteed decent career for children under her custody. Evidence of her relentless efforts is revealed through the success and opening up of career opportunities for her sons, including Kokoroshe. She is also responsible for bringing back Noliwe to school with a view to providing a brighter future for her. But the narrative also brings out the effects of parental conflict on children. While Kokoroshe and his brothers wallow in the success of their successful mothers, Sizwe and Thulani are caught up in their respective parents' conflicts. At one time Sizwe asks his mother, "But why do you keep having ugly fights with Daddy?" (*Seven Steps to Heaven*, 81). In reply she confides that it's because they are always under financial pressure. Equally affected is Thulani as revealed by his confrontation of his mother for her lack of assertiveness.

You mama can't look out for yourself. You are allowing daddy to use you. You are not your own person, you are always playing the obedient, God-fearing wife to fool your parishioners but the truth is that you are suffering. (*Seven Steps to Heaven*, 76)

Thulani's observations are corroborated by authorial intrusion which alludes to the dependency syndrome that the reverend's wife is suffering from. "She had always been the one to be led by the hand, agreeing to whatever the man of the house suggested" (*Seven Steps to Heaven*, 78). Incidentally, his intellectual skills as a writer are eventually misdirected and split between him and Sizwe. For Khumalo, the children's misdemeanors are a reflection of a diseased South African society, largely manifested at family level. This aspect is aptly captured by Masemola (2015:26) who notes: "In this post-1990 setting the nature of the relationships between fathers and sons becomes as delicate as that between husbands and wives." Significantly, then, the novel resonates with such family conflicts. In the casting of men as chief culprits, the novel deconstructs the patriarchal conventions to a certain point.

A slight problem with the narrative however, is its failure to present a model family structure and the limiting of women's entrepreneurship to illicit beer selling business. While the successes attained by the shebeen queens are commendable as indicators of women's advancement, they leave the reader with an erroneous impression that spousal compatibility is no longer desirable and that female advancement is attainable through some form of deviance. My problem with this post-modernistic interpretation is that it plays into the western and African American assimilationistic and homogenising rhetoric regarding the dismantling of patriarchy. I argue that Khumalo's attempt to present alternative female portraits through Mrs. Tembe and Mrs. Dube is rather contrived and ambiguous. Both women, in their attempts to achieve family cohesion, remain submerged in the moral abysses of their errant husbands. The writer seems to have reduced them to the periphery by denying them a definitive female sensibility. By assigning them very little discursive space, the narrative unwittingly relegates them to the role of the traditional passive woman. In the Bakhtinian sense this rendering excludes them from the central

discourse of men.

Deconstructing cultural conventions: a subversive or liberatory paradigm shift?

In his depiction of characters caught up in the inertia of cultural values or compelled to flout them, Khumalo performs a deconstructionist act that invites attention to female diversity in the pre-1994 South African context. Of particular significance is the novel's treatment of sexuality and cultural values as points of rupture within a community emerging from the traumas of a discriminatory political system. In the novel both men and women occupy a liminal space between cultural conformity and survival imperatives that attend to contemporary urban life. Moyo and Kawewe (2008:169) have also commented that in the urban areas Africans generally lost authority to define themselves. Hence, compared with earlier novels discussed in this thesis, the forms of female resistance and visibility, and manifestations of patriarchal power are greatly subdued. However, riding on the verge of independence, the work calls attention to how the black women of the townships have devised unorthodox ways to survive in an environment that denies them basic rights.

Khumalo uses his narrative to address the much contested problems of prostitution, men's infidelity, and later in the novel, to expose the multiple sexual relations indexed by Sizwe, Patrick and Tembi. For an analysis pertinent to this thesis, female cultural diversity is mainly mediated through sexual deviance. From the beginning, the narrative presents a picture of a community that has discarded issues of morality either for the sake of survival on the part of women, or for sexual gratification on the part of men. Sis Joy's Paradise park shebeen, which doubles up as a business enterprise and an "Oasis" for male and female sexual pleasures, highlights the dissonance between futile attempts to uphold African tradition and the

socioeconomic exigencies of the urban townships and city slums. Run mostly by single mothers, the shebeen queen's popularity in terms of their clandestine services, pose a serious threat to male dominance in the new social order. Through the shebeen queens' visibility, the novel presents the darker side of female sensibilities as a response to the state apparatus and patriarchy's constraining effects. The author allows the shebeen queens to subvert societal images of women as demure, submissive and submerged subjects. The women in the text are not the type that solicit for male pleasures; rather, they have the power to control men, even to the extent of using them as instruments of their illicit business. It is in this sense that Sis Letty enlists the services of her beautiful daughter in her business. Characterised as a femme fatale, Lovey exudes sexual power to entice and deflect men from their traditional roles.

Significantly, while the majority of women have taken a backstage in political activism, they have sought self recognition in their own way. In a manner similar to Kafka's Gregor Samsa, in *The Metamorphosis*, the shebeen queens have transformed themselves to cope with the violence and debauchery that township life is notorious for. Sis Letty is described as a "hard living shebeen owner who could challenge men to a fist fight – and win." We also learn that she was equally competent with the knife (*Seven Steps to Heaven*, 87). While one might be inclined to cast aspersions on her contemptible profession, Sis Letty is also sensitive to the fortunes of her business. Yet the confrontation between Sis Letty and Mrs. Tembe over the disappearance of the latter's husband highlights the divergent perspectives and contradictions that attend to issues of morality and business respectively. While Sis Letty complains about her faltering business, ostensibly linked to the Reverend's disappearance with her daughter, Mrs. Tembe is equally riled by the fact that Sis Lovey is destroying her marriage.

Now she got agitated, not getting to explain how the disappearance of the twosome had affected her business. When Lovey went , regular customers started complaining about the dropping of standards, the slow service. Lettie knew that it wasn't service that the customers were complaining about; it was Lovey's presence that they missed. (*Seven Steps to Heaven to Heaven*, 87-88)

For Sis Lettie, engaging in this kind of business is a matter of choice and survival. Yet from a different perspective, I am inclined to argue that both Sis Lovey and her daughter have a veneer of moral conscience that the man of the cloth lacks. Sis Lettie confides in Mrs. Tembe that she too knows how it feels to be abused and oppressed by men. It is Lovey who eventually tells the reverend, amid his incessant pleas to remain in their little "paradise", to go back to his family. It is precisely in this sense that his widely publicised return becomes a glaring charade. Khumalo skillfully assigns Sis Lovey with a singular moral conscience that prevails over and makes a mockery of her hypocritical lover's sexual mania.

Significantly, Khumalo lends a feminist streak to the narrative through the departure of reverend Tembe. The occasion opens opportunities for his wife to rediscover herself, first in her moments of introspection, and secondly through Mrs. Dube's timeous counsel. Linked to this also is the aspect of Mrs Tembe's desirability, captured through the authorial voice's reference to the male congregants' attempts to supplant their pastor who has opted out of his pastoral and family duties. The writer uses this occasion to highlight the black woman's yearning for freedom and female supportive systems. It is during these moments that Mrs. Tembe discovers her newfound freedom.

She was shocked by the sudden realization because she had never imagined her life without her husband. (*Seven Steps to Heaven*, 117)

This new found freedom to redefine herself is bolstered by Mrs. Dube's reassuring words: "Your focus on something close to your heart will bring back the equilibrium that you require to cope with the stresses and the challenges of life" (*Seven Steps to Heaven*, 118).

For Khumalo, then, black women have been living under some kind of bondage and must now begin to make independent decisions regarding family matters. When Mrs. Tembe decides to withdraw her girls from boarding school in order to 'foster a tighter bond with them' (*Seven Steps to Heaven*, 118) it is an affirmation of her breakthrough from the patriarchal controls that deny African women agency. But while one appreciates the writer's concern over the black women entrapped in matrimony, he seems to be sending the wrong signals to the idea that women can only find fulfillment in the absence of men. It is from this perspective that I find the novel's deconstructionist agenda rather unsettling, for it takes the same stance adopted by radical African American feminists such as Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston. I want to reiterate that the elimination of men from the social sphere is not as liberating as it might seem because it dismisses the possibility of compatibility in matters related to gender. Further, Khumalo's narrative does not seem to regard the search for female agency and empowerment within matrimony as a viable option.

Again, the new found freedom for Mrs. Tembe in the form of her right to wear lipstick, wear skirts that liberate her legs, and the removal of the doek, is an expression of some cultural inhibitions to which African women have been subjected. But while these external features are necessary indicators of women's retrieval of their rights, the novel is disappointingly silent on the more pertinent motors of female visibility that the contemporary African woman needs to attain self fulfillment. Here I am referring to what Achebe (cited in Mukherjee (2008:6) describes as the need for Literature to "speak of a particular space, evolve out of the necessities

of its history, past and current, and the aspirations and destiny of its people.” I feel that though the novel makes an attempt to address some pertinent issues regarding women’s creative potential in a genderized, racialised society, it glosses over their inner sensibilities and potential to transcend gender stereotypes.

The above concerns notwithstanding, Khumalo’s *Seven Steps to Heaven* is structurally inscribed within South African historiography in a manner that enables him to invoke a new subject position for black women. What often seem to be minor incidents or mere contrivances are actually indicators of black women’s nascent transcendental role in the new dispensation. In spite of the negative images associated with their trade, the shebeen queens have arguably moved a step in self actualization, while their married counterparts have actually regressed into oblivion. For these reasons, I do not share Zukiswa Zimela’s (2009: 2) observation that they remain defeated and frustrated, though the author seems to show little or no empathy for their suppressed patriarchal relationships.

If Khumalo’s metaphor of the onion is more appropriate for explaining the multiplicities that attend to the protagonist and his friend Thulani, it can also be extended to bring to view the new status of black women in the post Apartheid era. As has been noted earlier, historically the South African black women have been constituted by a political super structure that relegates them to the lowest social rung. The black women of the pre 1994 era, are, however, no longer as submissive and as culturally constrained as those of the 1960s. Earlier works by other South African writers such as Sindiwe Magona (*To My Children’s children*) and Alan Paton (*Cry the Beloved Country*) attest to this. Not only were the women marginalized but they were also sexually abused, insecure and silenced. All urban female characters in *Cry the Beloved Country* are objects of male sexual gratification. In *Seven Steps to Heaven*, however, the writer suggests

that the situation has changed for some of the women. Sexuality has become at once an aspect for self actualization and destabilization of the socius. For Khumalo, black women exhibit particular multiplicities to the extent that they do not necessarily share similar sensibilities. Over the years Sis Lettie has peeled into different personalities; from a factory worker back in Lesotho to a beautiful woman who enjoyed disappearing with men, to a business woman running a thriving business.

In her paper entitled “*Constructing feminine identities in the post modern,*” Diana Damian (2006:92) observes that:

The emancipated women invest their time and efforts in their private development, in building a career. In the public space these women appear as professionally successful, rational, talented and hardworking. They are endowed with the so called “masculine features.”

Thus, unlike Sizwe who has transformed into a monstrous self deluding appendage of Thulani aka Freedom Cele, Sis Letty has carved out a transcendent path of self actualization, even as she continues to carry the scars of her previous encounters with men. While the reader may be disinclined to the women’s self propelling strategies, it must be noted that they are operating within an environment where alternative opportunities are more limited for women than for men. This point has been stressed by Gaidzanwa 1996 (in Moyo and Kawewe 2009:167) :

African women’s confinement in domestic work resulted from race and gender specific market practices that relegated African women to the narrow occupations.’

In the text the women’s visibility and image is accentuated by their male counterparts’ emasculation and loss of respect and responsibility. Reverend Tembe’s disappearance is an

instance of a man undergoing a Kafkasquean experience through his secret hideout with Sis Lovey. But unlike Kafka's Gregor Samsa who physically transforms into a monstrous insect that his erstwhile family members find revolting, the reverend's transformation plays out the psychological monstrosity that attends his deviance. Despite his wife's readiness to forgive him, he feels he is now a misfit in the family environment he willingly abandoned. Actually he has become a kind of social bug. It is also worth noting that Sis Lovey, the agent of the reverend's transformation, remains herself. She retains the moral sense to tell him off, to jettison him back to his family. What is also interesting is that in his second disappearance the reverend is retreating neither to the warm embraces of a woman nor to a specific identifiable sanctuary. Thus, his action, apart from exposing his cultural deviance, is an instance of what Deleuze and Guttari (cited in Masemola 2015:19) refers to as becoming animal.

To become animal is to make the movement, the escape in all its positiveness, to cross the threshold and reach a continuum of intensities which no longer have any value except for themselves. (Masemola 2015:18)

The narrative alludes to the reverend's complete loss of image and social cohesion. It must be recalled that the reverend's transformation is foreshadowed earlier in the novel when he expresses a desire to go out into the street and join the laymen. Hence what started off as a rebellion against his religious calling degenerates into a neurotic descent into outright animalism, just like his son Thulani. This aspect of becoming animal, which is linked to loss of morals and direction, is extended to Sizwe who ends up as a wandering criminal with elusive identities. It can be said that the reverend's chameleon like character becomes his nemesis.

In light of the foregoing, I am inclined to believe that Khumalo uses the urban environment of the pre-1994 South African historiography to highlight the fact that it is the men rather than

women who end up the worst victims of cultural degradation that the colonial legacy in South Africa has engendered. In his attempt at depicting female visibilities with their diversity, the writer seems to have downplayed their moral blameworthiness by focusing more on their entrepreneurship and unbridled commitment to their children's future. This is unlike their male counterparts who exhibit neither direction, focus nor moral principles.

African Masculinities under Siege: the urban space as cauldron for socio-economic transformation

I begin this section of my thesis by emphasizing the fact that in its foregrounding of female characters' visibility, the novel inaugurates serious challenges for patriarchy. Given that the novel is set in the urban environments of Durban and Johannesburg, which serve as ideal operational spaces for women, compared with the restrictions of the Bantustans, the work appears to chart new discursive courses. The work shows that even though some women are still living under patriarchal constraints, others have begun to redefine themselves. The explicit profiling of male characters belies the fact that it is upon the women that the writer confers more economic and social power, even at the expense of compromising moral issues. Indeed the work deconstructs African masculinities by portraying men as drunkards, sex maniacs, war lords and hypocrites. In the words of Angels Corabi (1980-2003) :

Masculinity is a cultural construct which defines itself by binary opposites: to be a man means not to be a woman, ethnic or homosexual (Segal 1990). Consequently hegemonic masculinity is based and reasserts itself through sexism, racism and homophobia.

The above definition is pertinent to our understanding of the South African social context within which the novel is set. Indeed the work is structured around problems brought to bear by the underlying conflict between masculine and feminine ideals. As noted by Denise Buiten and

Kamila Naidoo (2013:6): ‘A key element in contemporary South African literature is the perceived “crisis of masculinity” and its impact on male identity and action’ (Campbell 2001, Mager 1998). The two authors point to how patriarchy in South Africa is being challenged by winds of social change. For Porsel (cited in Buiten and Naidoo (2013:7) “ male sexualities have been problematised as violent and irresponsible, with advocacy targeted at constructing a more equitable vision of sexuality.” While Khumalo has glossed over sexual violence in his text, there are always undertones of female denigration. This adds credence to the assertion that “ masculinity is performed through representations of sexuality by employing representations of women as sexual objects through which men actualize their masculine identity” (Buiton and Naidoo 2013:10).

Connell 2005:77 (cited in Mutunda, 2009: 19) makes a point about hegemonic masculinity, which she defines as:

the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to problems of legitimacy, which guarantees the dominant position of men and the subordination of men.

All the above critics seem to share and broaden our perception of how the novel deflates masculinities in a manner that calls for their evaluation in the new political dispensation. From the portrayal of shebeen queens, young boys and married men, to the hero of the story -within the- story, Ramu the hermit, there are instances of male characters’ attempts to boost their ego through abusing and denigrating women. Ramu’s ungrateful behavior, shown through his insulting of the woman who rescued him from the politically inspired violent attacks, shows how male stereotypical views have permeated cultural and religious sectors. Ironically, the novel establishes a unique trajectory of female cultural diversity, where some like Mrs. Tembe and

the prostitute in Thulani's story appear to succumb to dictates of hegemonic masculinity, while others such as Sis Letty and Sis Lovey contest it. In my view, it is those women who contest the status quo that the work seems to support. Yet, the means by which their protesting voice is articulated is not enough for them to break new ground.

Though the shebeen queens are not spared the language of derogation, it is their male counterparts who seem to be the worst victims of the writer's satiric butt. It is pertinent to note that the shebeen queens control the much frequented social space for the men's sexual gratification. Together with her business premise euphemistically dubbed Joy's Oasis, Sis Joy constitutes a powerful centripetal force for male patrons. On her part she has internalized the discourse and violence characteristic of the townships. That she can turn her freedom of speech against the male patrons, highlights the extent to which the urban space has the potential to function as a new discursive arena for gender contestation. Surprisingly, the women in the text have retained their maternal instincts. In fact, they often double up as father figures.

Khumalo's two pronged attack on masculinities is particularly enacted through the Reverend's nomadic Christian lifestyle, as well as Mvubu's political terror campaign. Both men exhibit serious hypocritical tendencies that undermine the confidence and authority vested in them. Reverend Tembe's immaturity and lecherous behavior is as devilish and disconcerting as Mvubu's violent disposition and greed.

In portraying older men as immature and violent, the writer alludes to the fact that they have become liabilities. This probably explains why they all end up being eliminated. In the novel, Mvubu, for all his pretensions at grandeur and philanthropy, has his ugly side exposed as he eventually dies a sick, lonely man stripped of his illgotten wealth. The contempt in which

Reverend Tembe and Mvubu had been held is summed up by young political activists and leaders who attended the latter's funeral: "This dog of a reverend must disappear. How can he sing eulogies to a warlord who threw our province into a bloodbath?" (Seven Steps, 63). It is significant that Khumalo's satire is directed at the two hypocrites. Neither of them does well in the public sphere. When the reverend pours out his empty eulogies on the dead man at his funeral, he makes a point about male visibility that undermines social stability in the sense that the men's moral failings stand in counterpoint to the shebeen queen's apparent successes. This aspect is echoed by Tripp (cited in Finchinchong 2006:135-147):

Women articulate their own scripts which envision alternative ways of ordering political, public and private life.

Ironically, Sis Joy and other women thrive at the expense of men, most of whom are either jobless or engage in economic activities that make a mockery of them as family heads. Need we be reminded that Mandla is only a factory sweeper while his wife occupies a more illustrious job of a teacher?

It is however, a matter of female diversity that Mrs. Dube remains eclipsed by Sis Lettie and other shebeen queens. The novel's depiction of these women's varying circumstances is further demonstrated through Mrs. Tembe's dependence on her unfaithful husband. In light of the foregoing, I wish to advance the argument that the female characters' sensibilities in the novel, diverse as they are, do not impact on the men's circumstances in the same way.

Another instance of female visibility that deflates patriarchal functions is demonstrated through Sis Lettie's organising and funding of the mayoral bowl in honour of her son's and Sizwe's success at matric. The occasion further underscores the women's potential to channel their resources positively towards social projects compared with their male counterparts' selfish

and adventurous escapades. Furthermore, in its depiction of women who adopt coping strategies for survival, the novel performs a task of redefining women's status. In a society with a history of unequal labour practices, the African women often suffered the worst from the impact of the racist labour intensive economy and could only settle for manual jobs as white women's nannies. Interestingly, the writer's satire and denigration of male characters such as Mvubu and reverend Tembe provides an avenue for seeing their weaknesses in order to weigh them against the women's strength and commitment to socio economic development in the post independence era. Mvubu's donations to the church are a mere cover-up for his diabolical acts against the South African citizenry. The text reveals damning statistics of his dangerous campaign:

‘I will die in peace, and with a clear conscience,’ he told the men gathered around his bed, though these men knew he had been responsible for the deaths of thousands of people in the past few years.... He donated generously . He was a trustee of the choir, sponsoring all their out of town excursions. (*Seven Steps to Heaven*, 60)

A matter of critical concern, however, is the writer's representation of some female characters who unashamedly rely on their bodies as leverage for empowerment. By casting these characters as agents of sexual immorality Khumalo ends up presenting a narrow biased interpretation of black women's potentialities. Not only does the writer often fail to capture specific nuances of interventionist discourse necessary for dismantling the vestiges of colonialism and patriarchy, but his attempt at portraying female diversity is restricted more to what happens to them and less to their possible forms of resistance. For Judith Butler (cited in Eagleton, 1991:375) “this reduction of female agency to a doing without the doer”, is unfair because, she argues, “ it is impossible to get rid of the subject altogether and claim to be a fully accountable participant.”

Genderised, racialised monstrosities : towards transcultural alternative sexualities

Critical discussion of the text so far has established how issues of gender and sexuality are central to its construction. While occasional references to South African historiography , including the protagonist's zest to fulfill his writing career are pertinent to our understanding of the plot, the work seems to stir more controversy in its depiction of characters involved in unorthodox sexual relations. It must be noted that the controversy surrounding the legality or illegality of homosexuality is still raging in Africa , more so in South Africa because of its racial composition. Here Cherrly Stobie's (2011: 4) disillusionment over the paucity or lack of discourse on and prejudice against bisexuality is worth noting:

Homosexuality is against the law in 38 of 53 African countries. Uganda and Malawi also legislated against homophobic relations. In 2009 Uganda passed a bill to enable homosexual acts to be punished by death.

For South Africa then, whose values are enshrined in the Bill of Rights of 1994 to protect human rights of Lesbian, Gay Bisexual and Straight people (Stobie 2011: 5), the issue of social reform remains pertinent. Stobie (2011:8) observes that "there is an ongoing struggle for human rights, freedom and equality, which includes but is not limited to a climate of respect for bisexuals and others within the sexuality spectrum." This is consistent with views she raised in her earlier paper where she notes:

An interesting turn in post Apartheid era is the handling of the trope of bisexuality, which opens up a potentially useful domain for considering sexuality and national identifications beyond the constraints of the binary mode,(Stobie 2009:4).

The novel's representations of same sexuality are brought out through white characters, Patrick and Sheree, who respectively engage in bisexual and lesbian relationships. What is most

striking is the manner in which gender relations are destabilized through performatives that subvert cultural stereotypes. In his presentation of characters who engage in multiple relations, Khumalo invokes queer theory to ignite further debate on how the South African socius is being transformed. According to Jonathan Culler (1997:132)

Queer theory ‘uses the marginal – what has been set aside as perverse, beyond the pale radical other – to analyse the cultural construction of the centre: heterosexual normativity. Queer theory has become the site of a productive questioning, not just the cultural construction of sexuality but of culture itself, as based on the denial of homoerotic relations.

It is also in this sense that the above theory is linked to deterritorialisation as a symbolic motor of cultural difference in the text. I am inclined here to agree with Masemola’s (2015:25) appropriation of Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) notion of the latter term to advance my own analysis of the actions of characters who cross cultural boundaries of performativity (to use Judith Butler’s term). I contend that when Patrick, Sizwe, and Tembi get entangled in deviant sexual behavior, they engage in queer forms of cultural deterritorialisation. I argue that their actions amount to a complex denial of practiced social norms. For Masemola (2011:1):

Khumalo’s novel marshals allochthonous memory and transcultural intertextuality to the extent that race, gender and masculinities are represented through a multiplicity and temporality that are sophisticated enough to transcend and /or implode the binary oppositions between men and women, gay and straight, educated and lay....

While the shebeen queens, Dube and Reverend Tembe embody deviant sexual acts linked with heterosexual behaviour, the younger characters in the later part of the text act in contexts outside matrimony and motherhood. This gives them a more transcendental space within which to operate. At the same time it places them within greater risk from public censure and

individual vulnerability. If the work weaves a complex postmodern intertext of its protagonist's multiplicities as a writer through appropriation of Thulani as his alter ego, it also encapsulates his multiple sexual relations with Patrick, a white man and Tembi, a black girl trying to fit into white culture. This again calls to mind the metaphor of the layered onion. Hence by involving himself in both heterosexual and homosexual relations, Sizwe crosses and recrosses the South African cultural and ideological boundaries. Indeed both male and female characters are mired in some kind of monstrosities that shock the reader, giving the impression that gender is no longer a simple question of binary opposites. The work exposes cultural reform in its most insidious manner. In her chapter entitled "*Locating the Subject*," Eagleton (1991:371) makes the following philosophical points about gender:

Within the sex/gender distinction, sex poses as the real and the factic, the material or corporeal ground upon which gender operates as acts of cultural inscription. (371)

She further asserts that "the real and the sexually factic are phantasmatic constructions – illusions of substance that bodies are compelled to approximate but never can" (Eagleton 1991:371). In the novel one gets the sense that Khumalo is curiously concerned about the transcultural, gender configurations that have come to attend South Africa as a rainbow nation. Particularly intriguing is the involvement of white characters in sexual relations, violence and drunkenness. Apart from the fact that the white characters are not fully developed, they each exhibit sexual and behavioural characteristics that are not in sync with conventional social norms. Patrick is a white man of Irish extraction who blends in with other white South Africans and foreigners such as Germans in a complex homosexual matrix. It is in this sense that I see the writer as examining cultural difference from a broader perspective than that expressed in other works discussed in this thesis. This novel establishes dimensions of sexuality beyond the

simple heterosexual relations, by extending the idea of South Africa as a monstrosity beyond the political and economic trajectories, to confront issues of multiple sexual partners, homosexual and hetero-homosexual relations. The novel's portrayal of characters behaving in uncharacteristically unorthodox ways seems to be also informed by Judith Butler's philosophy on the performativity of gender. In her controversial text, *Bodies that Matter*, she contends:

Performativity of gender is the reiterative and citational practice, the compulsory repetition of gender norms that animate and constrain the gendered subject but which are also the resources from which resistance, subversions and displacement are forged.

In *Seven Steps to Heaven* the inscription of homosexual activities within a predominately black community becomes a form of resistance because it disrupts normative expectations by portraying male characters subverting the social order. It's a deviation from known forms of resistance since it threatens the very social fabric upon which the majority of the South African society has been constructed. Worse still those who indulge in the acts do not seem to have agency but find themselves performing the act. Interestingly, the only female character engaged in such kind of deviance is Sheree, a white woman. It is clear that Patrick and Sizwe indulge because of pressure to survive, not necessarily sexual desire as is the case with the German nationals. It is in this manner that the work assumes a post-modernistic view of the pre-1994 South African society. For South Africans, the author seems to say, the binary opposites which have structured this society, have undergone a state of flux. This condition, according to Eagleton (1991) implies that people are no longer controlled by acts of cultural inscription. The novel thus examines the various ways in which the people of South Africa have degenerated into some kind of monstrosity, of which multiple sex partners is a part.

In the text Khumalo uses the mixed sexual relations to probe deeper into their complexity. What is also significant is the use of wry humour to break the racial stereotype of white men and women as superior. For the writer, the meanings people attach to relations are indeterminable. Daddy Coole assumes control of Patrick, whom he patronises in a highly satiric manner. Hence when Patrick resumes walking the streets in search of male patrons we discern a reversal of social status and fortune. Given that he had been involved in a heterosexual relationship with Tembi, whom he regarded with equal derisive disdain, it comes as a surprise when he hooks up with Daddy Coole, the black pimp. Daddy Coole's racial taunts at his white client are at once a parody of inversion of racial and class structuring in South Africa after the demise of Apartheid. We are immediately reminded of Patrick's own earlier racist taunts in their relationship. We note here that in the new South Africa it is money that determines power, as revealed by Patrick's fawning before the black pimp.

Patrick was on his knees, working his tongue round Daddy Coole's erect member. There were tears in Patrick's eyes, as he thought of Sizwe, whom he was missing so immensely. Caught as he was in the throes of his own desperation, he had given up on trying to help the person who mattered most in his life.....Whoever thought Daddy Coole would have a white man's tongue around his black dick, whoa! (*Seven Step to Heaven*, 192)

Here the narrative collapses complex interracial, homosexual relations that recall the Patrick-Sizwe-Tembi multiples. It is worth noting that in the earlier threesome bisexual relations, Patrick is in full control of his black and female lovers, exploiting their desirability at will. Tembi is a helpless victim of a white boyfriend who treats their affair in a matter-of-fact manner. Similarly, Sizwe seems to be content with playing the role of female partner in a

homosexual affair with Patrick. Given this rendering, it would seem that Khumalo's cynicism at such bizarre sexual multiplicities is an indication of his concern over rupture within South African society. It is significant that the novel's inscription of homo/heterosexual matters that resonate with female cultural difference gives it a transcendental position within the corpus of gender narratives of deconstruction. The novel brings a new dimension to debates on gender representation by focusing not so much on the hackneyed topic of female oppression and resistance but inaugurates new transformative representations that have often been associated with western societies. This can be seen as an effect of globalization on culture.

In its depiction of various characters, *Seven Steps to Heaven* delineates aspects of gender relations that subvert normative gender relations. Both heterosexual and homosexual relations are the foci of the writer's configuration of the South African Society. The men and women of Exclusive Township and Hillbrow exhibit various forms of sexual deviance. By their sanctioning of sexual partners, the shebeen queens, together with their accomplices, can be regarded as acting outside African cultural expectations. Because the multiple relations violate African values of marriage and are motivated by a desire for pleasure and to amass wealth, they constitute what Masemola describes as an 'ontological monstrosity' (2015:21). Indeed in their passion for the pleasures of the flesh, the shebeen patrons have become monstrosities.

Like Sizwe, whose writing vocation "turns him into an ontological monstrosity before he recognizes the fullness of his multiplicity, the men and women of Exclusive Park have become monstrous sexual maniacs who have subordinated their family unity to pleasures of the flesh. The multiplicities of these sexual perverts is seen in their masquerading as pious family heads or God-fearing. Interestingly, the dark spectre of the parents' multiplicities transfers unto their children. In the novel Sizwe and Thulani are initiated into sexual perversion after spying on their

fathers. The two friends engage in sexual relations with Noliwe, who also later has intercourse with their friend Kokoroshe. Hence the protagonists' preoccupation with a writing vocation that connects him with Thulani (aka Freedom Cele), in a story entitled *The Oneness of Three in One*, is played out on an erotic level to underscore the writer's disillusionment with his contemporary society.

Significantly, the later part of the novel presents Thulani and Sizwe engaging in individual multiplicities of sexual partners, even as they remain entwined with each other through the vocation. This shift in the narrative from heterosexual prostitution to one involving men only, constitutes some kind of deterritorialisation. The narrative shows how Thulani has outdone his father as a sex maniac; he is charged with having raped 138 women and is subsequently sentenced to death. What we see here is a character whose multiplicities in sexual perversion have increased exponentially with time, a real monstrous figure. Sizwe on the other hand has gone through his own sexual metamorphosis. From their twosome relationship with Noliwe, he has developed a unique craving for sexual relations with other men. This is crystallised when he enrolls at the Natal University as a black student among the majority whites. It is here where he meets Patrick, who is in a heterosexual relationship with Thembi, a black girl who is trying to pass as white. In a bizarre act Sizwe transforms into a homosexual lover with Patrick, who later admits to walking the streets in search of male clients, in order to raise College fees after his sponsors withdrew. What is most intriguing at this point is the further fusion of the three lovers, not in a love triangle with the same woman, but in the form of men craving for each other. This leads to Tembi being left in the cold, eventually. It is in this sense that I see the novel as engaging the reader into complex multiplicities of sexual perversion that involve both heterosexual and homosexual relations. What is clear is that despite his failure to invest female

characters with a protesting voice, Khumalo has provided another literary arena for exploring the politics of cultural difference.

The culmination of Sizwe's monstrosity is enacted towards the end of the text when his madness transforms him to a wandering bug who has to be hunted down by Patrick his lover.

He walked around in rags, his mouth and ears suppurating with sores, his breath rank his whole body a host to myriad parasites. (*Seven Steps to Heaven*, 288)

This incident paradoxically reconnects Sizwe to two earlier ones in the novel, one in which he and Thulani contract venereal disease, and the other, the opening scene which shocks the reader by its exposure of the sordid nauseating state of the drunken men at Sis Joy's shebeen. It is worth noting that in all the incidents images of men's diseased bodies are evoked, physically or metaphorically. One always gets the sense of victims getting their just desserts, since their adventurous escapades constitute a flagrant violation of the moral codes that sanction casual sexual relations. The image of the wandering cockroach feeding on human vomit is invoked here again in the form of male prostitutes metaphorically feasting on Sizwe's body. It is evident that his body has succumbed to diseases that accompany a reckless lifestyle of debauchery and crime. It would seem that while female clients are also involved in prostitution, it is the male prostitutes who the writer has mostly targeted.

Tembi appears to have been cast in a more sympathetic light than her lovers, even though she is equally to blame for loss of morals. Yet like Noliwe, she is involved in multiple sexual relations. But while Noliwe's and Lovey's encounters are restricted to heterosexual men at the time, Tembi is caught up in bisexual men, Patrick and the transformed version of Sizwe. Often portrayed as alienated and insecure, Tembi is depicted as a desperate girl clinging to a white

man who only sees her as a sex object. For all her services, she is still vilified as a sponge by Patrick. Though she herself knows Patrick is not the kind of son-in-law her mother would approve of, her attachment to him seems too strong to let go. Tembi's attempts to mimic and dress like whites is an exercise in futility because it alienates her from her true identity, and she ends up sexually abused by men in drunken orgies. Through the work the writer highlights young black women's vulnerability in a multiracial society. Apparently, by opting to define herself in terms of white interests and tastes instead of her own Africanness, Tembi performs a different kind of deterritorialisation delineated by Deleuze and Guattari (cited in Masemola 2015: 18). I am inclined to believe that Tembi's voluntary severance of black identity and association is motivated by feelings of class inferiority and greed.

One critical dimension that invites attention is the question of oppression. On the surface elements of female marginality are evident but not as serious as those depicted in other works discussed in this thesis. Some critics from Rhodes University Creative Writing Class, (2009) have latched on to this observation to castigate the writer for his lack of sympathy for the reality of black women in oppressed patriarchal relationships. They have charged that Khumalo treats women's issues as the norm and uses them as fodder to propel his narrative. It is unfortunate that such critics base their allegations on isolated incidents. For example, in the novel-within-the-novel, which features Ramu the hermit pouring out his stream of vitriol against the woman who saved him from death after being hit by a rubber bullet, one gets the feeling that the author is being overly unjust to the female gender. But if their observations are anything to go by, what is their response to the ample evidence pointing to the persistent vilification and satirizing of male characters such as Father Tembe, Mvubu, Thulani and Sizwe? How do such critics see the reverend's descent into evil? What do they have to say about

Thulani's incarceration after ravishing women's bodies and Sizwe's madness? I strongly feel that contrary to such misreading, the men are the main target of the writer's satire. Certainly the characterization of men does not amount to the author's elevation of them. I contend that Khumalo's treatment of female characters is not necessarily intended to undermine them in the critics' stereotypical sense but to help readers reflect on the underlying causes of their condition. This explains why the shebeen queens occupy a transcendental role as successful entrepreneurs. With the exception of Tembi, even the less visible female characters such as Noliwe and Mrs. Dube are neither under serious threat nor treated as fodder for men as alleged. Mrs. Dube even retains some honour by virtue of her more respectable job as a teacher while Noliwe makes up for her previous immoral behavior by deciding to go back to school.

Conclusion

As was the case with the first chapter in this thesis, I have shown how this novel explores female cultural diversity from the prism of a male author. The female characters such as Sis Lettie, Sis Joy and Lovey are more of types since they lack distinctive features of individuality. For example, save for some minor traits, they tend to merge as either femme fatales or helpless victims of male sexuality. It is from this standpoint that I believe that though the work addresses the African woman's condition, it often glosses over their sensibilities. This is despite the fact that in many respects the novel does probe into aspects of African women's livelihood that can still be deemed as representations of their quest for self recognition. The work partially illuminates into the black woman's condition through what Cheryl Lange calls striving "to diminish gender roles and stereotypes" (2008:6). This has been largely achieved through historical inscriptions that give credence to how the process of political change in South Africa has affected African women. However, I have also observed that the author's vacillation over the female characters' sensibilities betrays the fact that as a male author he is creating something

outside of himself (Cheryl 2008: 6). Cheryl has discovered that many female critics believe that male authors write inadequately from the male perspective.

In *Seven Steps to Heaven*, one often gets the feeling that the writer shows lack of what Judith Kegan Gardiner(cited in Cheryl Lange, 2008: 3) describes as an “empathetic identification with his characters.” There are many instances in the novel where some female characters are either victims of sexist discourse or are denied discursive space even though they might be holding constructive viewpoints. Mrs. Tembe and her friend Mrs. Dube seem to have been denied the agency that is necessary for articulating their sensibilities. While it can be argued that some male characters are also vilified, I feel that very often they deserve it, yet they are allowed more space. Overall, as a work of deconstruction, the novel still deserves a lot of commendation. Particularly relevant to my analysis is its depiction of African women relatively more visible in a modern environment where their male counterparts have been reduced to drunkards, criminals and skirt chasers. I have also appreciated the transformative function of the novel through the depiction of homosexual relations, a strategy that dissects more veneers of cultural diversity, paving the way for further research into how this has affected binary gender relationships. .

Chapter Eight : Conclusions to the study

As enunciated in the introductory chapter of this thesis, the purpose of the study was to explore representations of cultural diversity in seven selected texts by African and African American writers. The aim was to uncover the nuances of women's diverse sensibilities through a sustained exploration of the selected works. In the process, I hoped to evaluate the works by using theoretical frameworks that serve as benchmarks for a more informed perception of female visibility.

The study proceeded to examine female cultural difference through thematic case study readings and analyses of female characters' portraits and individual responses to various patriarchal contexts. Such analyses took cognizance of the historical / cultural and geopolitical spaces within which each text is set. Eschewing the monolithic standpoints touted by some western feminist critics, the study stressed the multilayeredness of female sensibilities that have come to characterise decolonial deconstruction narrative. With respect to female genealogy, the study was also motivated by the understanding that "women do not experience together but at different times of existence" d'Almeida (in Flavia Worle, 2014). This brings to question the issue of "decontextualisation and recontextualisation of traditions in the face of contexts that are different" (d'Almeida (in Flavia Werle, 2014). Indeed all the texts studied demonstrate an acute awareness on the part of the authors to reconfigure female subjectivities in order to eradicate forms of oppression and marginalization that are inimical to social cohesion, economic development and moral integrity.

Restatement of research questions

Taking the above into consideration, it is appropriate that in pursuit of the argument on female diversity, I revisit the following questions raised in the introduction:

- What are the discursive motors of difference for the self recognition in the selected African and African- American novels?
- What, pace West (1990:94) are the politics of cultural difference at stake in the seven novels under investigation?
- What and where are the coordinates of genealogies of difference in the strategies of visibility in the novels?
- How have the authors depicted the women's responses to the institutional power structures in the postcolonial era?

The focus of the first question was to identify the rhetorical features that differentiate women in their individual quests for self recognition. In all the texts, the study revealed that individual women's sensibilities are mediated by cultural factors that largely derive from patriarchal conventions. Each showed that women are affected differently in various circumstances as they grapple for self definition within their unique contexts. In particular, the study discovered that women's articulation and agency, as they respond to their situations, are either constrained by societal conventions or as subjects, they emerge as serious contenders to patriarchal rule, in all its guises. The selected authors have captured women's discourse as a polyphonic feature, highlighting the fact that those who challenge racist, colonial and patriarchal conventions operate within the

decolonial epistemology that calls for a liberational agenda for women in the current political agenda.

In my analysis however, I have hastened to posit that while women who pursue self recognition are informed by a transcendental view of female subjectivity, they do not necessarily desire a life without men. I maintained that African women's quest for survival and visibility can be partly explained through the Africana -womanist perspective. But I also insisted that while this ideology is a powerful theoretical foundation, it does not provide all the answers to the complexities of visibility. This explains why I found it prudent to incorporate a conflation of Cornel West's theory of cultural difference, Bakhtin's dialogic imagination, Judith Butler's *Bodies that matter*, Henry Louis Gates Junior's theory of *The Signifying monkey*, among others. This corpus helped to illuminate some of the subtler aspects of female visibility. In fact, I argued that most of these critical thinkers share common views regarding the need to recognize the female voice.

In my analysis of Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, I discovered that while critics' observations of the writer's apparent shift towards a positive portrayal of African women, as seen through Beatrice, is commendable, I argued, it still leaves the majority of male characters in higher echelons of power. In the novel women are assigned the role of presiding over the naming ceremony of Amechina but for greater visibility they still need to participate in the public sphere, where men cling to the reins of power.

For answers to the second question I discovered that the politics of cultural difference revolve around women's perceptions of their circumstances, that is, their ability to

challenge patriarchal, racial and gender stereotypes. Aspects of the text that perform a decolonial deconstruction function of “trashing the monolithic homogenous in the name of diversity, multiplicity and heterogeneity” (West 1990: 94) were evident in the texts, though with varying degrees of intensity. While male writers under study circumspectly acknowledge the diversity of female experience, they often get too preoccupied with male representations who occlude female characters they have identified as pursuing a transcendental agenda.

More results in answer to the second question yielded interesting trends, mainly in form of discontinuities of visibility between and across generations. The texts revealed that indeed female characters are constructed in “contexts that are different for each woman and each generation” (d’Almeida 2004:3). Given that the texts are predicated on gendered narratives, it emerged that the suffocating experiences of antecedent female generations provide a justification for younger women to adopt revolutionary strategies for contesting conservative social systems. This observation wraps up my original emphases regarding varied and conditioned responses to patriarchy. Achebe, Hurston and Khumalo have all constructed intertextual narratives that decry the plight of women denied voice by constraints of illiteracy, poverty and gender biases that are prevalent in communities that sanction female subservience. This explains why Nnu Ego (*The Joys of Motherhood*), Jani’s mother (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*) and Lettie’s grandmother (*Bitches Brew*), only make token resistance or accept their deplorable conditions as God given. In view of this, I have come to the conclusion that these generational discontinuities are critical to women’s transformative goals. For novels that feature female characters migrating to the cities, the urban space, education and

entrepreneurship, constitute strong coordinates for female visibility. The two texts by Emecheta, and Khumalo's *Bitches Brew*, attest to women who struggle to cope with exigencies of city life, or use the urban space to elevate and redefine themselves, as in *Kehinde*.

Significantly, entrepreneurship and sisterhood solidarity emerged as the most powerful co-ordinates of black women's visibility. Nearly all texts elide possibilities of conflict among women themselves, pointing to positive results emerging from forging alliances, in some cases even among women of different classes. This seemingly minor literary flaw needs to be rectified by future authors on the same theme because research shows that women at times undermine each other. Interestingly, it is male writers such as Achebe and Khumalo who develop the said coordinates as potent vehicles for female emancipation.

The study also revealed that female cultural difference particularly manifests itself through the male gaze. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston presents a female protagonist who transforms towards self fulfillment through her experiences with three men who come into her life. Janie's fulfillment as a happy independent woman at the end of the novel is attributed to her taking agency, in her successive genderised political life with Killick, Joe, and Tea Cake.

In *Bitches Brew*, Khumalo's protagonist traverses an almost similar political path towards self definition. Ironically, though Lettie never consummates a relationship with her men, she lacks the transcendental capacity that Janie acquires.

My reading of the selected texts made me arrive at a conclusion that for African women authors, the battle for visibility within the male dominated social order requires a sense

of sisterhood solidarity, a rebellious disposition as well as a singular transcendental vision to break new ground.

Kehinde, in the eponymous novel does not only rely on her friend for material and moral support but also demonstrates an acute awareness of the suffocating effects that threaten her image and survival. Her condition in response to it mirrors that of Adaku (*The Joys of Motherhood*), and to some extent Beatrice (*Anthills of the Savannah*).

But the study also revealed some female characters who appear to succumb to obeisance to patriarchal conventions. In this category we find characters such as Mrs Tembe (*Seven Steps to Heaven*), Sis Jane (*Bitches Brew*) and Jani's grandmother (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*). From this scenario I concluded that older generations of African women generally lack the strength and vision to contest the dominant power structures. The older women appear more vulnerable to the "coloniality of power" that reduces them to repositories of traditions they did not authorize (Vambe and Khan, 2013). In *Seven Steps to Heaven*, Khumalo has attempted to depict images of women struggling to cope with conditions of the urban townships. As observed in chapter Six, the work alludes to female advancement through the portrait of the imperious Sis Joy and Mrs Dube, the school teacher. However the novel disappoints by its failure to develop the female roles in the main narratives. Mrs Dube is a mere fringe character, despite the higher status she holds vis a vis her husband who is a mere factory worker. Also, Mrs Tembe fails to prove her potential to live independently after the departure of her husband. Like her friend, she too falls into oblivion.

In all intents and purposes, the use of Cornel West's theory as an anchor to my study was justified, given the sophisticated timbre of its philosophical polemics. The theory has opened niche's that enabled me to incorporate the specifics of female diversity. West's strength lies in his bold articulations of the need to explore female subjectivity in its multiplicity. Such a framework enabled me to conclude that while West tries to incorporate the concerns of African Americans, such as those pertaining to racial prejudices and socioeconomic conditions, it is not sufficient to explain other matters that affect African women on the continent. However, my study revealed that, in keeping with the notion of diversity, black women are not always making creative responses because of cultural constraints that militate against creativity. This is the case with Nnu Ego (*The Joys of Motherhood*). Another dimension to female visibility is the plight of white women who engage in mixed marriages with black men. In *Scarlet Song*, Mirelle's creative response to Ousmane's proposal is doomed because of their respective parents' conservatism as well as Ousmane's betrayal and failure to support her. Mirelle finds herself in an awkward situation whereby her attempts to enlist collective insurgency through Soukeyna and Ali are always thwarted by the more relentless conservative Yaye Khady.

With respect to the third question, the following positive aspects emerged from my evaluation of the texts. I discovered that the coordinates of the genealogies of difference reside in communities of discourse between friends and an innate individual capacity to challenge the status quo. While nearly all the works address the first challenge, they do not necessarily sustain it to a point where it is able to upset the dominant power

structures. The discursive strategies emerging from the communities of discourse are often abandoned or taken piece meal due to lack of proper coordination among female subjects. Hence they often dissipate into lamentations over unresolved physical and psychic damages inflicted upon the victims. In other words the “trashing of hegemonic forces of domination (West, 1990), mainly happens on a domestic level. This challenge is evident in Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah*, where Beatrice’s visibility through education is not rewarded by a deserving post in Sam’s autocratic government. Most female characters lack the spirit of collective insurgency that would see them upstage the powers that control them. Ironically, some of the texts show how various such attempts are undermined by contradictions among women themselves. In *The Joys of Motherhood*, female talk between Nnu Ego, Mama Abbey and Ato does not yield any meaningful result for the suffering protagonist, who later dies of loneliness and despair by the roadside. Also in *Kehinde*, the protagonist’s effort at self recognition is paradoxically undermined by the male aunts who identify themselves more with their brother than fellow women. This scenario is replicated in different ways in *Bitches Brew*, *Seven Steps to Heaven* and *Scarlet Song*, where female characters fail to embrace collective strategies for subverting the wayward masculinities and other entrenched cultural structures that restrict women to the circumscribed role of the domestic domain.

Apart from *Kehinde*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Bitches Brew*, the texts studied still leave the female character without a transcendental vision of her self worth. Such is the case with Mirelle (*Scarlet Song*), Nnu Ego and Adankwo (*The Joys of Motherhood*), and Tembi, Mrs Tembe (*Seven Steps to Heaven*.)

As for the last question, the study has revealed that in each text the female characters adopt individual strategies for coping with their conditions. While some succumb to the oppressive dictates of patriarchy others take up agency to contest the power dynamics that silence them. In other instances women adopt survival strategies that threaten to disrupt the female ideal of female supportive structures.

Research findings in the context of theoretical foundations

The study was mainly guided by a steady focus on philosophical views garnered from critics of gender and female embodiment. Critical views from Cornel West, Mikhail Bakhtin, Judith Butler, Hudson –Weems’ Womanism, Leonardo and Porta and others who have developed their respective theoretical frameworks, were used as a canvass upon which to carry out a literary analysis and critical interpretation of the selected works. In my study I also made use of Henry Gates’s Junior’s theory of the Signifying Monkey. Though this theory does not dwell explicitly on female cultural difference, I found it relevant for analyzing African American women’s trope of “double voiced” utterances by female characters as they articulate their dissatisfaction with patriarchy. Significantly, this theory is also applicable to *Anthills of the Savannah*, *Kehinde* and *Bitches Brew*, as it helps to explain the writers’ use of folktales and other rhetorical devices linked to African traditions and oral art forms. In *Their Eyes were Watching God*, Hurston captures the hidden female discourse within African American folklore, to register her sensibilities. The insults and taunts directed at Jody are apt examples of how female discourse is used by writers, over generations, to subvert the language of slave masters and masculinity. It is also worth noting that this theory intersects with Bakhtin’s, with respect to social discourse.

As indicated in the introductory chapter of the research proposal, Cornel West's theory was critical to my thesis by directing me to issues of female diversity at stake. This theory, with its focus on plurality, context, historicity, and the inevitably shifting cultural terrain of female subjectivity, together with its insistence on creative responses, paved the way towards an informed way of looking at female experience. I therefore proceeded to ask the question: How creative are the female characters as they grapple with the notion of visibility and self definition in the seven selected texts? Emanating from my first question in the statement of the problem, this guiding enquiry was used to throw a spotlight on characters such as Ona, Adaku, Nnu Ego (*The Joys of Motherhood*), Kehinde, Ifeyinwa(*Kehinde*), Beatrice (*Anthills of the Savannah*), Jani (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*), among others.

Following West's theory, the authors have drawn characters that either exhibit transcendent traits by willingly seeking to subvert the male order or are inhibited from asserting themselves by the dominant patriarchal forces. I discovered that the texts also bring out an inherent contradiction to female liberation through the portrayal of women who parochially embrace the notion that they are maintaining social stability when they oppress fellow women.

When West (1990) commends the black women's movement and the Black Diaspora Womanist critique for making strides towards a new cultural politics of difference, he makes a strong point that ignites further debate on how black women on the African continent can benefit from such a political project on a narrower scale. It is with this in mind that my study has developed the same view by positing African women as reacting to the contingent scenarios of their own situations in specific socio cultural

environments. I have therefore discovered that images and sensibilities of African women on the continent are continually evolving, hence the meaning and forms of resistance and self definitions of women, in the Derridean sense, is never final.

I found evidence of this transformational praxis in *Bitches Brew*, *Anthills of the Savannah* and *Kehinde*. The writers of these texts exhibit a literary deconstructionist view envisaged by West (1990:105):

Black cultural workers must constitute and sustain discursive and institutional networks that deconstruct earlier modern black strategies for identity formation.

West's theory, together with Mukherjee's have also pointed to forms of female strategic agency necessary for more "multivalent and multidimensional responses that incorporate the complexity of diversity..." (105). While attempts have been made to demystify power relations in texts such as *Kehinde*, *Bitches Brew* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the issue of how effective such endeavours have been remains problematic.

Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia helped me to explore the "monologic utterances" as they point to "ideological discourses" that are identifiable in different historical developmental stages. I discovered that the women's heteroglots are mainly motored by the socio-cultural environment within which the character finds herself.

Leonardo and Porta (2011), other theorists upon whom my thesis hangs, are particularly relevant for their explication of Fanon's theory of violence. Though their theory is constructed around violence on the level of race relations, I distilled it to explore the endemic violence evident especially in some of the texts. I have used the theorists' appropriation of Fanon's notion of a

humanizing form of violence to deconstruct the patriarchal order. I have incorporated the critics' reference to Fanon's educative psychic violence to advance the argument, in some of my texts, that patriarchy works like colonialism, through its tendency to create a false consciousness in the female psyche. In *The Joys Of Motherhood*, Nnu Ego adores the ugly Nnaife for giving him several children, after a barren spell with Amatokwu, while her co-wife Adaku frees herself from the condition of poverty their marriage represents. Similarly, in *Bitches Brew*, Lettie and Sis Jane feel that life without a man is meaningless. For Mariama Ba, women can be caught up in a double consciousness, as in the case of Yaye Khady, who justifies her oppression of fellow women on a false sense of security in a patriarchal system that only guarantees female autonomy through old age, albeit within the narrow operational space of the kitchen.

Convergences and divergences in the configuration of female characters

Taken as a whole, my critical enquiry yielded positive results that ranged from empowering women to reconfigure themselves by negotiating male compatibilities or adopting survival strategies of a liberatory nature. This brought me to a deduction that in the genealogy of female difference, each woman has to weigh her relative advantages of adopting creative responses to patriarchal or other oppressive systems. The complexity of female cultural difference is evident through diverse character traits exhibited by female characters in the selected novels. My study identified three such categories of female characters in the novels. The first type constitutes those who are culturally gagged and practically do nothing to redeem themselves. This group generally belongs to the older generation such as Jani's grandmother, Letti's grandmother, Beatrice's mother, Mathilde de la valle (*Scarlet Song*) and Nnu Ego (*The Joys of Motherhood*). Within the second category we find women who refuse to align themselves with those who subscribe to the current ideologies. Yet another group constitutes younger women who adopt a radical stance to

subvert the status quo. Beatrice (*Anthills of the Savannah*), Kehinde (*Kehinde*), Taiwo and Kehinde (*The Joys of Motherhood*), have learned that it doesn't pay to remain silent. The third group constitutes those who emerge from a condition of invisibility to one of self assertion and liberation. Here we have characters such as Jani, Adaku, Kehinde and Lettie, women armed with education or entrepreneurship skills to challenge men in their erstwhile preserves.

Backed by the theorists upon which this study is anchored, I have underscored the fact that female visibility is not only multiply varied but characterized by an ever shifting trajectory of sensibilities that plot female subjectivities in unique circumstances that mediate their responses.

Challenges and the way forward

Through this research, I have confirmed that contemporary creative writers, who adopt a female lens to address challenges of female subjectivity, have been largely successful in igniting this ongoing debate. In so far as their narratives are informed by a consciousness to reinscribe the woman's silenced voice in the male dominated cultural space, they point to the need for deconstruction of patriarchy and other dominant power structures. Nearly all these texts make an attempt to locate female characters at the centre of discourse. I have argued that this strategy indeed constitutes a deconstructionist endeavor, as it enables the reader to understand and evaluate various forms of resistance and self assertion that female characters embrace in their attempts to free themselves. I have emphasized that because women's responses and sensibilities to patriarchy are different, they must be understood as such.

The texts I have studied however, have not been exhaustive in their depiction of female cultural difference. While each writer has explored the topic in his/her own way, I noted that more still has to be done in terms of devising other strategies for African women to define themselves.

While Hurston depicts an assertive female protagonist who speaks her mind through her complaints to her husbands, female characters in the other texts lack the boldness to directly confront their male oppressors head on. It seems the writers have not afforded them a voice strong enough to swing the power in their favour in a manner that breaks new ground.

One question that still has to be answered includes issues of lesbian relationships, whether it is a liberating or deviant gesture for women or not? Another question is whether female writers can adequately capture male sensibilities in an equally empathic manner. Other topics that can be researched on, which are related to but outside the scope of this study, include the oppression of men by women. A great deal has been said about the way African patriarchal traditions restrain men who are victims of spousal oppression. It has been said that they suffer quietly for fear of losing their sense of masculinity. In addition, there is also room for investigating the extent to which female empowerment in the public sphere has had an effect on their visibility and relationship in the family. In other words, how does role conflict affect female visibility sensibilities?

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