

# **Politics of the Family in Contemporary East and West African Women's Writing**

by  
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## **Declaration**

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Date: December, 2015

## **Dedication**

For the memory of my father, Castory Ng'umbi and my father-in-law, Everist Mlowe who died when I was away in the course of writing this thesis.

## **Abstract**

This study explores narratives by African women from East and West Africa. It specifically examines how twenty-first century African women writers from the selected regions represent the institution of family in a way that challenges their older generation writer counterparts and Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's theory of black womanism. While accentuating the various ways in which the family trope is revisited in contemporary narratives (using African feminism and post-colonial approaches) the study benefits from the argument that the changes in the institution of the family in contemporary women's writing should be understood in terms of the socio-cultural, political and economic milieu of these regions, Africa and the global context generally. One of the notable forces behind these changes (apart from colonialism) is the change in gender politics: the understanding of gender roles and responsibilities, as well as social, political and economic instabilities, emigration, refugeeism, and the diaspora.

Through a comparative approach, this study shows that contemporary women writers do not disavow history; rather they lean on the shoulders of their literary 'grandmothers' and 'mothers' to vocalise what is expected of the post-colonial nation. Their narratives appear to suggest a shift in approaching a literary text by emphasizing the importance of family in the making of the geo-political nation. In addition, they subvert traditional ways of looking at the gender dichotomy between men and women by embracing what Chielozona Eze calls a third-wave global feminism (a revisited form of black womanism advocated by Ogunyemi) which challenges patriarchal power at home and opens avenues where men and women compete equally and equitably in socio-cultural, economic and political struggles.

## Opsomming

In hierdie studie word die narratiewe van vroue skryfsters van Oos en Wes Afrika ondersoek. Daar word spesifiek gekyk na hoe vroue skryfsters afkomstig van die gekose gebiede in die een-en-twintigste eeu na die instelling van die gesin kyk en of dit verskil van die siening van die ouer generasie skrywers en van die teorie van Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi oor vrouwees. In die studie word daar gekyk na die verskeie wyses waarop daar in moderne narratiewe na die gesin gekyk word (deur om gebruik te maak van feministiese en postkolonistiese benaderings). Die argument is dat die veranderinge in die instelling van die gesin soos beskryf deur hierdie skryfsters, verstaan moet word in die lig van die sosio-kulturele, politiese en ekonomiese milieus van hierdie gebiede, Afrika en die globale konteks in die algemeen. Een van die hoofredes vir hierdie veranderinge (behalwe vir kolonialisme) is die veranderinge in gender politiek; the verstaan van gender rolle en verantwoordelikhede asook van sosiale, politieke en ekonomiese onstabiliteit en emigrasie, vlugtelingskap en diaspora.

Hierdie is 'n vergelykende benadering waarin daar bewys word dat eietydse skryfsters nie die geskiedenis ontken nie, maar leun op die skouers van hulle letterkundige “ouma’s” en “moeders” om te verduidelik wat van die postkolonistiese nasie verwag word. Dit blyk dat eietydse skryfsters in hulle narratiewe die belangrikheid van die gesin in die bou van die geopolitieke nasie beklemtoon. Hulle verander die tradisionele wyse waarop daar na die gender dichotomie tussen mans en vrouens gekyk word en steun wat Chielozona Eze die derde golf van globale feminisme ('n vorm van swart vrouwees wat deur Ogunyemi beskryf is) noem. Die patriargale mag in die huis word uitgedaag en daar word na wyses gesoek waarop vroue op gelyke voet met mans ops sosio-kulturele, ekonomiese en politieke gebiede kan meeding.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Family: Concepts, Theories, and Implications

#### Introduction

In *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*, Florence Stratton convincingly provides a comparative study between East and West Africa in terms of literary engagement in the politics of gender. Her analysis is based on the earlier generation of African writers such as Grace Ogot, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Chinua Achebe, Buchi Emecheta, Flora Nwapa, and Mariama Bâ, and how their narratives interrogate cultural and political issues in Africa. Focusing on the representation of gender in those earlier fictions, Stratton holds the view that the literary dialogue between men and women is of particular significance (11). She asserts: "African women's writing cannot be thoroughly appreciated unless it is juxtaposed to African men's literature" (12). Stratton's suggestion is well accepted by Gareth Griffiths, who dedicates his analysis to first-generation narratives by Achebe, Ngũgĩ, Ogot and Nwapa, focusing on the colonial impact on their writings as well as the emergence of women writers in the literary arena to challenge male dominance in fiction writing. While centring his analysis on themes, Griffiths considers the production of texts by these writers (Achebe, Ngũgĩ, Ogot and Nwapa) "involved the recording of local knowledges" (119) obtained from oral literature materials and traditionally based images. One of the notable reasons for similarity in style and thematic representation among these first-generation writers – apart from the "shared colonial and neo-colonial literary patronage structures" (119) – (as Griffiths puts it) is the influence of Alan Hill's Heinemann Educational Books that won a decisive victory in the battle for market control in both West and East Africa (117). Whereas Stratton and Griffiths dedicate their studies to earlier generation narratives authored by males and females from East and West Africa, my study is centred on contemporary female authored fictions from the two regions. In my reading of these selected narratives and under the influence of the African feminist and post-colonial perspectives these fictions offer, I agree with Elleke Boehmer who advises us to recognise the voice of women when they speak their minds. She writes: women "speak for one's place in the world. It is also to make one's own place and narrative, to tell the story of oneself, to create an identity" in the environment where socio-cultural, economic and political forces have inevitably necessitated changes in gender roles; family structure and family spaces (*Stories* 94).

Specifically, I explore the ways in which contemporary African female writers from the two regions reconfigure the institution of the family, bearing in mind the socio-cultural, political and economic changes Africa has undergone since socio-political unrest characterised newly-independent countries. I suggest that the changes in the representation of the institution of family in contemporary women's writing should be understood in terms of the socio-cultural, political and economic milieu of these regions, Africa and the global context generally. One of the most notable forces behind these changes – apart from colonialism – is the change in gender politics: the understanding of gender roles and responsibilities, as well as social, political and economic instabilities, emigration, refugeeism, and the diaspora.

In *Criticism and Ideology* Terry Eagleton wants literary critics to approach narratives with mode-of-production approach. He emphasises the interconnectedness between literature and modes-of-production and how the two concepts require critical engagement to uncover rational underpinnings. As Eagleton points out, “the text comes to be what it is because of the specific determinations of its mode of production” (48) that shows how social, political, and economic structures of the society are organised. According to Eagleton, “every literary text in some sense internalises its social relations of production, [...] encodes within itself its own ideology of how, by whom and for whom it was produced” (48). Thus Eagleton looks at literature as a critical discourse inseparable from society and the ideological stand of that particular society. By so doing, as Tony Bennett argues elsewhere, Eagleton echoes Karl Marx by subverting the “tendency to think of aesthetic representation as ultimately autonomous, separable from its cultural context and hence divorced from the social, ideological, and material matrix in which all art is produced and consumed” (Bennett 69)<sup>1</sup> and instead, examines the literary text in relation to the society from which the writer comes.

In this sense, literature becomes an object “of critical investigation” (Eagleton, *Theory* 24)<sup>2</sup> of the real life of a human being and his or her environment. It is through the ability to historicize and creatively imagine the world that Eagleton looks at a human being as a creature distinct from other animals, claiming: “the human animal [...] moves within a world of meaning [...] and inhabits a *world*, rather than just a physical space” to allude to the imaginative ability of human beings to create ‘worlds’ through words (25; italics in original).

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<sup>1</sup> Bennett has paraphrased this argument from Stephen Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*.

<sup>2</sup> Terry Eagleton, in *The Significance of Theory*, is here speaking of the importance of using theory in approaching a literary text.

In this regard, the world of words enables a literary critic to enter into conversation across socio-cultural, religious, political and economic spaces. Commenting on ‘contemporary’ African women writers, Tuzyline Allan et al. bear witness to my argument when they assert: “African women writers do not lose sight of the social, political, and economic conditions that influence their lives” (5) to amplify the interconnectedness between literature and society, as well as the institution of family as a basic social structure, as revisited in their narratives.

This study explores the narratives of East and West African women writers<sup>3</sup> to establish how they interrogate the socio-cultural, economic and political dynamics in the post-colonial state and how these changes affect the institution of the family. The texts to be explored are Grace Ogot’s *The Promised Land* (1966) [Kenya], Safi Abdi’s *Offspring of Paradise* (2003) [Somalia], Doreen Baingana’s *Tropical Fish* (2005) [Uganda], Maaza Mengiste’s *Beneath the Lion’s Gaze* (2010) [Ethiopia], Nadifa Mohamed’s *Black Mamba Boy* (2010) [Somalia], and Elieshi Lema’s *In the Belly of Dar es Salaam* (2011) [Tanzania] from East Africa. From West Africa I examine Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) [Nigeria], Diana Evans’s *26a* (2005) [Nigeria], Aminatta Forna’s *Ancestor Stones* (2006) [Sierra Leone], Sade Adeniran’s *Imagine This* (2007) [Nigeria], Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street* (2009) [Nigeria], Lola Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* (2010) [Nigeria] and Sefi Atta’s *Swallow* (2010) [Nigeria]. The location of these two regions (East and West) from which the texts have been selected is not limited by political and economic borders but is defined by the geographical setting. Even if I speak about East Africa, I have included narratives from the wider Eastern African region (Somalia and Ethiopia) in order to explore the representation of the family trope in these war-torn nations marked by migration, refugeeism and the reconstruction of so-called ‘failed’ states.

I focus on these authors because, firstly, they use the English language in their narratives;<sup>4</sup> secondly, their countries are not only home to established modern African writers, but also exemplify the type of socio-political system that Achille Mbembe in “Provisional Notes on

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<sup>3</sup> There is an imbalance in the selection of texts from these two regions. I have six texts from East Africa and seven texts from West Africa. This imbalance is deliberate because the focus is (apart from studying narratives written in English only) their representation of the institution of family.

<sup>4</sup> East and West African regions, like other regions, are very diverse in terms of language. The influence of the language of their former colonial masters as well as that of Arabs, notably English, French, Italian, and Arabic alongside native languages such as Kiswahili, Amharic, Gikuyu, Igbo, and many others is visible in narrative writing tradition.

the Postcolony” calls the “post-colony” (3), meaning societies emerging from the experience of colonialism and the violence which the colonial relationship involves; thirdly, because of the African feminist and post-colonial perspectives they offer in understanding the family; and, fourthly, being new-comers, their narratives have received less scholarly attention.<sup>5</sup> Thus, as a comparative study, I focus on how they imagine and negotiate the family space at both local and transnational levels.

I chiefly situate my study in the twenty-first century by reading narratives published between the 2000s and 2010s. However, I include the earlier generation of writers represented by Ogot and Emecheta to explore the various ways in which the family trope has been imagined across generations, nations, and regions. In my thesis, I use the term ‘contemporary’ to mean the new corpus of women writers who appeared in the literary arena between 2000s and 2010s. Pius Adesanmi and Chris Dunton – apart from introducing these contemporary authors to scholars’ attention – acknowledge the proliferation of narrative writing by twenty-first century Nigerians. They suggest reading these narratives with a generational approach to uncover the possibilities they offer for a systematic understanding of literary trends and currents which operate both synchronically and diachronically (13).

Indeed, Adesanmi and Dunton’s ideas resonate with James Ogude’s views on intellectual responsibility, whereby contemporary African writers feel responsible for registering their cultural awareness by continuing to replay what happened in the past or what Ogude calls the archive that we get from literary precursors such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, J. P. Clark Bekederemo, Amos Tutuola, Flora Nwapa, Mariama Bâ, and Alex La Guma.<sup>6</sup> These selected writers have variously been categorised as third and fourth generation of African writers.<sup>7</sup> Certainly, it is because of the period in which these writers were born (1960s to

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<sup>5</sup> The phrase “less widely covered in literary scholarship” is in this study used to demonstrate that these ‘new-comers’ have not been analysed as widely in literary studies as their counterparts of 1966 and 1979. This also justifies why (in my study) I do not include contemporary writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Helen Oyeyemi and Calixthe Beyala because their narratives (comparatively) have received more critical attention to the extent of making these authors ‘popular’ in scholarship cycles.

<sup>6</sup> A seminar presentation by Ogude on “Chinua Achebe and His Legacy: Africa’s Man Booker International Winner” presented at University of Cape Town on 25<sup>th</sup> February, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> For example, Jane Bryce and Shalini Nadaswaran in different contexts, define these contemporary writers as third-generation. Obi Nwakanma, in her discussion of contemporary Nigerian writers, puts together Maik Nwosu whose novel *Invisible Chapters* was published in 1999, Maxim Uzoatu Uzo whose novel *The Missing Link* was published in 1996 and other writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chris Abani, Sefi Atta whose novels were published in 2000s. In her general statement, Nwakanma says these writers represent the third and fourth generation of Nigerian writers. See also “‘Half and Half Children’: Third-generation Women Writers and the New Nigerian Novel” by Bryce, “Rethinking Family Relationships in Third-Generation

1980s), their difference in styles of writing and thematic issues, as well as their centrality in reiterating a critique of the post-colonial nation that scholars have variously labelled them children of the post-colony, third and fourth generation of writers.<sup>8</sup>

My use of the word ‘writing’ in the title of my thesis is influenced by Della Pollock who defines writing as a performance that operates metaphorically to render absence present and to bring the reader into contact with ‘other-worlds’ (80). Features which Pollock identifies in writing include metonymy where writing recognises the extent to which writing itself displaces, even effaces ‘others’ and ‘other-worlds’ with its partial, opaque representations of them, not only revealing truths, meanings, events, ‘objects,’ but also often obscuring them in the very act of writing (83). It is within metonymic writing that Pollock sees the “longing for a lost subject/object, for a subject/object that has disappeared into history or time” (84). Other features of writing Pollock shares with us are subjectivity where there is a “dynamic engagement of a contingent and contiguous relation between the writer and his/her subject(s), subject-selves, and or/reader(s)” (86) as well as the citational feature that “figures writing as rewriting, as the repetition of given discursive forms” (92) to signify the critic’s role of dissecting and synthesising ideas from the given text.

From Pollock’s observation, one sees how writing – in terms of its performability – is able to embody philosophical, literary and historical engagements and one that, unlike a novel, does not limit the narrative in terms of its length. (Here I am referring to Ian Watt’s definition of a novel that it must have a certain length to distinguish it from a short story and novella).<sup>9</sup> This gives me an opportunity to combine three sub-genres (short story, novella and novel) in the selected narratives. Using Pollock’s features of writing, I explore (i) how the selected writings portray the parallelism between state and familial politics and (ii) how the authors imaginatively rewrite history by uncovering what Pollock calls a loss or longing for a lost subject/object by placing the institution of family centrally in the negotiation between history and reality. But before I go further, let me define the concept of ‘family’ as I use it in this study.

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Nigerian Women’s Fiction” by Nadaswaran and “Metonymic Eruptions: Igbo Novelists, the Narrative of the Nation, and the New Developments in the Contemporary Nigerian Novel” by Nwakanma.

<sup>8</sup> Abdourahman Ali Waberi, as quoted by Adesanmi and Dunton, regards these writers as “les enfants des postcolonie” [‘children of the postcolony’], whereas Adesanmi and Dunton, and Jane Bryce regard them as third generation writers.

<sup>9</sup> See also *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* by Ian Watt for more discussion on the novel genre.

## Family and its Literary Implication

In an attempt to define the concept of ‘family,’ the anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski argues that a family “is the group constituted by husband, wife, and their children” (132). He further contends that a family is a “tribal unit” (136) which determines the general structure and organisation of the society. On the other hand in the words of John Mbiti, a theologian and scholar of African philosophy, ‘family’ in the African context, “has a much wider circle of members than the word suggests in Europe or North America.” Mbiti argues that “in traditional society, the family includes children, parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, brothers and sisters who have their own children, and other immediate relatives” (*Philosophy* 106), as well as the living and deceased blood-related members. In this regard context is vital. Whereas Mbiti defines family in relation to Africa, Malinowski defines family in relation to European and American experience, despite both defining it on the basis of blood relationship.

On the other hand, the gender and cultural studies scholar Anne McClintock considers the concept of ‘family’ as a metaphor for nation. According to McClintock, a nation consists of different people with different cultural backgrounds who come to share the same experience and identity or constitute what Benedict Anderson calls ‘imagined communities.’ These people, regardless of their differences, perceive themselves as children of the same family and “speak of nations as ‘motherlands’ and ‘fatherlands’” (McClintock 63) to imply familial relationships. Whereas Malinowski and Mbiti read family in terms of nuclear and extended family respectively, McClintock allegorises it into nation.

Stratton looks at family from a literary perspective in relation to the way it is represented in African literature. She uses the Senghorian notion of ‘the mother Africa trope’ to justify the representation of women as allegories for nations in male-authored fictions. Using examples from Okot p’Bitek’s *Song of Lawino* and Ayi Kwei Armah’s ‘An African Fable’, Stratton contends that these writers “analogize [a] woman to the heritage of African values, an unchanging African essence” (41). This – through the representation of the woman and mother figure trope – suggests the centrality of the family in the making of the nation. Another group of African writers such as Nuruddin Farah in *From a Crooked Rib*, Mongo Beti in *Perpetua and the Habit of Unhappiness* and Wole Soyinka in *Season of Anomy*, according to Stratton, have “revise[d] the Senghorian analogy, for women now serve as an index of the state of the nation” (41). I find Stratton’s ideas useful here in discussing the



institution of family. I consider her analysis to be in line with McClintock's theorising of the nation-family metaphor whereby the mother-figure predominates in the making of the nation. Susan Andrade argues convincingly, writing on contemporary female writers, that "the family [in their writings] becomes the nation writ small" (*Writ* 21) to mean that the family is an allegory for nation. Therefore, Stratton implicitly discusses the mother trope as a microcosm of the household family and the nation as a whole.

Grace Musila takes the debate on the concept of 'family' further by regarding three sets of familial spaces: the literal family in the sense of blood relations, nation-families as imagined communities of people bound together by an imagined collective identity, and literary families in the sense of the canonical and artistic/cultural communities (3). Whereas Musila only focuses on the short story format, I use her definition to examine the selected narratives in order to explore how contemporary African women writers from the selected regions portray the family trope in their narratives in a way that enables readers to understand the extent to which the family space is reconfigured and how – in the course of reconfiguring it – these texts challenge Ogunyemi's theory of African womanism. As Naomi Nkealah would argue under the auspices of African feminisms, the selected writers aim at modifying culture as it affects women in different societies. They want to adapt to international human rights standards which would permit/liberate/empower women to function freely within a limitless space, without trespassing on forbidden enclaves (Nkealah 139).

The origin of family is not detached from the history of gender. Research on the origin of human beings and their engagement in production indicates an organisational structure that is based on hierarchy. Arguing from a sociological perspective, Gary Lee contends that "the differentiation between the sexes in terms of socially defined behavioural expectations coincided with the origin of the family" (62). He argues that "men have been assigned protective and productive tasks, and women domestic and child-care responsibilities, since the earliest periods of the existence of mankind" (62-63), but gender sensitisation and awareness in the move towards equal rights has made this fix void and "[it is] no longer necessary" (63).

Arguing along similar lines as Lee, anthropologist Richard Leakey ponders the division of labour among the majority of hunter-gatherer societies. He views these societies as strongly attached to a certain organisation and suggests that they are born from their social organisations whereby "males [were] responsible for hunting and females for gathering plant



foods” (60). This historical truism is also evidenced in the work of anatomist and human biologist Phillip Tobias. In his memoir *Into the Past: A Memoir*, Tobias discusses what he discovered on the origins of humankind as “hunters and gatherers evolved to pastoralists, agriculturalists and urbanites.” In his study, Tobias concludes that “the life-ways even formed a major basis of the adaptability of the peoples to their environments” (65). In the study of human remains, Tobias pinpoints the physiological differences that enable him to identify the origin of humankind not only by age, but also gender and ethnicity (84). This claim illustrates how social organisation and structure were based on gender dynamics. Therefore, the history of family is the history of gender power relations and the two concepts (family and gender) cannot be studied in isolation. From this point of view, the feminine gender was regarded as inferior compared to its masculine counterpart. Indeed, it is through such a gender-biased division of labour that feminists – as I discuss in the section below – saw the need to stand firm to fight against all forms of oppression against women, and literature emerged as one of the platforms to campaign for women’s liberation.

### **Theoretical Underpinnings and Point of Departure**

This study is informed by African feminisms and post-colonial theory, specifically in analysing how the narratives critique Chikwenye Ogunyemi’s views on African womanism and Elleke Boehmer’s view of socio-cultural, political and economic changes and their impact on private and public spaces. I describe how African feminists lay the foundation for approaching a text ‘genuinely’ by deliveating some of the African cultures that distinguish Africans from the rest of the world or from other ‘feminisms.’ Naomi Nkealah offers an intriguing observation that the labels of feminism and womanism are political. They both “strive for the total liberation of women from religious and socio-cultural institutions that relegate women to the periphery of existence” (138). Thus the main aim of the movement, be it feminism or womanism, is to fight for women’s “dignity and respect, not as a favour but as a matter of giving honour where honour is due” (135). It is through this idea of African feminisms as an inclusive term that I explore how contemporary narratives speak to Nnaemeka’s African feminist strand of Nego-feminism by suggesting negotiation and compromise in power relations between men and women. In addition, I acknowledge Boehmer’s interrogation of the intersection between the post-colonial and feminism. Thus for the purpose of this study, I regard Boehmer as a post-colonial feminist scholar. I use these two approaches because of the way they explore and represent women’s lives: their struggle

against patriarchy, racism and economic dependence, and how the disintegration of the post-colonial state in Africa – socio-economic and political instability, exile, migration and emigration – offers a new awareness of familial structures and spaces. Moreover, both of these discourses (that is, African feminisms and post-colonialism) are predominantly political, concerning themselves with the struggle against oppression and injustice; rejecting the established hierarchical patriarchal system, and denying the supposed supremacy of masculine power and authority.

Feminism as a political movement emerged in the 1960s to fight for the rights of women. The concern of the movement was to subvert patriarchal control and domination over women and to discourage the traditional values that were oppressive to women and which regarded women's issues as peripheral [see Ogundipe-Leslie (1994), Rivkin and Ryan (2004), Rubin (2004), and Irigaray (2004)]. Rivkin and Ryan further argue that since the 1970s, the liberal and radical feminists have not been in agreement as to what should be the common goal among feminists. Although the radical feminists accepted the idea that historically, gender is created by culture and can be subverted, the liberals embraced the idea that gender reflects a natural differentiation between men and women. This debate resulted in feminisms rather than feminism, say Rivkin and Ryan (766). Knowing these dynamics in the issue of feminism, African feminists sought to formulate their own feminist approach that is independent of Western and African-American feminism.<sup>10</sup> Ogunyemi reminds us of this when she says:

many black female novelists writing in English have understandably not allied themselves with radical white feminists; rather, they have explored the gamut of other positions and produced an exciting, fluid corpus that defies rigid categorization. (“Womanism” 63-64)

It is along these lines that Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie warns Africans to read works by white feminists carefully and with discrimination and, in the final analysis, they “must theorize their own feminisms” (208) or what she calls ‘recreating ourselves.’ In the words of

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<sup>10</sup> The demands of white Western and African-American feminists are often distinct from those of black women feminists in Africa. The issues of race and homosexuality are among the parameters that isolate black women feminists from the pool of feminism. Whereas white Western feminists and African-American feminists, in their articulation of feminist ideas, accept homosexuality, some African women feminists bring to the fore the concerns of race and do not accept homosexuality. See also *The Dynamics of African Feminism: Defining and Classifying African Feminist Literatures* by Arndt, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* by Boehmer, and “Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English” by Ogunyemi.

Ogunyemi, this self recreation enables African women to “historicize [their] circumstances and focalize [their] politics” (*Wo/Man* 116) in order to understand the essence and how the politics of identity and space are played out, where members negotiate the challenges of proximity and distance, and where notions of harmony and peace can be completely disrupted by war and migration. Therefore, Ogunyemi’s African womanism can be read as a counter-discourse to Western and African-American feminism. As Ogunyemi points out, African womanism as an ideology “is necessitated by African women’s inclusive, mother-centered ideology, with its focus on caring – familial, communal, national, and international” (*Wo/Man* 114). The inclusive nature of the ideology implies the involvement of men as an integral part in women’s struggle in order to “prevent the palaver from generating into a monologue or an unproductive shouting match – and to avoid a stalemate over naming and renaming with their postcolonial implications” (*Wo/Man* 117). Other oppressive sites that African womanism deals with, according to Ogunyemi, include “totalitarianism, militarism, ethnicism, (post)colonialism, poverty, racism, and religious fundamentalism [that] prevent [African women] from having a space of [their] own, in which to recuperate in order to join the international discourse from a position of strength” (*Wo/Man* 114). While these scenarios make one think of the depiction of women’s oppression in narratives such as Nawal El Saadawi’s *Woman at Point Zero* (1973) from Egypt, Anthonia Kalu’s *Broken Lives and Other Stories* (2003) from Nigeria, Safi Abdi’s *Offspring of Paradise* (2003) from Somalia, and Maaza Mengiste’s *Beneath the Lion’s Gaze* (2010) from Ethiopia, Ogunyemi wants us to draw our attention to African tradition and/or cultural values as well as the political and economic environment that influence African women’s lives. Using Nigeria as an example, – in the course of making Africa a better space that respects equality and equity between men and women – Ogunyemi foregrounds issues of corruption, greed, power mongering, civil war, military aggression as central aspects to any Nigerian theorising about Africa in general and African women in particular (*Wo/Man* 112).

However, one wonders about the coincidental reformulation of the womanism theory by Ogunyemi and Alice Walker within the same year, 1985. For Walker, as she explicitly defines ‘womanism’ in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens*, is the opposite of ‘girlish,’ that is, frivolous, irresponsible, not serious. Instead, the concept of ‘womanism’ from the black folk expression of mothers to female children, implies outrageousness, audaciousness, courageousness, wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered ‘good’ for one, and interested in grown up (xi). Walker considers a womanist as someone “who loves

other women, sexually and/or nonsexually, appreciates and prefers women's culture, women's emotional flexibility, [...] and women's strength and sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually" (xi). While Ogunyemi would agree with most of Walker's assumptions about the theory, she will differ from her on the question of homosexuality as not constituting what she calls 'genuine' African tradition and cultural values. Nevertheless, Ogunyemi makes it clear that she arrived at the term 'womanism' independently and was pleasantly surprised to discover that her notion of its meaning overlaps with Walker's (72). Susan Arndt posits that, in her earlier research Ogunyemi used the term 'womanism' without a modifier—, however, — in her later publications she began speaking of 'African womanism' to distinguish her concept of 'womanism' from Walker's idea.

The proponents of the African womanism philosophy, as Ogunyemi would call it, in contrast to their white Western and African-American counterparts, have embarked on a new way of looking at feminism by negotiating other tenets that are typically addressed from one perspective of black women. These tenets include race, sex, culture, nationality, economic and political considerations and the "African obsession to have children" (Ogunyemi's "Womanism" 64 and *Palava* 133). In her book *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, Boehmer situates the black woman's struggle in the colonial context, asserting: "colonial women were, as it is called, doubly or triply marginalized. That is to say, they were disadvantaged on the grounds not only of gender, but also of race, social class, and, in some cases, religion and caste" (224). Thus, African women, as Stratton notes, "were subjected to interlocking forms of oppression: to the racism of colonialism and to indigenous and foreign structures of male domination" (7). The isolation of black African women from Western and African-Americans in their articulation of feminist ideas is evident in the narrative fictions of black African women writers. These writers, as I argue in this study, situate the family trope as a centre where gender roles are imagined, negotiated, and exercised in a way that differentiates African women from black and white Western women and African Americans. Examples include the writings of Nwapa, Ogot, Emecheta, Bâ, Aidoo, Head and Dangarembga.

The notion of the 'post-colonial' has excited the academy and generated extensive critical engagement, not only amongst literary scholars but also in various other disciplines. Crawford Young poses an intriguing question as to why most contemporary scholarship in Africa is geared towards interrogating the African post-colonial condition rather than its post-

independence counterpart. In his discussion, he considers the difference between the two concepts as a matter of academic and semantic dimensions. For him, the post-colonial state is much preferred because of the “silent incorporation of many defining attributes of the colonial state into its post-independence successor” (24). Young’s ideas echo Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin’s thought, which challenges historians, economists and political theorists who treat post-colonial states interchangeably with post-independent ones. As Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin write,

independence may come to be seen as superficial [...] because the dominance of the idea of the European concept of the nation in the minds of those who led the struggle for independence often meant that the new post-colonial states were closely modelled on that of the former European powers. (193)

These scholars appear to suggest that the post-colonial label will continue being the defining feature of the African states because, in the words of Mbembe, “the postcolonial regimes have not invented what they know of government from scratch” (*On the Postcolony* 24).

It is in terms of these post-colonial and post-independence contradictions that Ania Loomba sees the need for ‘situating’ the post-colonial notion by emphasising the prefix ‘post’ which linguistically means ‘aftermath.’ Although Loomba makes us think of the 1960s when most of the African countries marked their political independence as the beginning of the post-colonial state, she views ‘post’ or ‘aftermath’ in two senses: temporal, that is coming after, and ideological, as in supplanting (1103). For Loomba, the ideological nature manifested in the ‘post’ notion is contestable and is the one that implies that “the inequities of colonial rule have not been erased” (1103).

It is, therefore, plausible to argue that, since the post-colonial state is a male construct – as Boehmer argues elsewhere – inherited from their former colonial powers, it is time women emerged in the public space and challenged male power dominance through their narratives. Hernandez, Dongala, Jolaosha and Serafin view these contemporary writers as the ones who look unblinkingly at the challenges they confront while creating visions of a more positive future by using writing as their witness to oppression (3). Exemplified by the proliferation of women writers from the early 1980s, these writers imaginatively claim access to the public sphere by going against the hegemonic line by telling their stories, replacing the unplaced

space in the national drama with the concrete figures, bodies and voices of ‘daughters’ (Boehmer, *Stories* 35). They use their writing as a podium for challenging the post-colonial state and negotiate power with their male counterparts. By using African feminisms and post-colonial approaches, I examine how contemporary female writers through their narratives – unlike their literary ‘grandmothers,’ and ‘mothers’ – embrace feminism without apology by telling of bodies in pain and the way they provoke pertinent ethical questions<sup>11</sup> in an attempt to subvert all forms of female subjecthood that used the institution of the family. As Chielozona Eze points out, these writers are “historically informed about their place in their struggle to right the wrongs done to women’s bodies in their cultures” (89). To reach this goal, I examine the selected narratives by using close reading, contextual and thematic analytical methods as discussed in the section below.

### **Research Design and Methodology**

My study uses a comparative methodology that entails the consideration of more than one phenomenon to discover the similarities and differences in representation or to observe a certain phenomenon across time and space. I deploy this method in analysing selected female writing in order to examine the portrayal of family structure and space across generations, nations and regions. Since the orientation of my study foregrounds textual analysis, I use close reading, contextual and thematic methods. The close reading method involves paying close attention to the text itself without considering anything beyond the text, as under New Criticism (as applied in the United States) or practical criticism (as applied in the United Kingdom). The aim of this close reading is to elucidate the ways “literature embodies or concretely enacts universal truth” (Rivkin and Ryan 6) through the deployment of language that is interpreted denotatively and connotatively. As formalists such as Boris Eichenbaum, Victor Shklovsky, and Cleanth Brooks would argue, literary language is different from ordinary spoken language. In other words, literary language is defamiliarised as it is made strange. Therefore, through close reading, I read the selected narratives to get the meanings of words in the text and their implications in terms of symbolic and metaphorical embodiments. However, reliance on close reading alone in textual analysis detaches the text from the society. Therefore, I suggest, close reading to be the first step in approaching a literary text with the aim of appreciating the literary language and its symbolic and metaphorical

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<sup>11</sup> Eze speaks of what he calls a rebirth of African feminism among contemporary female writers, citing the example of Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street*.

embodiments then it has to be followed by contextual and thematic approaches so as to recognise the interaction between the text and the society.

Since my study is deliberately situated in a relationship between literature and society, I find it useful to read the selected narratives beyond the text itself by including the sphere of reference and “meaningful interaction with [the writer’s] environment” (120)<sup>12</sup> from which creative writers get material for their literary works. In this regard, I combine the strengths of close reading with the insights that come of associating text with context. Felski’s work, “Context Stinks,” serves as an inspiration and guidance on how to look at context in the text. According to Felski, context is an ampler, more expansive reference point that invariably trumps the claims of the individual text, knowing it far better than it can ever know itself (574). However, she cautions against over-contextualising the text so much that it loses its literary aesthetics and gets ‘boxed’ in history. Eagleton appears to share a similar view with Felski when he discusses the relationship between history, ideology and text. For Eagleton, the “formal relation between criticism and text resembles the relation between the tribal bard and the king to whom he recounts historical victories, or the relation between bourgeois political economist and capitalist manufacturer” (*Criticism* 18) to indicate how a literary text benefits from socio-economic, political and cultural contexts. Thus, a careful mind is required to filter and interrogate how fiction and history speak to each other in the text. Boehmer argues along similar lines that “many more postcolonial narratives [...] have plots which are based on history” (*Colonial* 195). This is why in this study – before engaging in a critical analysis of each text – I begin by describing the background of the author followed by a summary of the narrative to introduce the context and to show how history and fiction shape each other. I do so by picking some of the author’s special life events such as year of birth, place of birth, education level and her publications. For the summary of the narrative, I highlight what the story is about, who is the protagonist of the story, what he/she does, when, how, and why. I also highlight the main theme of the narrative and what I consider the strongest and weakest formal features of the story related specifically to my reading of ‘family’.

The two methods (close reading and contextual analysis) in this study are geared towards thematic analysis. They act as mechanisms by which to interrogate the portrayal of theme(s)

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<sup>12</sup> Carole Davies and Anne Graves speak of how a woman writer should go about theorising gender and feminist ideas in more realistic terms in order to show the interplay between the writer and her society which she represents. See also *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature* by Davies and Graves.



or what Ngũgĩ in *Writers in Politics* calls the conscious acts of men in society that include the tensions, conflicts and contradictions at the heart of a community's being and process of becoming (5). Guided by the topic – the portrayal of family – I explore the thematic representation of the familial structure and space or “the configuration of the boundaries that define familial relations” (Cazenave 88)<sup>13</sup> in the selected narratives by considering the characters, their characterisation and the images and symbols used in the writing and how they delineate the familial relationship. I examine how these writers foreground the theme of family by portraying women challenging men in their families and how they reconfigure the institution of family to suit the twenty-first century Africans who embrace feminisms in a different way from their literary precursors.

### **Chapter Breakdown**

This thesis includes an introduction and a conclusion and five core chapters. In each chapter I focus on various thematic concerns in two to three primary texts. These texts are chosen according to their similarities in terms of portraying certain aspects of the familial relationship. Chapter One situates the study by giving its rationale, definition of concepts, theoretical framework and methodology.

In Chapter Two, I begin my analysis of primary texts by exploring how the narratives of the older generation of African female writers depict familial structure and space. Focusing on Ogot's *The Promised Land* and Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, I interrogate how the traditional family space begins to demonstrate the need for change due to socio-cultural and economic pressures.

Chapter Three examines the portrayal of the family trope in Forna's *Ancestor Stones* and Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. It explores how the two narratives depict the family space as a springboard for gender role negotiation.

Chapter Four explores the parent-child relationship in the context of family disintegration and analyses how children create a new space – what I call a liminal space – to renegotiate the family configuration. In this chapter, I read Baingana's *Tropical Fish*, Evans's *26a* and

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<sup>13</sup> See *Rebellious Women: The New Generation of Female African Novelists* by Cazenave for more discussion on how women become involved in the struggle to subvert patriarchal power.



Adeniran's *Imagine This* to examine the precariousness of the host family and explore how protagonists fail to reunify their families and end up living in a liminal space.

Chapter Five focuses on marginalised groups of children and women – voices from the fringe of urban society such as 'street children,' drug dealers and prostitutes in Lema's *In the Belly of Dar es Salaam*, Atta's *Swallow* and Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*. I explore the portrayal of characters who are victims of economic and political pressures that force them to be not only migrants but also to negotiate other ways to survive by forming affilial relationships to offset the loss of the biological family.

Chapter Six discusses the family-nation metaphor by interrogating how families play a vital role in peace-building and reforming nations torn by wars. I situate this chapter in Somalia and Ethiopia by looking at Mohamed's *Black Mamba Boy*, Abdi's *Offspring of Paradise* and Mengiste's *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*.

Chapter Seven summarises the study by giving the theoretical and methodological contribution of the project and points the way forward to further research.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Politics of Intimacy: The Family Antecedent

#### Introduction

This chapter reads the selected narratives from earlier generations of African women writers from East and West Africa in relation to how they engage in evocations of family and traditional values. It discusses the representation of forms of traditional families and how they come under pressure to change due to socio-cultural and economic changes. The chapter focuses on Ogot's *The Promised Land* and Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* to explore how the selected writings depict the family trope: close personal relationships and power struggles within the family, and how the family is portrayed as one of the central pillars in defining gender roles, power negotiation and conformity, victimhood, wifhood, subjugation, and space for ideas about women's liberation. I suggest that the family space in the selected narratives emerges as a two-edged sword: first, as a powerful tool for oppressing women through the institution of wifhood and motherhood and, second, as a space for resistance to such oppression and for the formulation of liberating ideas. By 'politics of intimacy' I mean a close relationship among family members in the household, whereas 'family antecedent' denotes the earlier forms of family. These phrases ('politics of intimacy' and 'family antecedent') provide an opportunity to explore how the older generation of African women writers represent the family trope in their writings and how they help readers to understand the extent to which the family trope is reconfigured in contemporary writings.

In literary texts, the portrayal of family has, implicitly, been a concern of many African writers. For example, the images of father, mother and children (and the attendant features such as breast-feeding, tenderness, solace, and sympathy) are represented in African revolutionary poems<sup>14</sup> such as: Léopold Sedar Senghor's 'Prayer to Masks', Yambo Ouloguem's 'Dear Husband,' and Dennis Brutus's 'Dear Wonderful Woman.' These poems imply the family trope where Africa as a geo-political space is portrayed as feminine, encompassed by the all-embracing Mother Trope; the ability to bear and nurture children. The primacy of family is also evident in the canonical writings of modern African writers such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *Arrow of God* (1964), Flora Nwapa's

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<sup>14</sup> In the quest for change of power and political organisational structures during colonial times and immediately after independence in some African countries, pan-Africanists used different methods of conscientising and creating a sense of belonging for Africans. Poems were among the key weapons used to instil a sense of homeliness and originality.

*Efuru* (1966), Guillaume Oyono-Mbia's *Three Suitors One Husband* (1975), Ousmane Sembène's *Xala* (1976), Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* (1980) and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* (1967). These writers variously represent family as a domestic space for patriarchal orientation, a symbol of power and pride in preserving traditional values, and a focal point for the liberation struggle against colonialism.

Ogot and Emecheta, apart from belonging to different generations,<sup>15</sup> provide narratives that speak to each other in an interesting way, particularly on the interplay between traditional and modern ways of life and their impact on the family space. Speaking of generations of writers and how the socio-political and economic conditions shape narratives, Adesanmi and Dunton believe the first and second generation of African writers were influenced by colonialism, independence and subsequent post-independence disillusionment and stasis because most of them were born when the colonial event was in full force (14). However, in this chapter I argue that Ogot and Emecheta in their narratives acknowledge the colonial event by portraying the second World War and its impact on Africa, but their texts juxtapose traditional and modern societies for the purpose (as Ogot would argue) of achieving traditional values (for example, Ogot's) and challenging them as being oppressive to women (for example, Emecheta's).

Their narratives provide profound ideas pertaining to defining the family trope in literary context and from feminist and post-colonial perspectives. Although both narratives deal with the family trope, I concentrate on how they differ in their depiction of the family. I discuss how Ogot's *The Promised Land* speaks about the traditional family structure and space: (i) how the family institution is used as a space for oppressing women, and the female characters' loyalty to the traditional as well as paternal systems and (ii) how the narrative echoes family dynamics and the desire for wealth and locates the land question as central to its discussion. I also engage with Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* to explore how the narrative takes a step further than Ogot's and how Emecheta's female characters use the family trope as a space for the formulation of women's liberating ideas. Based on their

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<sup>15</sup> Adesanmi and Dunton, in their discussion of third generation Nigerian writers, categorise Nwapa who wrote during the same period as Ogot, as part of the first generation of African women writers, while Emecheta belongs to the second generation. See also *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* by Stratton, *Urban Obsessions Urban Fears: The Postcolonial Kenyan Novel* by Kurtz and *The Dynamics of African Feminism: Defining and Classifying African Feminist Literatures* by Arndt for more discussion on Ogot's *The Promised Land* as the first Anglophone African narrative by a woman and, together with Nwapa's *Efuru*, who are thus categorised as first-generation African women writers.

differences in the portrayal of the family institution, I divide this chapter into two sections. Section one focuses on *The Promised Land* and section two on *The Joys of Motherhood*.

### **Traditional Familial Structure and Space in *The Promised Land* (1966)**

Grace Ogot was born in 1930 in the Nyanza district of Kenya. After her schooling, she trained as a nurse and worked in Kenya, Uganda and the United Kingdom. Later she was elected to the Kenyan parliament and subsequently served as an Assistant Minister for Culture and Social Services. *The Promised Land* was her first novel. As one of Kenya's most prolific female writers, she has also published collections of short stories – 'The Rain Came' (1963) and 'Ward Nine' (1964) – as well as the novels *Land Without Thunder* (1968), *The Other Woman* (1976), *The Island of Tears* (1980), *The Graduate* (1980) and *The Strange Bride* (1989). *The Promised Land* is a story about emigration and its tragedies in a traditional context. It unfolds through Ochola, the protagonist, who migrates from Nyanza (an area around the Kenyan side of Lake Victoria) to Tanganyika in search of wealth. As a way of creating his 'home' independently from his parents, Ochola, immediately after marrying Nyapol, sees the need for settling in 'the promised land,' Tanganyika (now Tanzania), where he can prosper economically. The central theme of the narrative is emigration and family dynamics. Ogot captures this theme in her narrative by depicting contrasting characters: those who are bitter on the disruption of the traditional family bonds such as Ochola's father, Nyapol and the community members, and the ones who disregard the continuity of family bonds such as Ochola. However, the plot of the narrative is so linear and rich with details concerning traditions that the narrative emerges as more anthropological than fiction.

In discussing the portrayal of the family trope in an African traditional context, I focus on female characters' submissiveness to their patriarchal counterparts and how men assume the role of decision-makers in the family. The 'traditional familial structure and space,' as I discuss in this chapter, refers to the pre-colonial and rural-based type of life. In this section, I argue against Evan Mwangi, who contends that *The Promised Land* dismantles patriarchy through what he calls "folkloristic self-praise" (29) and counter Stratton's argument that the novel "undermines patriarchal ideology by means of a reversal of the initial terms of the sexual allegory" (62). Rather, I read *The Promised Land* by focusing on the institution of family and delineating how it is shown to play a central role in undermining women in favour of men. Ogot's deployment of folkloristic materials in her narrative, as Mwangi argues, allows one to infer that African gender stereotyping has its root in traditional oral literature.

The portrayal of famous father figures in African fiction, Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, Ezeulu in *Arrow of God*, and El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye in *Xala*, for example, demonstrate how power is imagined in literature and exercised at the level of the family, more often than not in favour of patriarchy in the pre-colonial and post-colonial states. These father figures use the traditional values to justify their supposedly god-given power over women. Henrietta Otokunefor and Obiageli Nwodo's probing question, "how does a woman escape the tyranny of a tradition and a system, assert her individuality while still playing out the roles of daughter, wife, mother?" (7) is very significant in evaluating and criticising the power dominance manifested in traditions that make women believe that by violating traditional family roles and responsibilities they cease to be women.

Situating the narrative in a traditional context, *The Promised Land* shows how the family as a domestic space enhances the dominant ideology of patriarchy under the cloak of tradition. Ochola, for example, is so stubborn that he does not accept any advice cautioning against his decision to migrate to Tanganyika because he is "a married man" (31) and, therefore, has power over his family. The household, which Mbiti regards as "the smallest unit of the family" (*Philosophy* 107) in African contexts, becomes a centre from which Ochola exercises his power and autonomy. The decision to leave Nyanza for Tanganyika is the result of Ochola's desire for wealth and it does not need the blessing of his extended family.<sup>16</sup> As a married man and head of the family, he uses his power and authority to deny Nyapol any form of agency in her marriage. The loss of Nyapol's power in the family is captured by Ochola's threatening statements: "[t]here is nothing to explain. All I've been telling you since last night is that we're going to move to Tanganyika and settle there as soon as we agree on the date" (26). Nyapol's gendered role of being a woman and wife define her space in the family. She has to compromise and obey the authority, her husband, and has "to stay with her husband's people for better or for worse" (20). Nyapol is, as Foucault would have it, "inside power [and] there is no escaping it" (*Sexuality* 95). Nyapol's denial of power in the household space represents the invisibility of women in the public sphere by setting traditional rules which, according to Gloria Anzaldúa, restrict a woman to "only three dimensions: to the church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother" (39).

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<sup>16</sup> I have adopted Ogunyemi's concept of the "extended family" because, in contrast to Western perception of family, it identifies the black extended family as viewed by womanists with its large numbers and geographical spread. See also "Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English" (73) by Ogunyemi and Mbiti (*Philosophy* 106) for more clarification.

Creating women in African writing with “metaphoric or symbolic roles” (91)<sup>17</sup> and as carriers of traditions which adversely affect them forms another way of looking at how the familial space accelerates the subjugation of women in the household, extended family and geopolitical nation. Highlighting the dominance of patriarchy in the post-colonial state, Boehmer asserts: “[t]he new post-colonial nation is historically a male constructed space, narrated into modern self-consciousness by male leaders, activists and writers, in which women are more often than not cast as symbols or totems, as the bearers of traditions” (22). As carriers of the traditions and pride of the family, women are made to internalise these values and transmit them from one generation to another. Mothers have the role of teaching their daughters about what tradition expects of them in the family. Nyapol abides by traditional values as an identity and affirmation of origin or collective identity of the Luo-speaking community and to protect her family from “the fiendish-hearted old man” (119) when in Tanganyika. For example, Nyapol’s adherence to her traditions make her believe that “if she was not cleansed properly, then [her] babies might die” (120). Thus, Nyapol’s bitter weeping stems from Ochola’s refusal to allow her to have “the cleansing ceremony [...] after the birth of twins” (119) in Tanganyika. She has internalised traditional values to the extent of not wanting them be violated in her presence. The narrative seems to suggest that traditional values, apart from oppressing women, are used as a weapon to defend the family against evils. For example, by adhering to traditional principles, Nyapol creates a wall of defence against the old man (the medicine man who is suspected to be a witch). It is worth noting that the narrative endows Nyapol with the power not only to give life through birth but also with power to protect the family from enemies.

Furthermore, the narrator’s description of Nyapol in relation to her mother reveals the power of mothers in moulding their daughters to become future wives, since the only destination for women, as prescribed by a tradition, is marriage: “[h]er mother had always said, ‘if you’re frightened don’t sit still, keep on doing something. The act of doing will give you back your courage’” (8). Nyapol “knew the basic rules and taboos that her mother had taught her” (100). As a traditional woman, Nyapol’s mother perceives marriage and motherhood as institutions in which a woman cannot think beyond her husband and children. In a traditional setting, the mother figure is represented as a powerful medium for harbouring and transmitting traditions and customs, not only for the well-being of the household, but also the nation. The institution

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<sup>17</sup> See *Stories of Women* by Boehmer for more discussion on the side-lining of women through metaphorical and symbolic representation.

of marriage, therefore, has become a strong bond that binds women to their husbands. Associated with marriage is the bride price. Like other commodities in the market, a woman's value is judged according to her beauty and her respect for traditional values, hard work, the quality of her husband-to-be and sometimes the level of literacy. Women, the carriers and preservers of traditions which adversely affect them, nevertheless strive to make sure that the quality of a woman matches the dowry one has to pay for them. Interestingly, the narrative substantiates this assertion by the depiction of the women in Nyapol's family, who steadfastly demand that Ochola's family pays more cows and goats as "compensation for his [Ochola's] ugliness" (9). Their conformity to traditional and patriarchal power signifies Ogot's indebtedness to her grandmother's oral narratives, where (as I argue) gender stereotypes in families find their root.<sup>18</sup>

Related to images that "subvert[] the dominant representations of culture" as Lionnet puts it, Ogot, through Aziza (the wife of a medicine-man in Tanganyika), portrays the bride price as a weapon of patriarchy that ties a woman to her husband. Although Aziza wants to be free to associate with other women and her relatives, she cannot do so because her husband, the medicine-man, treats her as his property. The conversation between Nyapol and Aziza reveals the hatred Aziza has, not only of marriage, but also of the bride price that ensures her subservience to her husband. She believes the bride price robs her of her voice to fight against her oppression by her husband. Aziza's lamentations also suggest many women's desire to get rid of the shackles, including the bride price, that bind and silence them in domestic and public spaces. But she cannot dismantle patriarchal dominance because she has been reduced to a nonentity with no voice in the family.

As Banyywa-Horne observes, a traditional "woman needs a man to survive. Aziza has little or no relevance beyond her role as a sexual object" (123). This stereotypical perception of women is a traditional truism and men use it as a weapon to justify their stranglehold over women. Wifehood, as represented in this narrative, does not only subject a woman to the oppressive hands of patriarchy but also makes a woman vulnerable to physical and emotional suffering. Nyapol and Aziza view this kind of subjection as another form of slavery where the husband-wife power relation is that of a master and a slave. Their dissatisfaction with marriage haunts them so much that they regret having joined it in the first place. As Lionnet

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<sup>18</sup> Ogot in her childhood spent much time with her grandmother who taught her the traditional folktales that inspired her writing. See also on [http://www.jrank.org/literature/pages/5274/Grace\\_Ogot\\_\(Grace\\_Emily\\_Akinyi\\_Ogot\).html](http://www.jrank.org/literature/pages/5274/Grace_Ogot_(Grace_Emily_Akinyi_Ogot).html) for more information about Ogot.



observes, these female characters, Nyapol and Aziza, struggle to “subvert” (205) gender stereotypes by hating the constraints attached to marriage. The narrator captures the feelings of Nyapol: “[s]he thought of her mother and sisters who were, perhaps even now enjoying the tales of old times in the village where they had lived for so many years.” The narrator continues: “[s]he wished she had not married. Marriage was a form of imprisonment in which the master could lead you where he wished” (46).

Similarly, the representation of the old man’s domestication of Aziza reveals how men use the institution of marriage to marginalise women. The old medicine-man beats Aziza and separates her from her family members and neighbours, perhaps, because of jealousy over his young wife who has the charms to attract younger and more virile men. Aziza thinks of running away from the old man’s house, but wonders how a woman can leave her husband when she has sworn “to stay with her husband’s people for better or for worse” (20). She wonders whether a woman’s family is capable of paying back the bride price. The implication here is that traditional notions of the family act as an impediment to women’s quest for power and freedom. They end up suffering and sometimes, like Nnu Ego in *The Joys of Motherhood*, die in the course of struggling for recognition as good traditional women. Aziza concludes by saying: “I know that his hands will never leave me. That’s why I decided I must stay with him” (114). The narrative does not show any radical kind of reaction being taken by these women to fight back for their rights; rather they consider submission and conformity an integral part of traditional social well-being.

Nevertheless, in her depiction of the marriage trope, Ogot gives certain powers to women. The narrative considers marriage not only as an institution for oppressing women, but also a space where a woman, like men, gains power: “[s]he was no longer a child!” (12). Suggestively, Nyapol is mature enough and a significant figure in the family. At different times in the narrative, Nyapol advises Ochola to do according to what she believes to be the right thing for the well-being of the family. For example, Nyapol’s resistance to her husband Ochola’s suggestions to leave Nyanza for Tanganyika suggests the power of women in the family. Right from the beginning of the narrative, Nyapol challenges Ochola’s plan to leave Nyanza for Tanganyika. Like a fortune teller, she anticipates the disintegration of the family and she does not want it to happen in her presence. Nyapol first opposes leaving Nyanza for Tanganyika. She also opposes building a house far from Okechi (the Luo old man who welcomed them to Tanganyika) for fear of evil people. Thirdly, she resists abandoning Luo traditional values when in a foreign land, Tanganyika. Such resistance suggests not only the



traditional bonds that women are tied to through the institution of family but also the vision the narrative embodies in women characters. Because of patriarchal hegemony, they are dragged along without any say simply because they are women. These women, however, foresee the danger that might harm their families. In fact, it is the disregard of Nyapol's advice that lands the whole family in trouble. Ochola's disregard of the power of his wife results in his suffering from an unknown disease. Despite the persistence of the women, the hegemony of patriarchy in the family weakens Nyapol's power and forces her to accept whatever her husband decides.

The representation of family members' co-operation in different socio-cultural and economic activities demonstrates how the familial space plays a significant role in defending their traditions against any critical pressure that endangers them. Through their co-operation, marriage, as Mbiti observes, being "the focus of existence" (*Philosophy* 133), is not just an individual's but also a familial affair, and therefore the wife belongs to the extended family. Similarly, every person – unborn, living or dead – is, according to Mbiti, part of the family. Ochola's decision to migrate to Tanganyika shocks his extended family because he is introducing something extraordinarily new – limiting the institution of family to the household. Indeed, this African philosophy, embedded in tradition is so rooted in their daily lives that anyone who violates traditional values is cursed. Owiti's "weeping and offering secret prayers to his dead wife to help him change their son's mind" (36) turns into a curse for the obstinate Ochola who disobeys his family's advice. Abiero (the young brother of Ochola) despite being converted to Christianity, still upholds tradition by attempting to bar Ochola from taking his family away from Nyanza. He wants Ochola to leave Nyapol to take care of Owiti, her father-in-law: "I could understand it if you were going to work in Tanganyika, leaving Nyapol behind" (30).

The narrative articulates the importance of familial relations and their power in decision-making on various matters that are related to the family. *The Promised Land* seems to suggest that polygyny is one of the ways of dealing with the problem of orphans in traditional society. This context of acceptance of polygyny, though challenged in contemporary narratives (as I discuss in subsequent chapters), speaks about the characters' submission to the traditional and 'conventionalised' patriarchal hegemony. The novel represents polygyny as an antidote to a step-mother's cruelty. Indeed, the mistreatment Owiti's children get from their newly-married step-mother – beating, calling them names, and forcing them to work hard without food (32) – following the death of their mother makes Owiti's relatives intervene and advise him to

marry another wife who can take better care of his children. As such, Owiti becomes polygynous because of the influence of his relatives under the guise of rescuing Achar's (Owiti's former wife) children from mistreatment. It is because of these dynamics in a monogamous family that Obioma Nnaemeka supports polygyny as a way of "maintain[ing] equity, justice, harmony, and sharing responsibilities" ("Spaces" 173). In this context, the narrative invites readers to look at children as the concern of all women, so that polygyny becomes permissible in circumstances where one woman mistreats children out of spite. If Ogot's commitment to her tradition is overwhelmed by her "nostalgia for the golden ages of bygone days" (12)<sup>19</sup>, as she imagines this in her narrative, then Roger Kurtz is right in arguing that Ogot's *The Promised Land* is too anthropological, as it depicts and explains various Luo customs and traditions such as marriage, witchcraft, and belief in traditional healing (28). The narrative suggests more sympathy with the sufferings of the children than Owiti, who sometimes weeps when he hears about the torture his children encounter from their step-mother. The relief the children get from their treatment by Chila (Owiti's third wife, from Ugenya, near the River Nzoia) indicates Ogot's articulation of what Ogunyemi later came to call 'African womanism', by giving prominence to African women's obsession with children (Arndt, "Gender Trouble" 712) as one of the tenets of African womanism and a symbol of growth and sustainability of the family.

In *The Promised Land*, Ogot also juxtaposes traditional and modern Western values, demonstrating that African traditions are strong compared to Western beliefs. Its dedication to African traditions makes the narrative work similarly to that of p'Bitek's *Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol* (1966). Published in the same year, these two writers lucidly represent how meaningful and powerful African traditions are by rebuking Africans who embrace Western education and religion, and their accompanying values, at the expense of their own African values. In *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*, Trinh Minh-ha observes that the relationship between the writer and his/her work resembles that of a father to his son/daughter, a mother to her son/daughter, God or Priest in a religious context, and "the Priest's role is to transcribe and/or explain as truthfully as possible God's confining voice" (29). Minh-ha's observation illuminates the mutual respect between the writer and her/his work by emphasising the primacy of culture as "essential[ly] a semiotic concept"

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<sup>19</sup> According to Charles Larson, East and Central African writers, in their writings, are frequently trapped in a past from which they cannot escape. Thus, they must reconstruct the past before jumping into the contemporary present. For Larson, the past is inescapable.

(71)<sup>20</sup> and a denominator in anthropological novels. Exemplifying the interconnectedness between the writer and her culture, *The Promised Land* defends African traditions through the character Owiti, who is devastated by the “changes that [are] undermining the old customs” (34). Like pan-Africanists, Ogot creatively defends “the virtue of native culture, characterised as rich, pure and authentic” (Boehmer, *Colonial* 100) and she deploys the family as a centre of resistance against the values of Western colonial culture.

Indeed, the narrative’s disengagement from women’s liberation demonstrates how history and traditions are embedded in the novel. Historically, according to Mbiti and Lee, traditional African societies divided people along gender lines. This division of labour does not only sideline women by giving them lighter work – feminising them – but also denies them knowledge which could make them heroines and compete with their male counterparts. The influence of parents in the family here is vital in making their children behave according to their gender. As mothers teach their daughters ‘women’s roles,’ sons are always detached from their mothers when they come of age. Okonkwo’s frequent beating of Nwoye when found in the kitchen with his mother in *Things Fall Apart* is not by accident. As a grown-up boy, he has to be under his father’s tutelage to be masculinised. Similarly, Owiti, in the course of reproducing the patriarchal system, confines Ochola and mentors him according to what is traditionally expected of a man. In this regard, the narrator says:

Ochola was maturing into a man and Chila allowed him to spend more time with his father in the evenings. Out of the hands of his jealous step-mother, he developed faster and became a good companion to his father. Owiti often spoke to him about the tribal traditions and the clan wars. Owiti knew the names of all the clan heroes, and taught Ochola to recite them. (33-34)

Arguing about the relation between knowledge and power, Minh-ha asks: “[c]an it [knowledge] be conveyed without the exercise of power?” (41). The informal teaching Ochola gets from his father prepares him to be a hero. Ochola is made not to fear bloodshed in times of wars, a typical masculine trait. He is prepared to be like his father who “fought in several clan wars” (32). The lessons that the daughters learn are limited to the private space of the household, where they are trained how to become the custodians of tradition. The

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<sup>20</sup> I am using ‘semiotic concept’ as used by Minh-ha to circumscribe signs and meanings, in this case, culture and the meanings it denotes.

knowledge Ochola gets from his father enables him to know his position in relation to women and the power he has over them in his society and its traditions.

In *Stories of Women* Boehmer demonstrates the importance of mothers in the family. According to Boehmer, the use of terms such as motherland, mother country, and mother tongue invite “connotations of origin – birth, hearth, home, roots, the umbilical cord – and rest upon the frequent, and some might say ‘natural,’ identification of the mother with the beloved earth” (26-27). The images of Achar, Aziza and Nyapol create a sense of family unification, home and man-makers. These images variously represent the institutions of motherhood and wifehood; however, the novel conflates the two institutions in an attempt to accentuate the role of female figures in the making of home and negotiating peace in times of hostility or misunderstanding. Achar’s spirit controls Ochola’s family and Ochola cannot decide otherwise in his life without consulting her: “[i]nstil the spirit of a man in me so that I may work hard and be prosperous” (69). As his mother, Achar is responsible for inspiring Ochola to work hard. This is why “Ochola never praised anything without mentioning his mother’s name” (126) to show how important she is in his family. Likewise, Aziza uses Nyapol to negotiate peace between her husband and Ochola. She says:

I have been meaning to come and talk to you for a long time, but as my husband won’t let me visit you, I haven’t had a chance.” She continues, “I hope your husband was not very upset by the way my husband spoke to him when he came to our home some months ago. I have been longing for a chance to apologise to him. (112)

The centrality of the mother and wife figure in the narrative connotes tranquillity and peace-making among family members. Aziza, as Minh-ha points out elsewhere, “is the heart of the joint family, the needle sewing its different members together” (107). The river, where Nyapol and Aziza meet, acts as a centre for purification, confession, and negotiation between the two antagonistic parts. Knowing how adamant men can be, the narrative invests much trust in women when it comes to negotiation because of their sophistication in speech and power to convince.

*The Promised Land*, in celebrating the sustaining effect of African traditions, represents the migration of characters from one geographical location to another, but without their violating their traditional values. The narrative critiques Clifford’s balanced position on the fixity of identity of individuals in a migratory context: “I do not accept that anyone is permanently

fixed by his/her 'identity,' but neither can one shed specific structures of race and culture, class and caste, gender and sexuality, environment and history" (12). Clifford's doubt about the fixity of identity (although in subsequent chapters I concur with him) is challenged in anthropological novels such as *The Promised Land*. The strong attachment of the Luo-speaking communities to their traditions and homeland, even in migratory contexts, can be explicated in relation to the family's struggle to maintain their traditional identity and commitment to the survival of the family. Even if men allowed flexibility in terms of traditions, women could not have accepted it because they abide by the traditions, not only for their own sake but also for the children and family members in general. The narrator captures this idea:

[t]he cleansing ceremony, usual after the birth of twins, was not performed. Some of their friends were Moslems, and others were Christians who no longer believed in such rites. The omission of this ceremony added to Nyapol's fear of the fiendish-hearted old man. She became convinced that if she was not cleansed properly, the babies might die. (119-120)

The narrative asserts that the Luo community in Tanganyika are united as one family. The social gatherings are centres where the Luo-speaking community practise their traditions and make Nyapol shake off her worry because "she would retain the strong ties that held her close to her own people" (111). Therefore, the Luo-speaking community members migrate with their cultural identity intact and practise their traditions to save their families from whatever danger they might encounter.

As the first and second generation of African women writers, Ogot and Emecheta in their narratives could not let the Second World War pass without narrating its social-political, economic, and cultural upheavals in relation to Africans or what Adesanmi and Dunton call 'colonial experience.' These writers offer an opportunity to re-read the impact of the war from an African feminist perspective. Ogot and Emecheta acknowledge the changes in family structure caused by the Second World War and its aftermath. In contrast to Emecheta, as this chapter demonstrates, Ogot depicts these changes as a threat to traditions. The influence of capitalist ideology overwhelms Ochola. He considers creating his own world. Ochola has restructured the family space so that it promotes capitalist sentiments. Whereas his father

defines wealth in terms of togetherness and family (“I’m rich as I am! I live on our own land! But what I need most is your company” (36)), Ochola thinks of material wealth:

[b]ut I must go, father. I’ll be more useful to you if I go,” argued Ochola. “I’ll be rich and all the money troubles we’ve had for so many years will vanish. Whatever I earn I’ll share with the whole family.” (35)

Such violations of tradition are an affront to African society. The narrative suggests creation of a society that obeys the traditional principles without being pushed by external influences. And, as a sign of warning to Ochola, the illness afflicts him for his disregard of familial advice.

Ochola’s failure to flourish in the new country, ‘the promised land’, because of severe illness, is associated with his rebellion against Luo traditional values and customs and familial advice. The writing explores the need to abide by societal norms and familial advice; Ochola contracts a disease that finally forces him to rejoin his wider family in Nyanza. However, the narrative leaves readers in suspense as to whether Ochola arrives safely in Nyanza, dies en route or manages to escape from the strong hands of Abiero (his young brother) and Magungu (the medicine-man) who drag him away to Nyanza. It is also silent about what happens to the abandoned properties: Nyilaji, the dog, cows, chicken, goats, granaries of maize, millet and beans Ochola has accumulated during his stay in Tanganyika. But such suspense engages the reader to rewrite the story, making what Jacques Derrida and Derek Attridge call “its beginning [...] its end” (42) – and vice versa – in plot organisation. In addition, the abandonment of material wealth suggests the value of familial bonds over physical property.

The illness symbolically represents Ochola’s arrogance, egocentrism, egotism, disregard of familial advice, and punishment for disrupting traditional family ties. It is not by accident that Sembène in *Xala* also deploys the same figure in representing inefficiency in leadership in the post-colonial state, using his principal character El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye. He represents El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye as failing to consummate his new marriage because of the ‘xala’ disease he is suffering from. In an attempt to cure the disease, El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye ends up dispensing with all of his properties, with no success. So, the ‘xala’ disease signifies the corrupt leaders in post-colonial Africa that have to be removed from power. Through the character El Hadji Abdou Kader Beye, Sembène calls for a revolution to change the regime

by humiliating irresponsible leaders publicly, showing that they are incompetent in their leadership. Similarly, *The Promised Land* humiliates and banishes Ochola for his disregard of traditional family ties.

To sum up my discussion, *The Promised Land* expresses Ogot's indebtedness to her traditional values. She depicts the institution of family as a space where traditional and patriarchal powers are exercised. The narrative paints female characters that conform to traditional and patriarchal powers. In circumstances where women try to come up with sound arguments to challenge power, they are suppressed. It is because of this suppression and domestication of women that I find it useful to read *The Promised Land* along with Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* to explore their contrasts in depicting the family trope. As I will argue in discussing *The Joys of Motherhood*, Emecheta, in contrast to Ogot, represents a sharp criticism of tradition and male dominance in the family.

### **Changes in Familial Structure and Space in *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979)**

Emecheta was born in 1944 in Lagos, Nigeria. She was educated at a Methodist School in Lagos and London University in Britain. After her schooling she worked as a librarian at the American Embassy in Lagos and as a community worker in Camden, North London. Emecheta is among the best-known African women writers. Some of her publications include *In the Ditch* (1972), *Second Class Citizen* (1975), *The Bride Price* (1976), *The Slave Girl* (1977), *The Moonlight Bride* (1980), *Destination Biafra* (1982), *Double Yoke* (1982), *The Rape of Shavi* (1983), *Gwendolen* (1989) and *Kehinde* (1994). *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) is a story about the importance of motherhood and its challenges in a traditional African context. Nnu Ego, the protagonist, ironically yearns for motherhood, but in the end she comes to the realisation that it is not always a rewarding experience. When Nnu Ego is mature, she is forced by her father, Agbadi, to marry a man. When her first marriage to Amatokuwu flounders because of her failure to conceive, Nnu Ego is forced by Agbadi to marry Nnaife, a man she has never seen before. The novel centres on the relationship between Nnu Ego and Nnaife, interrogating the family dynamics and underscoring the desire to subvert the patriarchal power engendering control through the family. Emecheta explores the challenges of motherhood through the use of simple and straightforward language, and characters who make readers feel the reality of traditional and gender dynamics in Africa. The narrative uses flashbacks to reinforce the aesthetics of the narrative and disrupt the flow of events which potentially make the reader fail to follow events as they unfold.



By ‘changes in familial structure and space’, as the title of this section suggests, I am referring to the novel’s criticism of traditional societies in their treatment of the family trope. Unlike *The Promised Land*, *The Joys of Motherhood* is fuelled by women’s struggle against any oppressive forces that have their roots in traditional societies. In other words, it is a story that, as Stratton asserts, “confirms the existence of a female tradition in fiction” (111). As such, I discuss Emecheta’s representation of the family trope and how it acts as a centre of liberatory ideas for women.

Set partly in traditional and partly in urban societies of Ibuza and Lagos, respectively, *The Joys of Motherhood* problematizes the configuration of family by emphasizing the power of motherhood in traditional and modern<sup>21</sup> spaces. Motherhood, which in the traditional Igbo sense defines a woman, becomes a burden to Nnu Ego, who strives not only to be a good mother, but also a traditional woman and wife. While in Ibuza, Nnu Ego yearns for motherhood, to qualify as a ‘complete’ Igbo traditional woman. The desire for motherhood continues even when she is in Lagos, a modernised environment. Despite Nnu Ego having five children, including boys, it is not enough for her to live a happy life as a ‘complete woman’ in Ibuza. The institution of motherhood that is supposed to be fulfilling turns into bitterness in the modern world. For example, Nnu Ego is left to take care of children when her husband is conscripted into the Second World War: “I have all these children to look after” (167) suggests the problem that Nnu Ego encounters in taking care of a big family in the absence of Nnaife. Here the narrative questions the joys of motherhood in the modern world. It advocates for a change in perception of motherhood in post-colonial Africa.

The move from Ibuza to Lagos, and being integrated into the Yoruba-speaking community and forced to learn the Yoruba language, complicate Nnu Ego’s understanding of the life pattern in urban centres. Language, as one of the powerful tools for propagating ideology, as Margaret Daymond points out, changes Nnu Ego’s “belief and attitude, in thought and emotional pattern” and contextual “understanding and use of the concepts ‘woman’, ‘wife’, and ‘mother’ (280). According to Daymond, the changes that Nnu Ego encounters represent Western colonisation of Africa and its impact on African traditions in negotiating a new identity that suits the socio-political demands of the day. Oyèrónkè Oyèwùmi elsewhere treats Nnu Ego’s migration from Ibuza to Lagos as a move from the “rural area where the sexual division of labour grants women certain roles and autonomy, to urban areas where

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<sup>21</sup> In this context, the concept “modern” denotes changes in the society ushered in by colonial rule, which adversely affected Igbo traditional values.



flexible gender systems are almost non-existent” (265). This juxtaposition of rural and urban life is captured by Nnu Ego’s contention that “I can understand the value of being a senior wife in Ibuza; not here, Nnaife” (150) to demonstrate the extent to which urban life has distorted the traditional pattern of life. Nnu Ego’s failure to have a voice in Nnaife’s family is not only characteristic of her loss of autonomy and political power in the domestic space, but also represents the marginalisation of women within the geo-political nation.

To challenge women’s marginalisation, Emecheta’s narrative offers a critique of African traditions that are oppressive to women. Her characters are crafted in a way that imbues the narrative with a revolutionary attitude against paternal and patriarchal hegemony. Emecheta’s writing, together with that of other female writers such as Nwapa, Aidoo and Bâ, suggests how the 1960s and 1970s were the turning point for women struggling against all forms of oppression and subjugation propagated by tradition and colonial values. In their work, these writers criticise the local, traditional social practices as the source of patriarchal system and suggest ways of bringing about equality between men and women. These writers criticise the motherhood trope as a defining feature of a woman by showing possible alternatives to conventional life. For example, Nwapa’s eponymous character, Efurū, becomes a priestess after failing to become a mother.

Situating *The Joys of Motherhood* in the late colonial period, during the period of independence as well as in its aftermath, the narrative shows life and human relations and the attendant mayhem such as the Second World War, the intertwining of traditions and modernity and their effect on the family. Contextualising the late colonial period and its accompanying effects on Africans, such as the emasculation of men and oppression of women, Emecheta writes: “[t]he year was 1934 and the place was Lagos, then a British colony” (1). The rule of colonialism and resistance to it as represented in African literature is underscored. Writers and critics view colonial discourse as a source of inequality and iniquity in Africa. The distortion of African traditions by the forces of colonisation is made explicit in works such as Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, p’Bitek’s *Song of Lawino* and *Song of Ocol* and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s novels, *A Grain of Wheat*, *Petals of Blood*, *The Devil on the Cross* and his critical texts: *Writers in Politics* and *Decolonizing the Mind*. These works portray the locally embedded (traditional) patriarchies and the general racially denigratory policies and effects of colonialism. These writers (Achebe, p’Bitek and Ngũgĩ) attack colonialism and its local agents in the course of building an African state which is autonomous and has flourishing traditions that define Africans.

The re-location of Nnu Ego from Ibuza to Lagos represents the dichotomy between pre-colonial African societies and colonial and later post-colonial African states, between tradition and modernity. Emecheta depicts the character Nnu Ego in a migratory state to draw the connection between pre-colonial and colonial African societies in relation to the treatment of women. While in Ibuza, Nnu Ego experiences segregation based on her gender. When in Lagos, Nnu Ego is doubly marginalised. She is marginalised because she is a woman and because she is black. She experiences the colonial discourses and stereotypes: master/baboon, woman-made man,<sup>22</sup> emasculation of men, and the money economy, which not only suppress women, but also subject them to various forms of oppression.

Nnu Ego's characterisation makes readers sometimes become deeply empathetic towards her experiences, sharing her feelings of joy or pain, sympathising with her, and at other times hating her for her conformity to traditional systems that are hostile to women. For example, the death of her son, Ngozi, and the sickness of Oshia, make readers share the pain Nnu Ego suffers. Similarly, the narrative makes readers share the joy with Nnu Ego when she succeeds in having bright sons, but the novel's aim is to challenge the character for being too conformist towards traditional values that undermine women.

To foreground the experiential nature of motherhood in a traditional sense the story begins with Nnu Ego's frustration at her failure to comply with traditional norms – not having children or a family of her own. She is afraid of the future: “[o] God, let some of her own children be like that, so that she would not suffer in old age as well as now” (198). The death of her first son, Ngozi, makes Nnu Ego's life unbearable. Remi Akujobi points to the significance and perception of motherhood in the African context, where motherhood is “profoundly shaped by social context and culture” (1). He further argues that “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 other attached to another – her baby (1). For Akujobi, “motherhood in some quarters is seen as a sacred and powerful spiritual path for a woman to take,” (1) an idea which Eustace Palmer perceives as soothing women, “as an attempt by the patriarchy to continue the enslavement of the African woman” (88). Motherhood here means sacrifice and self-denial, and Nnu Ego loses hope in life because she is not able to endure the shame of not bearing her husband a child, especially

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<sup>22</sup> Nnu Ego regards Nnaife as a ‘woman-made man’ because he cannot decide on his own unless advised by his boss, the wife of Dr. Meers. Nnaife wants a church wedding to impress Mrs. Meers and avoid being sacked from his job. See *The Joys of Motherhood* p.52 for more information.

a son. The novel also wants readers to pay more attention to the psychological torture Nnu Ego suffers and to see that the death of Ngozi shows how in traditional societies married women who don't have children are ostracized and labelled 'barren'; subjected to condescending pity, or are abandoned (divorced) by their husbands. This is created by Emecheta's artistic arrangement of events starting the narrative with Nnu Ego's confusion, leaving readers confounded as they do not know the source of her confusion. She uses flashback narratives by prioritising the confusion of her protagonist in relation to her failing to adhere to traditional conventions. The death event is delayed until chapter four of the narrative.

Lillian Osaki's dissertation on the representation of madness in black women's writing provides fascinating insights into how to read Nnu Ego from a different standpoint. Osaki observes that the theme of madness "is a recurring theme in African women's writing" (5). Osaki surveys African women's writing, interrogating how this theme is handled in Head's *A Question of Power*, Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, and Aidoo's *Anowa*. Osaki also traces the theme in the writings of African-American women such as Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. In her analysis, Osaki questions why female figures in these fictions are represented as mad and whether the mad woman is any less sane than the society that condemns her. What is madness anyway as far as African women's writing is concerned? (5-6). She concludes that madness in women comes because of failures to fulfil the expectations of their society. Osaki's theorising of madness resonates with Cazenave's who, in her study of madness and mad women in Francophone African literature, comes up with the conclusion that madness results from female characters' "refus[al] to play an active role or even participate in basic social functions" (68). This theme of madness in black women is also discussed by Flora Veit-Wild in *Writing Madness*. Giving examples on the depiction of black Africans in colonial narratives such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*, Veit-Wild is of the view that madness and horror "are especially linked to the black women's body, which arouses in the white man suppressed fears and longings" (17). She goes further on the concept of madness by exploring what she calls 'writing madness', which, in its broader sense, means "writing the body" (3) where the body becomes a site that enables us to read the mind. Veit-Wild's conclusion about madness appears to resonate with Osaki's when she says that in "male-dominated societies [...] women [were] labelled as 'mad' [because] [...] [they] breached the borderlines set for them by their own communities as well as by the colonial authorities" (Veit-Wild 129-130).

It should be borne in mind that the concept of ‘madness’ has frequently been seen in *The Joys of Motherhood* to denote different meanings. Emecheta, in her writing, foregrounds the idea of madness as a psychological state that affects a character emotionally. According to the narrative, the traditional woman’s desire for children often creates psychological disorientation that lays a fertile ground for madness. For example, the conversation between Nnu Ego and her brother-in-law (on how she has to respect her husband so that her hopes can be fulfilled) is a manifestation of this: “I shall come and visit you again when you are really mad” (46). Nnu Ego’s brother-in-law makes the point clear by saying that “women talk and behave like mad people with their infants who are too young to make sense of any such noises” (47). Later, Adaku, Nnu Ego’s junior wife, says: “can you hear her singing? She is so devoted to her children” (184). Akujobi makes the point clearer when he says that motherhood in the cultural setting makes a woman cease to be “an autonomous individual because she is one way or the other attached to another-her baby” (1). As Akujobi postulates, Nnu Ego, in the course of carrying out her duties as a traditional mother and nurturer of the family, loses power and autonomy in the family. The institution of motherhood has subjected her not only to the power of a patriarchal husband but also to the regime of rearing children. Since motherhood is obligatory in a traditional context and women are forced by their families to be mothers, Emecheta’s narrative prompts readers to examine how every woman is potentially a mad person, given these contexts.

Emecheta’s text also uses the concept of ‘madness’ to denote the anger, disappointment and annoyance associated with one’s failure to achieve family expectations as governed by traditional values. Whereas Osaki in her study of Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* treats the concepts of ‘frustration’ and ‘madness’ interchangeably, in this chapter I consider ‘frustration’ to be the most appropriate term to describe Nnu Ego’s psychological state. I consider ‘frustration’ as an emotional state that is attributed in African literature to characters who suffer emotionally for failing to live up to societal expectations. My use of the term ‘frustration’ parallels Obi Wali’s description of protagonists such as Clarence in Camara Laye’s *Radiance of the King*, Obi in Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease*, and Okolo in Gabriel Okara’s *The Voice*. For Wali, frustration arises because of “the individual [being] unable to penetrate a society where individualism is submerged under the tyranny of traditional communalism” (32) and a “pervasive sense of failure of communication at crucial points in the stories” (31). Whereas Wali explores the depiction of frustration among characters such as Clarence, Obi, and Okolo, which evoke Western values in traditional African societies,

Emecheta represents the opposite. She depicts the character Nnu Ego as migrating with traditional values into the modern world of Lagos. Finally, both Wali and Emecheta demonstrate how difficult it is for an individual to live in “the community where the individual does not exist in his own right but is compelled to lose his identity for the sake of social cohesion” (Wali 33).

Thus, Nnu Ego is described (after the death of her first child) as angry, disappointed and grievous because of the circumstances that deny her the joys of motherhood. The narrator says: “she is not mad after all [...] she has only just lost the child that told the world that she is not barren” (65). She is disappointed and grievous by the loss of identity – being a woman and mother of son – which she has been longing for since her first marriage to Amatokwu that would “tell the world that she had once been a mother” (64). Even when Nnu Ego gets the courage to speak, she displays her anger, disappointment and grief at the loss of her son, Ngozi. She fears that her family – from Nnaife’s side – will reject her and that when she dies she will be improperly buried, outside her husband’s compound (189). Also, apart from categorizing her as a failed woman, like Amatokwu’s family, Nnaife’s family may look for another wife for Nnaife and make her a junior wife. Knowing these drawbacks, Nnu Ego wants to confront her *chi* and ask why she is first denied children and then deprived of her only son. Her hope was for him to be the heir to his father’s properties. Emecheta’s narrative challenges these family dynamics (struggling to become a senior wife and yearning for motherhood) by eventually Nnu Ego becoming a mother of bright sons and a senior wife. And yet, Nnu Ego does not get the peace she desires. She ends up dying alone and buried outside her husband’s compound, despite fulfilling all her social obligations as a woman and mother. Emecheta, in her fiction, engages readers to think of other possible alternatives in liberating women economically, socially and from patriarchal control. She suggests that women set their own priorities in life, without necessarily depending on men.

However, Salome Nnoromele cautions on what she regards as misrepresentations of African women in African women’s writings. She is at odds with the current feminist discourse of offering what she calls an unresearched and narrowly-defined image of an African woman that is in contrast “with the existing anthropological and sociological works on African women” (181). In this regard, she contends:

the truth is that these over determined representations of African women as victims greatly contrast with existing

anthropological and sociological works on African women [...] If literary critics are indeed after the truth about the lives of Igbo women, and by direct correlation African women, why have they not taken these studies into account in their interpretations of African texts? What is so truthful about readings that blind these critics from seeing African women as anything but victims? (181)

Nnoromele's argument seeks to challenge the interpretation of female characters in *The Joys of Motherhood* as exaggerated. Thus she aligns herself with Gikandi's student who doubts whether Okonkwo is "a representative African" (5). In particular, Gikandi, while echoing his American students' questions, raises questions on 'moral consideration' in African literature: "Okonkwo's beating of his wife during the holy week (why do Africans beat their wives?) or the killing of Ikemefuna (why are these people so cruel?)". He contends that there are "many signs in the book that he [Okonkwo] was a unique, even alienated individual in the bourgeois sense of the term" and that "the killing of Ikemefuna was fashioned after one of the most important narratives of sacrifice in the biblical tradition: 'Abraham's aborted sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22'" (5).

The question of Nnu Ego being mistreated in her family because of failing to conceive in her first marriage to Amatokwu and the paradoxical torture of motherhood she encounters by bearing children who do not conform to traditional values should not necessarily be an anthropological, sociological or historical reality unless we view literature as in the Aristotelian theory of mimesis.<sup>23</sup> Nnoromele's argument erroneously equates literature to anthropology, sociology and history. Thus, the creative writer is not limited to historical events but rather he/she can use those events as material for his/her writing. Emecheta's life history – being denied Western education by her biological parents, her mother being inherited by Buchi's uncle, Buchi's difficult life in Lagos and her struggle to get money for her education, the hurdles in marriage (Marie Umeh xxv-xxvi) – are some of her encounters in life which she experienced and which are reflected in her protagonist, Nnu Ego. However, *The Joys of Motherhood* is not just Emecheta's autobiography but rather a combination of experiential fact and fiction. Yet, what Nnoromele calls 'misrepresentation' in this context

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<sup>23</sup> Aristotle defines the mimetic theory of art as the imitation of reality, arguing that humans imitate nature. See also *Poetics* by Aristotle.



may be the blurred line between fact and fiction that marks creative work. Emecheta, while having her life experience in an African traditional society, including its oppression of women, uses her creative imagination to critique African traditions. Her narrative challenges the traditional system by metaphorically killing her protagonist Nnu Ego who embraces African traditions to represent Emecheta's desire to kill all forms of traditions which are inimical to the rights of women. Indeed, it is through these traditions that are hostile to women that Emecheta suggests the realisable possibility of a woman who can break the chains of slavery and subjugation to paternal power and control. She suggests a family structure that is not necessarily man-centred, but gives women an opportunity to decide for themselves.

Challenging the man-centred family structure, *The Joys of Motherhood* shows how the institution of family silences women by denying them the right to decide on their future husband. The institution of marriage is sorted out by the family, sometimes without the girl's knowledge of who her husband-to-be is. Unlike the liberated Juliette in Mbia's *Three Suitors One Husband*,<sup>24</sup> Nnu Ego's father is the only decision-maker when it comes to her marriage: "I have promised Amatokwu that I will think about his son" (28). When the marriage to Amatokwu fails by not raising children for her husband's line, Agbadi is not hesitant to look for another man, according to his wish: "that is true, my daughter. However, my only fear is that we do not know the man I have in mind. His family here are good, hardworking people, though." Nnu Ego, being a product of traditional society where a woman has to worship a man and do whatever he decides, has to accept her father's instructions: "if you wish it so, so it will be" (38).

The narrative represents a family as a crucible where youngsters are morally nurtured; it also serves as a determinant of the individual traits of members of that particular family. For instance, while knowing the Owulum family, Nnu Ego does not know who Nnaife is. Such a principle does not work for Nnu Ego, because the Nnaife she meets in Lagos is not the one she envisions in her mind: "short, the upper arm danced as he moved about jubilantly among his friends, and having a protruding belly!" (44). Despite his ugliness Nnu Ego cannot leave him because he is her father's choice and she is not ready to let him down. The narrative makes readers sympathise with Nnu Ego through her sufferings, and at the same time blame

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<sup>24</sup> Juliette, the protagonist in *Three Suitors One Husband*, does not agree to marry a man who is not her choice. She challenges her family for choosing her a man instead; she decides to marry a man of her choice.



the family led by its patriarchal father, Agbadi, who denies Nnu Ego a chance to make her own decision about her marriage.

The death of Agunwa, Agbadi's senior wife, as Davies and Graves as well as Boehmer observe, epitomises "the motif of jealousy and inequality in polygynous families" (Davies and Graves 29) and "the women's bearing nature of traditions" (Boehmer, *Stories* 22). This death also exposes the role of the senior wife and mother of sons in the family, and the birth of Nnu Ego. Agunwa, as portrayed in the narrative, subscribes to traditions and worships her husband. She is very humiliated when she realises that Agbadi is making love with his concubine, Ona, in the same courtyard. The narrative makes readers pay attention not only to the act of love-making within Agunwa's compound, but also to love-making with "a bad woman" (18) – one who does not obey Igbo traditions. As a senior wife, according to Agbadi, Agunwa has to set a good example for other younger wives. She has to be calm and courageous: "why, if she behaved like that what kind of example would that be to the younger wives?" The only advantage she gets as a senior wife and mother of sons – a 'complete woman' – is being buried within her husband's compound, accompanied by "her slave and her cooking things" (19). Nnu Ego's prayer, "God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage?" (209) is a prayer that is heard in contemporary African women's writings, as I demonstrate in subsequent chapters. It resonates with Agunwa's yearning for recognition in the family as a mother of sons. And the silence of the slave girl when she is forced to die with Agunwa symbolically communicates the dumbness of women violated by their patriarchal counterparts. They cannot stand up to defend their rights because everything in their lives is controlled by male-authored traditions, which are preserved and transmitted by women. As Emecheta portrays, Nnu Ego, is a product of rape between Agbadi and his concubine, Ona, and at the same time as the reincarnation of the slave girl. Thus, in any case, Nnu Ego is an outcome of disgrace and her sufferings and finally miserable death justify her fate. However, scholars of African feminism such as Robolin, Derrickson, Osaki, Friedli-Clapié, Nnoromele and Andrade do not show the impact of the rape on Nnu Ego, but instead concentrate on the reincarnation aspect, perhaps because they want to stress the fact of women's fertility as the sole identity marker for an African woman. The reincarnated Nnu Ego shows the continuity of the lifecycle of human beings.

Polygyny is a type or form of marriage often depicted in African literature. This theme has attracted the attention of African feminist critics and African women writers. As Palmer

observes, “polygyny in Africa remains controversial” (90). Scholars such as Ogunyemi, Palmer, and Derrickson do not see the problem with polygyny in Africa. For example, Nwapa’s protagonist, Efuru in *Efuru*, is ready to marry her husband a new wife when she realises that she cannot bear him a child and, as Palmer puts it, “she seems to subscribe to the view that only a wicked woman objects to sharing her husband with another woman” (90). According to Palmer, the negative representation of polygyny by African women writers begins with Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* and Bâ’s *So Long a Letter*. In making a general comment about the hatred of polygyny, Ogunyemi asserts that Emecheta and Bâ are groomed in the “Western expectation of monogamy” (“Womanism” 75). She further argues that “men must be men, it seems, but women do not have to be like them. Having accepted men with their libidinous disposition, she can create a stable life around her numerous children, male and female, along with their spouses” (76). Ogunyemi seems to suggest that women who choose to be in a polygynous marriage do so because they want protection. They want to be mothers but not wives. This is evident in her interview with Arndt, in which she contends:

[t]hey want to marry into polygynous households so that they do not get oppressed in marriage the way my generation was oppressed by men. Hence, they would marry somebody who was already married, and then they would live in their own house and have children. They want children, but they also want to be free in marriage. (“Gender Trouble” 716)

Ogunyemi’s suggestion is accepted by Derrickson, who goes a step further by stating the advantages one can gain from polygyny. Giving an example of Igbo women, Derrickson argues that polygyny eases the workload of women by making it a common practice for women of the same union to share domestic chores, such as cooking and babysitting (43). Extending the debate further, Wakota observes that men use polygyny to “solv[e] the problem of unsuccessful marriages” (42). However Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* (As I discuss in Chapter Three) appears to suggest a counter observation to Wakota’s by showing how female characters use a certain form of polyandry to strengthen the marriage institution. Drawing from abovementioned scholars, Emecheta’s narratives challenges the institution of polygyny because of its elevation of the father in the family structure as the overall lord in charge of the family, with women reduced to the position of serfs or slaves to control.

Nwokocha Agbadi, for example, has seven wives and two mistresses; Nnaife has four wives. This situation creates a problem for the family. Due to the large number of family members, Nwokocha Agbadi and Nnaife both fail to provide their wives with sexual rights, food, housing and clothing. They treat women as fetish objects and use them for their own pleasure and satisfaction: “when they became pregnant he would not be seen in their huts until the time came for him to mate them again” (8). This kind of family arrangement is what is depicted as disturbing in the story which faults the traditional system for perpetuating it. Instead, the text suggests a monogamous marriage with fewer children, that is, using family planning. The families of Ubani, the cook, and Cordelia, Nwakusor and Ato, and Mama Abby are represented as models of well-planned families, which also happen to be self-sufficient in terms of household necessities. On the other hand, *The Joys of Motherhood* criticises the polygynous system by representing the death of Agunwa, Agbadi’s senior wife, out of jealousy in the marriage and the failure of Nnaife to control his wives and children.

Apart from polygyny, the assumed power of men in the family in the post-colonial state is scrutinised. Only good-mannered children belong to their fathers as the bad ones belong to their mothers. This kind of hypocrisy and avoidance of responsibility plunges the woman into unjustified culpability. For example, Nnu Ego is praised for having children, especially boys, who are bright, expected heirs of Nnaife and the ones to ensure what Mbiti calls “the power of immortality” (*Philosophy* 142) in Nnaife’s family. Failure to meet the expectations of Nnaife by “not helping in the family” (225) and obeying his patriarchal power causes Nnu Ego to be treated as a mother of evil children who does not raise them properly. Emecheta’s novel, apart from illuminating women’s ability to take care of children in the family, criticises patriarchal power for shifting all child-care and rearing responsibilities into the hands of women. It satirically condemns the men’s desire to have sons who will ensure the survival of the family’s name and inheriting widows. Nwakusor’s eloquent speech on the death of Nnaife’s brother and the chance for Nnaife to inherit his brother’s wives piques the interest of Nnaife:

[h]e reminded him that the day a man is born into a family, the responsibilities in that family are his. Some men were lucky in that they had an elder brother on whose shoulders the greatest part of the responsibility lay [...] Now, you Nnaife, until last week were one of those lucky men. (127)

The death of Nnaife's brother, a very important character in the story in relation to the marriage between Nnaife and Nnu Ego, exposes some of the opportunism associated with traditional marriage. Nnaife is in a blissful mood as he now has an opportunity of inheriting his deceased brother's wives and exercising his power over the entire family. What Nnaife regards as a means of demonstrating his superiority and immortality by having more wives and children, turns into suffering for Nnu Ego. Nnu Ego hates the tremendous increase of family members in her household but she can neither avoid it nor tell her father, because she is afraid of disgracing "the name of the family" (132). Emecheta's story shows how traditional principles have taken root in people's minds, making them afraid of accommodating change that is likely to distort their traditions. As a result, Nnu Ego in court describes herself as an object to be owned by a man: "Nnaife is the head of our family. He owns me, just like God in the sky owns us" (245). Such kinds of absolute dominance and control affect women and reduce them to mere objects.

Besides literal families, the narrative demonstrates how the post-colonial state is engendered. The geo-political nation, as Boehmer puts it, "is embodied as woman" (4) and the president figure stands as father (Mbembe, "Notes" 18). This conceptualisation of the post-colonial nation, according to Mbembe, has resulted in titles such as 'Father of the Nation' or 'Mother of the Nation' to mean president or sometimes the first lady of the president. These metaphors imagine the nation as a family with collective identities. Situating her text in colonial times and during the Second World War, *The Joys of Motherhood* shows the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, and how women can be heads of families. The narrator at various times alludes to this prospect:

[t]he man has certainly forgotten all about us, and we don't know if anyone is ever coming to take his place" (95-96). "I think we are on the side of the British. They own Nigeria, you know" (108). "The British own us, just like God does, and just like God they are free to take any of us when they wish." (165)

Discussing the power of male figures – Christ and president – Musila argues for the omnipresence of figures of power in the post-colonial state (2). Traces of the colonial master, the British, in Nigeria are evident in the daily lives of Nigerians through the representation of Nnaife and his family. The Second World War adversely affected the nation. The British were granted masculine power as the father of Nigerians who were at war, leaving the

children starving. Like the supreme God, the British are omnipotent and can impose anything upon the nation in their imposition of the top-down power structure in the national family.

Furthermore, as the excerpt above demonstrates, Emecheta foregrounds the impact of the Second World War on the nation. The war, apart from negatively affecting Nigerians as represented in the novel, also provides an opportunity for evaluating the power of women in the absence of colonial powers and fathers. Surprisingly, the absence of the colonial figure makes Nnaife dependent on his wife. This reversal of roles suggests the possibility of women being heads of families. In addition, the abduction of Nnaife to join the British army, leaving Nnu Ego and Adaku to take care of the family, establishes the power of the women. These women, as depicted in the narrative, can manage to take care of the family without men, despite the hurdles they encounter.

Emecheta's depiction of women's solidarity in her narrative is deliberate. She uses the rich body of Igbo women's history nostalgically to remind them of their political power and gatherings in pressing for their demands. The Igbo women's gatherings, which during colonial times came to be called *mikiri* or *mitiri* (from "meeting"), according to Allen, "provided women with a forum in which to develop their political talents" (169-170). These traditional gatherings, as Judith Allen observes, were based on market associations by making women have a voice in the selling of their produce and a capacity to boycott or strike in case of any infringement of their rights by their male counterparts. Having its root in traditional society, these associations unite women regardless of their social differences. Nnu Ego and Adaku, apart from their social differences – senior and junior wife – live in a sisterly manner and use their sisterhood to demand their needs as mothers of children. Arguing along the same line with Oyèwùmi, Nnu Ego and Adaku "use their status as mothers to challenge some of the demands their cultures placed on them" (267). They "stop cooking for their husband," (149), sing songs, and dance mad dances as a way of criticising Nnaife's expenditure on drink at the expense of providing housekeeping money, delaying his return home and not attending to his wives' sexual needs. These forms of boycott, which Allen regards as "sitting on a man" (170), are very effective in disempowering men by making them repent and change the situation in favour of women. Adaku demonstrates the highest form of boycott by breaking "with the conventions of Ibuza society", as her "exclusion from it and ultimately from the narrative itself" (Andrade, "Rewriting" 104) shows what is expected of a woman yearning for liberation against oppressive traditions.

Despite the hurdles she undergoes in taking care of her family, Nnu Ego manages to feed them with the assistance of her fellow women. Iyawo and Mama Abby (her neighbours) feed Oshia (Nnu Ego's son) to save him from death by hunger, otherwise Nnu Ego could commit suicide in the course of experiencing the 'joys of motherhood': "thank you, God's messenger. You are the greatest doctor I have ever seen. You diagnosed our illness in your head and, without bothering us, you prepared the medicine and applied it to us. And in less than an hour we are all well" (117). Consequently, to make ends meet for her family, Nnu Ego becomes creative in marketing: she becomes a vendor by selling cigarettes, chopped wood, clothes blue, matches, and kerosene. The assistance she gets from Mama Abby, Iyawo and the landlord enables her to increase her sales. The implication is that the whole process of challenging patriarchal power needs collective efforts and motherhood should be used as an institution for women's struggle against the oppressive system, and for exercising their political power and control.

In the novel, Emecheta uses family as an agent for change in society. To accomplish this objective, Emecheta deploys two sets of contrasting characters: the set of characters groomed by traditional values and those obsessed with the modern world. By so doing, *The Joys of Motherhood* shows that the second half of the twentieth century is the time for gender-struggle regardless of the space where a person is. In this case, Ona and Adaku – representative of the women's movement for liberation – play a significant role in communicating the narrative's theme of gender liberation. Based in Ibuza village where traditional principles are rooted, Ona creates her own world that exempts her from slavery to tradition and patriarchal power and control. She is both daughter and son to her father, Obi Umunna, and therefore lives in the space between sons and daughters. Ona's extreme beauty, as the narrative describes it, gives her another advantage: the mistress of Chief Nwokocha Agbadi who, apart from his wealth and honour from his wives, is tortured and humiliated by her.

Beauty here is used as a weapon to deprive Agbadi of his power. Ona is depicted as "a very beautiful young woman who managed to combine stubbornness with arrogance" (6), the characteristics Agbadi likes most. Knowing her pride as a precious woman, Ona spends much of her time "humiliating him [Agbadi] by refusing to be his wife" (6). She knows what it means to be a woman in a traditional context. She does not want to be a conventional woman because she is aware that if she marries Agbadi "her fate would be the same as that of his other women" (11). Ona criticises the institution of motherhood and gender inequality by

attempting to dismantle the patriarchal hegemony. Agbadi says, “I will die if you go” to which Ona responds, “so you are just an ordinary person after all – no, not an ordinary man but a spoilt child who cries when his mother leaves him” (13). The narrative uses the beautiful woman figure to emasculate male power dominance. As an agent for change in the familial structure, Ona stages her struggle against the powerful man, chief and leader of the Ogboli people. In fact, she dies while fighting for change and a better life for women. The last words of Ona on her death-bed bear testimony to the anticipated bright future for women: “allow her [Nnu Ego] to have a life of her own, a husband if she wants one. Allow her to be a woman” (26). The birth of a weak son, by Ona, who dies a day after the death of Ona, symbolically communicates the wilting power of men’s control over women.

Adaku, on the other hand, fights her own battle. Emecheta creates Adaku as an example of politically-liberated women, gender-conscious, and who demystifies the Igbo myth that motherhood and money are two incompatible possessions. Adaku is happily liberated and leads a luxurious life with her daughters. It is worth noting that Adaku is doubly disadvantaged when compared to Nnu Ego. She is undermined as a junior wife and mother of daughters and, therefore, an ‘incomplete woman’ in traditional society. In examining the position of women against the background of change, Palmer considers Lagos to be the centre of women’s liberation. It is the place where Nnu Ego and Adaku experience a reversal of gender roles. The “images of femininity,” says Palmer, “are constantly used in reference to the men” (100). The roles which were traditionally carried out by women such as cooking, cleaning, and washing clothes are now done by men and sometimes women head their families in the absence of fathers. For instance, Nnaife works as a washer-man in Dr. Meers’s house and Ubani as a cook for Dr. Meers’s household, and then later as the head manager of the Nigerian Railway Department.

Using the backdrop of emasculation in urban Lagos, Adaku sees the need to defy patriarchal control by creating a space for women. Indeed, the hard life she has encountered by not having sons to ensure the continuity of Nnaife’s name and being regarded as a ‘second class citizen’ in the presence of the senior wife have awakened Adaku from silence. Adaku is certain that a woman, if given the opportunity, can do what men do and vice-versa. To subvert the male-dominated world, Adaku threatens to be a prostitute and use the money to educate her daughter in the same way Nnu Ego does for her sons. Angrily she says:



I will spend the money I have in giving my girls a good start in life. They shall stop going to the market with me. I shall see that they get enrolled in a good school. I think that will benefit them in the future. Many rich Yoruba families send their daughters to school these days; I shall do the same with mine. Nnaife is not going to send them away to any husband before they are ready [...] I am going to be a prostitute. (188)

Scholars of African women writers have attempted to interrogate the viability of Adaku's decision to be a prostitute. Robolin believes that Adaku literally became a prostitute as a response to her stressful life. According to Robolin, prostitution enables Adaku to meet the basic needs and opportunities for the future careers of her daughters. Being annoyed by patriarchal control, Adaku uses prostitution to expose "the workings of an oppressive and damaging social structure that she desperately wants to abandon, even at the cost of her own social respectability" (87). Adaku declares her intention to educate her daughters using the money she raises from her prostitution and market business. In this regard, debasing her body through prostitution becomes immaterial; she wants a bright future for her daughters through education, which would free them from the restrictions her patriarchal society imposes on her and on her daughters.

Arguably, Andrade, Palmer, and Friedli-Clapie are right in suggesting that Adaku does not necessarily become a prostitute in the real sense. What she does is "deliberately to annoy Nnu Ego" (Palmer 99) and create her own destiny that is out of the man's control: "I want to be a dignified single woman. I shall work to educate my daughters, though I shall not do so without male companionship" (191). Here, the narrative, through Adaku, makes a very significant point as far as African feminism is concerned. It shows that, in contrast to Western feminists in their struggle for liberation against the yoke of oppressive power, black feminists aim at uniting "blacks everywhere under the enlightened control of men and women" (Ogunyemi, "Womanism" 71). They treat men as allies in their struggle.

Kehinde's refusal to marry a man her father has chosen for her becomes another blow to Nnaife. Poor Nnaife does not go with the times and he realises very late that the world is no longer under unquestioned patriarchal control. What can be regarded as the disintegration of patriarchal control comes when Kehinde boldly answers Nnaife: "I am not marrying that man" (230). Nnaife is left to rule what can be regarded as the misfortunes in his family: Oshia

leaves for America, Adimu for Canada, and Taiwo for a man without any family arrangements for her marriage. In the meantime, Kehinde refuses to marry the man of her father's choice. In consequence, Nnaife regrets marrying Nnu Ego because he blames her for spoiling their children. Nnaife is further embarrassed when he learns that Kehinde has eloped to marry Ladipo, a Muslim and moreover a Yoruba. Being Christian and Igbo, Nnaife is not ready to let his daughters marry men from other religions and ethnic groups. Kehinde's decision to marry a Muslim and Yoruba youth is an embarrassment to Nnaife because she has gone against the rules of patriarchal control. Such an embarrassment and what Nnaife regards as family shame makes him attack and harm the Ladipo family in the course of fighting "to defend the honour of his daughter" (242). This violence in the Ladipo family results in his imprisonment. Nnaife is imprisoned symbolically to silence him and allow women to decide on their own without men's interference. Emecheta, through Kehinde, creates a space for women to exercise their own freedom without paternal control. The question of religious and ethnic differences, as Emecheta portrays in her narrative, is of no importance. What matters is true love between the couples.

To demonstrate the desire for change in society, the narrative, through the death of traditionally grounded characters, suggests killing of traditional beliefs that are harmful to women. By so doing, Emecheta creates a space for women to demonstrate their power. Agbadi's last words on his death bed: "I shall come again into your house, but this time I shall bring your mother" (171) represents the presence of women in the public sphere. He foresees the emergence of women in politics and public control. Agbadi, a representative of the old generation, has to die for the new generation to create their own world that is friendly to both men and women: "things have changed a lot. This is the age of the white man" (36). Later, Agbadi says with finality: "I must hurry. Most of my age-group are over there waiting for me" (171). The death of Agbadi symbolically represents the sweeping away of traditional systems which were geared towards denying women a platform to raise their voices and demands for their rights. Thus, Emecheta in her writing creates a space for the twenty-first century generation of Africans who strive for gender sensitivity however, as the selected narratives show, that 'battle' is hardly over, or won, as yet.

The miserable death of Nnu Ego at the end of the narrative is another angle that needs critical scrutiny. The sad ending of the novel inversely underscores the title of the narrative by revealing the irony that is dominant in the writing and is associated with motherhood for a woman. The joys of motherhood turn into the bitterness of motherhood complicated by

wifehood and womanhood. As a senior wife and mother of clever sons, Nnu Ego expects her children to grow and become great people who “might rub shoulders one day with the great men of Nigeria” (227), but like a barren and deserted woman, “she died quietly [there], with no child to hold her hand and no friend to talk to her. She had never really made many friends, so busy had she been building her joys as a mother” (253). Her silent mode of “not answer[ing] prayers from children” (254) represents Nnu Ego’s rebellion against traditional norms. In her analysis of women’s subjugation, marginalisation and othering, Nnaemeka expounds the idea of women’s silence as “an act of resistance” and this can “mean both a refusal to talk and an invitation for talk” (4). Unlike the armed movement, this kind of resistance, as Hernandez, Dongala, Jolaosho and Serafin put it, “is the challenging [of] beliefs, traditions and values” (6) which play with the woman’s sexuality as fetish and as body for producing sons. In this context, Nnu Ego’s silent voice represents her rejection of all forms of oppression against women by denying prayers regarding “women’s fertil[ility]” and motherhood, the institution that is used by patriarchs to consolidate their stranglehold over women.

## **Conclusion**

As members of an earlier generation of African women writers, Ogot and Emecheta depict the familial structure through the lens of African tradition. Whereas Ogot represents the family trope as a space for enhancing traditional systems and embracing patriarchal control, Emecheta uses the same trope to unsettle dominant power relations. She subverts the social construction of gender by empowering women (for example, Adaku) and emasculating men. The contrast between the depiction of family in *The Promised Land* and *The Joys of Motherhood* offers an opportunity to explore certain historical events that sparked revolutionary attitudes in Africa. One of the remarkable historical events affecting Africa is the Second World War, which catalysed the decolonisation process, enabling African countries to intensify the fight for independence and attain political independence in the late 1950s and 1960s. Associated with political independence, Emecheta’s narrative, in contrast to Ogot’s, stages another battle. It conveys the belief that a country is not independent if women are still under patriarchal domination. Decolonisation, according to Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood*, should aim at entrusting power to both African men and women. These writers through their imaginative works bring the institution of the family to the fore in criticising patriarchal hegemonic power. They are aware of the complex nature of being heard

by the patriarchal hierarchy; so they use the institution of the family, the smallest institution in the state to do so. Situating their writings in traditional African societies, these writers show how women through family ties were denied opportunities to excel in life, and how they were instead prepared to become housewives, while men were being prepared to become heroes and leaders of society. Ogot and Emecheta's narratives use the family to construct and deconstruct conventional and traditional ideas about women in relation to men. Chapter Three extends this discussion by expounding on familial change and arrangements by exploring gender role negotiation and examining how socio-economic and political changes influence the family institution.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Familial Change and Arrangements: Gender Role Negotiation

#### Introduction

This chapter focuses on the representation of the family trope and socio-economic changes in the post-colonial state as depicted in Forna's *Ancestor Stones* and Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. Forna and Shoneyin attempt to portray a world that is transforming to accommodate both men and women through the empowerment of women. In other words, these two narratives, in Cazenave's words, "break down the unspoken barriers [...] that circumscribe [a] woman's condition in African society" (88). The chapter centres its discussion on how the family structure, space and gender roles are negotiated, imagined and exercised in the texts.

The concept 'gender role negotiation' I use in this chapter denotes the transformation of gender roles within the family structure. It involves the bargaining for power where women use their space within the family to fight for gender equality and equity. Richard Coughlin, in theorising about conflict resolution, notes the differences between males and females in avenues of negotiation. Whereas males "employ conflictual, self-interested, and assertive bargaining styles in approaching negotiation," their female counterparts "tend to negotiate in a distinctive voice that emphasizes the centrality of relationships to the development of negotiating strategies" (326). In this sense, I examine the selected narratives in relation to how female characters in the family space play a proactive role as custodians in the transformation of gender roles. I draw much attention to these protagonists because of their ability to negotiate different spaces. As Coughlin points out, women are the best negotiators because they are oriented to "social relationships through which [they] are connected to others" and "they are better listeners" (324).

As a transformation concept, gender role negotiation provides one with an opportunity to survey the history of family and gender, their earlier forms and how they have been changing over time to suit the socio-cultural and political changes of the day. In Chapter Two I discussed the history of family as represented in earlier fiction by the African women writers, Ogot and Emecheta. I have argued that the family, in its traditional form, emerges as a powerful space for oppressing women through the institutions of wifhood and motherhood. I have also discussed how the family is used as a space for resistance to such oppression, and

for the formulation of liberating ideas. In this chapter, I explore how the contemporary generation of African women writers of this study build on their understanding gleaned from the earlier generation of African women writers to re-define the constitution of familial space and re-configure gender roles. I argue that these changes in the family structure and arrangement necessitate gender role negotiation. My argument is based on how Forna and Shoneyin's narratives historicise the polygynous family structure, suggesting a new trend of familial structure that disrupts the patriarchal hegemony, and how they empower women by rendering some men impotent and irresponsible.

Forna and Shoneyin imagine the family space drawing on their childhood memory and daily life experience. Whereas Forna writes from Britain, Shoneyin is based in Nigeria. This makes Forna's *Ancestor Stones* a diasporic narrative that chronicles the African familial structure based on the author's childhood memory. The oral stories Forna used to hear from her aunts and the families' cooks in Freetown, Sierra Leone, and her own experience of the extended family become resources that enrich her narrative. Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* is a narrative that is not based on childhood memory and encompasses "modern-day"<sup>25</sup> issues in Nigeria, reflecting the author's experience and daily interaction with her society. These narratives, regardless of their diversity in setting and residence of authors, speak to each other and engage readers to re-read the institution of polygyny in Africa, not only as a space that oppresses women, but also a centre for gender role negotiation.

These narratives provide a rich body of knowledge on polygyny and gender roles. They attempt to create a space where women can challenge patriarchal hegemony and negotiate for power in the family. One of the ways of challenging patriarchal control – the narratives suggest – is through bargaining or being involved in a struggle. Like Nnaemeka who argues that gender role negotiation must begin from the indigenous space that determines development in African societies, Forna and Shoneyin represent the family as a space for gender role negotiation. Nnaemeka makes the point clearer when she says that the indigenous is not the traditional, but it is what people consider to be "important to their lives, whatever they regard as an authentic expression of themselves" ("Nego-Feminism" 377). Nnaemeka's observation alludes to the centrality of the family institution as an 'indigenous' space in the whole process of gender role negotiation.

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<sup>25</sup> Shoneyin confesses in her interview with Nana Fredua-Agyeman that her novel, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, is concerned with polygyny in modern-day Ibadan. See also <http://freduagyeman.blogspot.com/2011/01/conversation-with-lola-shoneyin-author.html#!/2011/01/conversation-with-lola-shoneyin-author.html> for more discussion on the interview.

My use of ‘negotiation’ in this chapter is influenced by Nnaemeka’s theorisation of negotiation, that is, “the feminism of negotiation” (377). For Nnaemeka, negotiation means “give and take/exchange” and “cope with successfully/go around” (378) or what Coughlin calls “bargaining” (324) for power. Although I agree with Nnaemeka’s theorising of negotiation, I expand on it in this chapter to include navigation amidst hindering obstacles to marginalising and eliminating the oppressive party or what Wynand Piennar and Manie Spoelstra call “‘win-lose’ model of negotiation” (9). Thus, I discuss these narratives in relation to how they represent the family trope as a space for gender role negotiation and how female characters play a vital role in the process of intercession. This chapter is divided into two sections: the first section reads the depiction of polygynous familial structure by focusing on how Forna and Shoneyin’s narratives historicise the polygynous familial trope, and the second section centres the discussion on the new trend of familial structure as suggested in the narratives.

### **Historicising the Familial Structure and Space: Re-reading Polygyny**

Situating their narratives in the juxtaposition of historical past and present contexts, Forna and Shoneyin imagine how the institution of the family is subject to change over time. Their narratives provide a nexus between the past and the present, with the aim of eschewing the historical past that was built on patriarchal power dominance and gender inequality. The term ‘historicise’ I use in this section refers to going back to the past. It provides an opportunity to examine how and where the contemporary generation of African women writers begin to advocate for changes that “seek not only to reinterpret, but to change the world in favour of women” (Antonia Ekpa 28).<sup>26</sup> In historicising the familial structure and space, I read *Ancestor Stones* and *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* in relation to how they offer an opportunity to re-read the institution of polygyny in twenty-first century Africa. Based on their years of publication, I begin by looking at Forna’s *Ancestor Stones* and then Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*. In my discussion of these novels, I do not consider the representation of the history of familial structure and space as the end in the selected narratives; rather, I treat it as a stepping stone that allows contemporary African women writers to argue for changes in the institution of family. In both texts, the central male

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<sup>26</sup> See “Beyond Gender Warfare and Western Ideologies: African Feminism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” by Ekpa for more discussion about 21<sup>st</sup> century women writers and their determination to change the world for the betterment of both men and women.



characters and the families they lead are affected by their Islamic affiliations within their respective (rural past versus urban present) African contexts.

### ***Ancestor Stones* (2006)**

Forna was born in 1964 in Glasgow, Scotland, to a Sierra Leonian father and a Scottish mother. Following the death of her father who was hanged for treason, Fornas went to live with her mother in Scotland. In her childhood Fornas spent much of her time in Freetown, Sierra Leone, with the extended families' cooks who told her endless stories about patriarchal society, co-wifehood, traditional religion and the incursion of Islam and Christianity into Sierra Leone.<sup>27</sup> Fornas divides her life between London and Sierra Leone. She is an emerging writer and her first publication – *The Devil that Danced on the Water* – came in 2003. It was followed by *Ancestor Stones* (2006), *The Memory of Love* (2010) and *The Hired Man* (2013). *Ancestor Stones* is a narrative depicting polygyny. It is made up of multi-faceted stories told through the voices of four women in the Kholifa family: half-sisters Asana, Mariama, Hawa and Serah. The story centres on their father, Gibril Umaru Kholifa, who is a polygynous husband with eleven wives. The novel begins with a letter written by Alpha to his cousin, Abie, urging her to return home to revive the family's coffee plantation because she is the only one who has the potential to do so. Abie's aunts have decided to leave the family coffee plantation for her to restore to its former glory. When Abie returns home, she begins to hear stories from her aunts Asana, Mariama, Hawa and Serah. They are stories about polygynous family, civil wars, bi-racial marriage, economic struggle, education, religious conflicts, corruption and European incursion into mining centres. These stories, narrated by four women with different experiences of growing up in a polygynous family, provide Abie with important background information on her family's history. To capture her central theme, polygyny, Fornas presents characters who embrace it and those who challenge it, the latter with the aim of modifying it. However, some of the characters, especially mothers, are not developed enough for their voice commenting on the state of their polygynous family to be heard.

In discussing the history of familial structure and space as depicted in *Ancestor Stones*, I read the lives of some of the eleven wives of Gibril Kholifa Umaru, as narrated by Asana, Mariama, Hawa, and Serah, to establish their perception and experience of polygyny. I

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<sup>27</sup> In her memoir, *The Devil that Danced on the Water*, Fornas provides some background into her life and how she lived in an extended family in Sierra Leone.

consider these eleven wives of Gibril as the ‘older generation’ in the sense of the genealogy of female characters depicted in the narrative. As Harrow notes, *Ancestor Stones* is a novel that “takes us back a few generations to the women ancestors on the African side of her family” (13), arguably, to enable readers to grasp the changes in polygynous family structure as influenced by socio-cultural, economic and political pressures. Therefore, contemporary African women writers do not disavow history but rather change the perspective of narration according to the socio-cultural needs of the day. In other words, the return of Abie to Rofathane village from Scotland suggests the “cosmopolitan outlook of the narrative in which the past and present sustain one another in lively and evolving ways” (53).<sup>28</sup> For example, Emecheta’s female characters such as Adaku and Kehinde, as demonstrated in Chapter Two, promise to introduce women’s emancipation by educating girls and involving women in decision-making, but they do not show the extent to which their promises are fulfilled. Going further than Emecheta’s characters, Forna’s narrative reveals how female characters challenge patriarchal power by assuming power over and taking control of their own decision-making.

Born into a hugely polygynous family of eleven co-wives, the narrators – Asana, Mariama, Hawa and Serah – share similar stories about their mothers’ experience in a polygynous household. These narrators give a historical account of how their mothers were trapped in a polygynous institution. They depict their father, Gibril Umaru Kholifa, as a rich man who uses his wealth and religion to control and domesticate women. In narrating the contrast between her father, Gibril, and her husband, the slaughterhouse worker, Hawa says: “this man was so poor I became his only wife” (179-180). Since the slaughterhouse worker has no access to polygyny, Hawa has to lead her “married life working like a servant” (180). In the same vein, Asana marries a monogamous man but later she divorces him to marry into a polygynous family, which does not work on her side and she eventually decides to lead her own life with her children and grandchildren.

Based on these women’s adoption of polygyny, one can be tempted to ask, what does polygyny mean to Asana and Hawa? Critics such as Helen Ware (1979), Dominique Meekers and Nadra Franklin (1995), Obioma Nnaemeka (1997), Michael Boyle (2007) and Cynthia Cook (2007) view the institution of polygyny in the African traditional context as

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<sup>28</sup> Borman speaks of how African writers in the diaspora write back to Africa. See also “Literature of Return: Back to Africa, Belonging and Modernity” by Borman for more discussion about contemporary African diasporic writers and their agenda on coming back to Africa through narratives.

advantageous to women. In their analysis of polygyny, these scholars underscore the issues of shared responsibility and an enlarged labour force in the family. The higher the number of wives in the household, the less the toil individual women experience in the polygynous family. Hawa, married to a generous husband, the slaughterhouse worker, does not love him, for she says: “but he was not the man I loved” (179). As a result, she decides to divorce him and marry Khalil. The failure to produce children with Khalil because of tubal ligation makes Hawa hated by her husband and mother-in-law. The hatred forces Hawa, like Efuru in Nwapa’s *Efuru*, to find Khalil, another wife (Zainab), who will help not only in producing children, but also with household activities. Thus Hawa says, “I found Khalil a wife [...] I complained there was too much work for me, what with the trading I did at my stall in front of the house. I needed somebody to cook and to mind the children” (191).

Hawa encourages readers to see the institution of polygyny as a negotiating tool for defining gender roles in traditional African societies. It was powerful in lessening the traditionally conventionalised ‘women’s roles’ in the family. In this regard, Hawa communicates a form of gender role negotiation through what Nnaemeka calls “compromise” (378)<sup>29</sup> with patriarchal power. She grew up in a polygynous system and is, therefore, aware of men’s desire to marry as many women as they can. In this context, Hawa is not only the link between the historical and the present polygynous family structure, but also reshapes modern day polygyny by using what Ogunyemi regards as men’s “libidinous disposition” (“Womanism” 76) as a means of avoiding gender oppression. Therefore, Hawa uses the institution of polygyny as a weapon to lessen the burdensome gender roles that are shouldered by women. Hawa’s disapproval of her husband is not only because he is too poor to marry other wives, but also because she cannot be flexible in making her own decisions. Based on Meekers and Franklin’s views on the mutual relationship between wealth and polygyny, Gibril Umaru Kholifa subscribes to African tradition because he is rich, as such high economic status in a traditional context is a precondition for a polygynous marriage. Women also prefer polygyny “because polygynous husbands tend to be wealthy” (315)<sup>30</sup> and there is the possibility for them also to be rich.

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<sup>29</sup> See “Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing and Pruning Africa’s Way” by Nnaemeka for more discussion on how women negotiate power amidst patriarchal hegemony.

<sup>30</sup> See also the theorising of polygyny and its advantages in “Women’s Perception of Polygyny among the Kaguru of Tanzania” by Meekers and Franklin.

The need for women's flexibility and the lessening of 'women's roles' in polygynous marriage is also captured by Ya Namina, the senior wife of Gibril. More importantly, she has the authority to choose wives for her husband and assign them responsibilities in taking care of their husband. Ya Namina's role as a senior wife is to "maximise [the family's] economic benefits by selecting hard-working co-wives, and to limit intrafamily conflicts by choosing those junior co-wives [she] likes" (Meekers and Franklin 315), and the ones who can respect her as a senior wife. Here one can ask, what does polygyny mean to her as a woman? By paying attention to gender roles, is Ya Namina not subjecting her fellow women to the trap of patriarchal power and oppression? And how does the narrative appear to respond to Michele Tertilt's assumption that polygyny obstructs "economic development" (523)<sup>31</sup> in Sub-Saharan Africa? Such questions bring to mind scholars such as Nakanyike Musisi and Nnaemeka in relation to their theorising of polygyny in Africa.

Focusing on the Buganda Kingdom, Musisi warns against the dangers of misrepresenting polygyny systems in Africa. She calls for a critical distinction between the polygyny systems practised in pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial times. For Musisi, the pre-colonial polygyny system was strategically used by elites "to create and ultimately to control not only economic, but also political and social components of a state apparatus" (758). Besides, these Baganda women, says Musisi, were not excluded from political processes but rather "played an important role at state level in balancing internal and regional politics" (786). Musisi looks at pre-colonial polygyny as an institution that was decent to women because it made them visible in public spheres. Using Musisi's observation, I argue that *Ancestor Stones* considers the institution of polygyny as both advantageous and disadvantageous for women. The narrative describes the relationship among women in the polygynous family using the Mende word – '*Ores*' – which means co-wife and rival. Based on the power of Ya Namina as a senior wife, Forna represents the polygynous family as a space for women's empowerment, "maintenance of equity, justice, harmony, and sharing of responsibility" (Nnaemeka, "Spaces" 173). The narrative refutes Tertilt's assertion that polygyny obstructs development in many Sub-Saharan African countries, as the novel perceives it as a space for socialisation among women and for increasing family wealth.

According to Cook and also Wakota (in different contexts), Ya Namina subscribes to African traditions by accepting the polygyny system that "provides children (and workers) for

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<sup>31</sup> Tertilt is discussing polygyny as an institution that undermines women's rights and the source of economic underdevelopment. For more discussion, see "Polygyny, Women's Rights, and Development" by Tertilt.

Africa's predominantly agricultural society, sons for men, and social security for women in their old age" (249). For Wakota elsewhere, Ya Namina holds the view that having "many children means more labour and more labour means wealth" (56). Arguing in line with Musisi, Cook and Wakota, Nnaemeka blames Western feminist critics for misrepresenting the polygyny system in Africa. She aptly argues that, "African women who are in polygynous marriages are not morons or powerless, exploited, [and] downtrodden victims" (167). Indeed, such power and empowerment of women in the pre-colonial era as articulated by Musisi and Nnaemeka is evident through the co-operation among the co-wives in Gibril's family. Apart from quarrels and jealousy, they live as sisters; each is aware of the others and they are responsible for taking care of all children in the polygynous household. For instance, Ya Isatta helps to look after Ya Namina's children. What can be regarded as the decline of polygynous marriage in the contemporary African context, as Nnaemeka notes, is caused by, among other factors, the emergence of big cities and modernity, "where it is difficult for a civil servant to maintain two or three homes" (174). The traditional polygynous system is thus replaced by what Nnaemeka calls "a serial" monogamy that allows frequent divorce and conjugal relationships, or what Mulder calls a system in which "men marry women sequentially, or women marry men sequentially" (131), which disrupts co-operation among co-wives as it used to be in traditional societies.

However, the kind of polygyny Fornas's narrative is suggesting through the wives of Gibril is one that allows for interaction among co-wives and respects the hierarchy in the family, that is, from senior to junior wife. Such a family structure is also well articulated in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Nwapa's *Efuru*, where the senior-junior wife roles are distinctively articulated and practised without quarrel among them. This type of polygyny is far from that depicted in Bâ's *So Long a Letter*. Here, the character Modou Fall marries the young Binetou and deserts his senior wife, Ramatoulaye. Pondering on Modou's version of his modern form of polygyny, Nnaemeka says, "Modou's action is the foolish act of an irresponsible, wayward spouse and sugar daddy that has absolutely nothing to do with the institution of polygyny as it is inscribed both in Islamic law and African culture" ("Spaces," 177-178). Subscribing to the "inscription of African culture" as Nnaemeka puts it, Ya Namina controls her co-wives to make sure that they obey her as a senior wife and act according to the needs of their patriarchal husband. Ya Namina "didn't like a wife she couldn't control" (64) and as a result she was to be the only one to choose women to marry her husband. The mutual understanding

among co-wives and co-operation in solving their family problems validate the social mutualism of the African polygynous family.

That explains why Hawa, even after having experienced her mother's life in a polygynous marriage, defines the concept of 'co-wifeness' using the Mende word '*ores*' to mean

[t]he women who share your husband with you. The women with whom you take turns to cook. The women you give whatever is left over in your own pot. The women who are the other mothers of your children, who suckle your baby when your own milk has dried up or unexpectedly soured [...] the word [*ores*] has another meaning [...] it means rival.  
(65)

Notably in such a huge polygynous family, it is hard to meet the interests of every individual and, therefore, rivalries are unavoidable. What matters is the harmony and co-operation forged among co-wives. Since Asana, Mariama, Hawa and Serah represent the generation of African women who are exposed to the two worlds (traditional and modern), they offer a critique of these worlds based on their own experience. Knowing the advantages their mothers have in a polygynous household, Asana and Hawa opt for polygyny, which does not work for them. The difficulties stem from changes in time and space. They need first to reconfigure the polygynous system according to the needs of the modern world and make it a central institution for gender role negotiation. For example, Asana marries Osman Iscandari and becomes a third wife but later she divorces him and Hawa, after divorcing the slaughterhouse worker, marries Khalil and assists her husband, Khalil, to marry another woman, Zainab. Khalil and Zainab eventually run off, leaving Hawa helpless. The decision for Asana and Hawa to divorce communicates the diminishing power of the institution of polygyny as a space of negotiation in African traditional societies. Rather, while challenging the womanist approach, they suggest divorce as a space of negotiation in modern societies.

The history of polygyny as narrated by the four Kholifa family members inspires readers to consider the silence of the eleven wives of Gibril. In theorising the discourse of power, Michel Foucault views silence as a shelter for power. He aptly observes: "silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions; but they also loosen its holds and provide for relatively obscure areas of tolerance" (*Sexuality* 101). Reading the eleven co-wives against the backdrop of Foucault's ideas, one sees silence not only as a shelter for power but

also a state of compromise and readiness to accept situations as they unfold. Forna's text has silenced the co-wives to give their daughters (the next generation as narrators) an opportunity to speak on their behalf. Here, there is a danger of misinterpreting their perception of polygyny. As Nnaemeka warns, "speaking for others requires carefully walking a fine line between participation and usurpation [...] speaking for others does not create absence and exclusion" ("Spaces" 163). The co-wives' participation in commenting on the state of their marriage in a polygynous family is muted.

The fact that Gibril marries only one wife, Tenkamu, out of choice indicates how polygyny is driven by women. The narrator says, "After she [Ya Namina] was widowed she could have returned to her own people as other wives did. But she stayed and chose a new husband from the younger brothers. She chose my father" (16). Then she became the senior wife and the rest of the other co-wives, except Tenkamu, "were chosen by Ya Namina" (64). Women are interested in marrying Gibril because he is a chief and a rich man. Despite the oppressive aspects they encounter in their polygynous marriage, such as being forced to desert their traditional religions, some of these women have accepted it and live a happy life. Their readiness to be in a polygynous familial structure communicates not only a form of gender role negotiation that could enable them to lessen the burden of gender roles that were shouldered by women, but also a desire to benefit from their husband's wealth. The willingness of women to join the polygynous family, as depicted in this narrative, indicates that in a traditional African setting or what Musisi calls 'precolonial' time, a polygynous family system was not a problem and women preferred it and were ready to join it because it facilitated role shifts and fostered co-operation among co-wives. What Asana, Mariama, Hawa, and Serah view as oppressive to women can be attributed to the influence of modernity, where polygyny is perceived as an institution of intensifying patriarchal hegemony.

Whereas Forna portrays polygyny by situating her narrative between pre-colonial and colonial times, Shoneyin, as I discuss in the section below, sets her story in the post-colonial period. Reading these two narratives, one encounters, on the one hand, how Forna represents the African polygynous familial structure that values labour power and co-operation among co-wives in the household. Shoneyin's narrative, on the other hand, underscores the pressure from parents, men's desire for children, and poverty among women as the major causes of polygyny.



***The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives (2010)***

Born in 1974 in Ibadan, Nigeria, Shoneyin was the only girl in a family of six children. She went to school in Nigeria and Edinburgh in Scotland. Eventually, Shoneyin obtained her teaching degree from London Metropolitan University. Apart from being an emerging novelist, Shoneyin has published two collections of poetry, 'So All the Time I was Sitting on an Egg' (1998) and 'Song of a Riverbird' (2002). *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* – Shoneyin's debut novel – is a story about a polygynous family and its dynamics. The story unfolds through the patriarchal and polygynous husband, Ishola Alao, also known as Baba Segi, who has four wives, namely (in the order of seniority) Iya Segi, Iya Tope, Iya Femi and Bolanle. Set in a modern town, Ibadan, the novel shows how literate and illiterate women are forced by circumstances to marry into polygynous situations. Whereas the first three wives of Baba Segi decide to marry him to escape from poor living conditions in their homes, Bolanle marries Baba Segi because of ill-treatment and displeasure from her mother. When Iya Segi realises that Baba Segi cannot produce children, she discreetly becomes the lover of Taju, Baba Segi's driver, who successfully impregnates her. Iya Segi, later on, shares this secret mission of looking for men outside the confines of the marriage with her co-wives, Iya Tope and Iya Femi. To avoid competition in their marriage, the three co-wives jealously prevent Bolanle from knowing how children in Baba Segi's household are being conceived. Unfortunately, the coming of Bolanle, the fourth wife and a university graduate, does not only add competition in their marriage but also exposes the impotence of Baba Segi. Therefore, the narrative questions assumptions about fatherhood and polygyny in modern day Africa. One of the themes in this narrative is polygyny. This theme is well-crafted, using a simple and straight-forward plot that makes readers grasp the message easily. On the other hand, Shoneyin has used 'plain' language, with few literary devices and figures of speech that could make the literariness of her work more solid.

To historicise the institution of polygyny in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, I focus the discussion on the first three wives of Baba Segi: Iya Segi, Iya Tope and Iya Femi. Since these female characters are illiterate and come from poor family backgrounds, they provide an insight into illiterate women's perceptions of polygyny. Shoneyin, when asked in the interview by Fredua-Agyeman about her views on polygyny, claims modern polygyny is an institution which the majority of women join because they are illiterate, unskilled and often have limited aspirations. These women, according to Shoneyin, come from rural areas where

education is seldom given to women and they are not given opportunities to see themselves as anything more than a man's property.

Born in a single-parent family headed by a mother, Iya Segi, Baba Segi's senior wife, develops a negative attitude towards men. She is told by her mother that her father left her "pursu[ing] another woman's hole and died inside it" (97). The hatred of men pushes Iya Segi to start making and selling *fufu* (one of the traditional and staple foods among the Yoruba) in order to live an independent life. She also develops a habit of worshipping money, and "even when boys teased [her] she was not bothered but looked at them and sniggered, knowing their father's fathers could not have a fraction of the wealth [she] had accumulated" (98). Iya Segi's mother communicates this form of resistance against patriarchal power by advising her daughter to reject the institution of marriage; however, her circumstances do not allow it.<sup>32</sup> On her deathbed, Iya Segi's rebellious mother finds herself falling into the pattern of tradition by forcing her daughter to marry and bear children: "do you want to become a ghost in the world of the living? That is not how I want to leave you in this world" (101). Iya Segi's mother wants to ensure the continuity of her lineage. As a result, she collects the money which Iya Segi had accumulated from selling *fufu* and gives it to Ishola Alao, the man who later becomes Iya Segi's husband.

Iya Segi's mother's complicity with Baba Segi illustrates the failure of gender role negotiation in traditional societies where women find themselves forced by circumstances to be custodians of patriarchal oppression. It is worth noting that Baba Segi uses the money received from Iya Segi's mother to begin a business that attracts more money and becomes rich. Here the narrative underscores the power of women in initiating action over the future course of their lives. It invites readers to read a woman as a creative and significant figure in development. As Meekers and Franklin suggest, affluence is a precondition for polygyny in an African traditional context – like that in *Ancestor Stones*. Baba Segi's accumulation of wealth adds to his patriarchal status, which he uses to marry more wives. For example, when the crops fail to produce on Iya Tope's father's farm due to excessive drought, Baba Segi is asked by Iya Tope's father to marry his daughter and pay the bride price that would compensate for the crop failure. Without Iya Tope's consent, these two patriarchs reach an agreement that allows Baba Segi to marry her. This arranged marriage forces Iya Tope to

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<sup>32</sup> Marriage in the African context, according to Mbiti, is the focus of existence and among its purposes is remembrance of parents after death. Anyone who dies without leaving behind a child or relative who will ensure her/his existence is counted as a very unfortunate person. For more information see *African Religions and Philosophy* and *Introduction to African Religion* by Mbiti.

confront the issue of her identity as a woman in a patriarchal world. She is left pondering who has the right to control women's bodies. Why does her older brother tell her that she is ripe for marriage while she still considers herself a child?

Iya Tope's intriguing questions evoke the ideas of post-colonial and feminist critic Minh-ha, who warns against the danger of relying on differences in constructing identities. She observes that, "differences as uniqueness or special identity is both limiting and deceiving" (95). If we define womanhood as based on sexual identity, says Minh-ha, we are justifying and concealing exploitation and making the body "the safest basis for racist and sexist ideologies" (100). Arguing in line with Minh-ha, Cazenave makes a conclusive statement that the body becomes "a manifestation of psychosomatic troubles" (127) that puts a woman at risk of being fetishised and exploited by the patriarchal hegemony. Drawing on Minh-ha and Cazenave's observations, I consider *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* as a narrative that engages readers to see the patriarchal system as one that constructs a society based on differences. The patriarchal system defines a woman's body using physical differences and by so doing perpetuates the exploitation of women. For example, Iya Tope is defined according to how hard she can work on the farm for the betterment of her husband: she is "as strong as three donkeys" (81). She has to be sacrificed to Baba Segi to rescue her family from famine. Thus Iya Tope perceives herself as someone who has been reduced to the level of an object: she is "like tubers of cassava in the basket. May be something even less, something strange – a tuber with eyes, a nose, arms and two legs" (82). In this context, the female body is not only denied the right to speak her mind in public, but is also used as a symbol for survival of family members, because it is Iya Tope's womanhood that rescues the family from famine.

Knowing the benefits she gets from living in an urban polygynous household, such as not engaging in farming activities, Iya Tope devotes herself to staying with Baba Segi. She doesn't "want to go back to the village" (84). Iya Tope's refusal to leave Baba Segi's home and resolve to continue staying in a polygynous family echo Ware and Nnaemeka's theorisation of polygyny. These scholars, as I have argued elsewhere, consider the institution of polygyny as advantageous to women because it brings about shared responsibilities in the household. In her study of Nigerian women, Ware argues that polygyny is perceived by illiterate women as a building block for kinship networks with new ties. This kinship network exists because of the polygynous situation that can result in a larger number of family members. These illiterate women hold the view that the higher the number of wives in the

polygynous family, the greater the number of children produced in the household. Since Iya Tope comes from an illiterate family, she remains in the polygynous family because she does not only want to escape the hostile nature of her patriarchal father but also, like Iya Segi and Iya Femi, wants to benefit from the wealth of Baba Segi and have her own family to expand the kinship network. Therefore, she compromises in order to continue benefiting from the wealth of Baba Segi, escaping from her patriarchal father and having her own family that enables her to extend the kinship networks. Doing so helps her to come to terms with the patriarchal system.

Moreover, Iya Tope commits to staying in Baba Segi's compound as a co-wife despite the hatred and abuse she gets from Baba Segi for delaying her conception. However, she subverts Baba Segi's patriarchal control by having a sexual relationship with the meat-seller, who makes her pregnant and helps to maintain her marriage with Baba Segi. Her readiness to cooperate with Iya Segi in controlling Baba Segi's compound communicates a form of control and balance of gender roles. Here, I argue in line with Ware that polygyny helps women in "sharing the burden of the husband's sexual demands" (189). Baba Segi, in different contexts, is described by his wives as an awkward man who does not know how to handle his sexual desires. Iya Tope and Iya Femi say:

...that was how I lived: three days of pummelling from Baba Segi and a day of healing from the meat-seller" (86) [...] "He wasn't like Tunde at all. There was no sucking, no licking, no nuzzling, no moistening. Baba Segi was heavy, everything about him was awkward" (130) [...] Baba Segi's penis was so big that two men could share it and still be well endowed. (132)

These women have subverted patriarchal dominance by negotiating their way within a polygynous system. By having sexual relations with other men outside the matrimonial structure, they undermine patriarchal power in the family. In this stance, as the excerpt above demonstrates, these women, apart from pitying Baba Segi for his infertility, look at him as someone who does not satisfy them sexually. This reality prompts Iya Femi to maintain her love relationship with Tunde, her former boyfriend. She deliberately allows herself to be impregnated by Tunde to sustain her marriage to Baba Segi, especially after realising that

Baba Segi cannot make her pregnant. She also knows how society oppresses women. Her first encounter with oppression is when she loses her parents and her uncle forces her to leave her parents' house because "a girl cannot inherit her father's house" (121) and she reacts by burning down the house. The second encounter is when she is oppressed by Grandma, where she works as a housemaid. It is in Grandma's place that she falls in love with Tunde, the only son of Grandma. Here the narrative shows how some women reinforce the patriarchal system to oppress their fellow-women. Therefore, by having an extramarital relation, burning her uncle's inherited house and expediting her impregnation by Tunde, Iya Femi perpetrates a form of vengeance against patriarchy.

The harassment by Grandma makes Iya Femi tell Taju, Baba Segi's driver to persuade Baba Segi to marry her, as a way of escaping from a life of torture and harassment. Eventually, when Iya Femi is married to Baba Segi, she continues visiting Tunde, who eventually makes her pregnant. Her relationship with Tunde and eventually a child, Femi, can be interpreted as retaliation against Grandma. Iya Femi wants to show Grandma that she has the potential to marry her son, but she cannot marry him because Baba Segi has conquered her and "not even God Himself could have made [her] leave Baba Segi's house" (130). Here the novel explores the complex considerations that consolidate the institution of polygyny.

On the whole, Fornas and Shoneyin, in the work discussed, seem to suggest that in traditional societies, women joined the institution of polygyny not only because they wanted material wealth and desired to escape from patriarchal oppression from their families, but also because it was a form of gender role negotiation that could improve their lot. By marrying a polygynous husband, women could lessen the traditionally ascribed gender roles and attain flexibility in their marriage. For example, the eleven wives of Gibril share the household chores. Similarly, Iya Segi, Iya Tope and Iya Femi maintain their particular marriage arrangements by having other men outside the wedlock who help them conceive. Ultimately, these women want to create a society that respects women in the same way as it does men. In other words, as I discuss in the section below, they suggest a new kind of family that values gender equality and equity.

## The New Trend of Familial Arrangement

In this section, I use the concept of ‘new trend’ to mean the point of departure from the older generation of African women writers. Unlike Ogot and Emecheta’s writings, Forna and Shoneyin write for twenty-first century generation readers who have a different life experience than African women of earlier periods because of socio-political and economic changes. Therefore, I use Forna’s *Ancestor Stones* and Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* as narratives that speak to changes in family structure and space, and their implications for gender role negotiation. I do so by discussing how the selected narratives revise the familial structure, which in a way suggests gender role negotiation in an environment where patriarchal control still dominates. In exploring these narratives’ representation of a new trend in familial arrangement, I argue in line with Boehmer’s view that “any piece of writing is a product of its time” (*Colonial* 8). They reconfigure the family structure so as to make room for women to have power in the household and the nation as a whole. To give autonomy to each narrative to be discussed, I divide this section into two sub-sections, focusing on each of the novels respectively.

### Reconfiguration of Family Structure and Space in *Ancestor Stones*

Forna creates female characters who are conscious of what it means to be a woman in the twenty-first century. Her characters are ready to break the chains of oppression and victimisation engendered by patriarchy. For example, the narrative suppresses the teachings of mothers to their daughters that aim to subject them to patriarchal power: “before you are married keep both eyes open and after you are married close one eye. But when I was young I closed my ears instead” (107). However, later Asana regrets not listening to her mother’s advice when she gets involved in an abusive marriage, but, as discussed below, she stands firm by formulating a single parent family structure. Female characters are determined to change the world to one in which a woman’s body is no longer a fetish and a marker of traditions that deify men’s power over women. The ‘closing of ears’, as Asana demonstrates, is a sign of resistance. It is instrumental in signifying the female character’s refusal to accept the ‘old traditions’ that deny women the power of decision-making in the family. Instead, it creates a new trajectory in which women can exercise their power without being interfered with by their patriarchal counterparts. In traditional societies, while sons answer to their fathers in the course of maintaining patriarchal control over women, daughters are

answerable to their mothers. Mothers teach their daughters what is expected of them as women, wives, and mothers and, therefore, patriarchal ideas permeate the daughters' minds through the mothers' agency. What Asana does however not only rejects the 'old traditions' that oppress women but also dismantles a family structure that divides children on a gender basis.

Pointing out the new direction women can take to subvert men's power dominance over women, the narrative suggests revisiting African traditions with the aim of modifying them. It disrupts the discourses that articulate binary oppositions such as men/women, husband/wife, traditional/modern, child/adult, and religious/non-religious, which are the sources of inequality in the family and in society at large. By so doing, the novel inevitably creates a new form of family structure where the father figure, as portrayed by the older generation of African women writers, is no longer the head of the family. Even in polygynous situations the father is silenced to give women a chance to speak. For example, Ya Namina, the senior wife, is in charge of everything in the family: "she paid the workers their wages and held the keys to the store; she ordered the provisions and hired the servants" (31) and the rest of the other wives are answerable to her, except for Tenkam.

Whereas Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* suggests empowering women through emasculating men such as Nnaife and Ubani, *Ancestor Stones* goes a step further by empowering women. It gives power to Ya Namina to control the family. The same applies to Asana, who marries Osman Iscandari as a third wife. When Asana is ill-treated by her husband, she seeks advice from her senior wife, Ngadie, who advises her to break up the marriage (127). Therefore, the narrative gives women power to make decisions for and to control their families. To achieve this role, it recommends co-operation among women in order to defeat patriarchal dominance.

*Ancestor Stones* advocates a non-competitive environment where women can excel in their struggle to achieve a worthwhile life without being in conflict with patriarchy. This is justified by Asana's complaint against her brother. She says, Alusani's "best deed in this world was to take from me what was mine" (17). As a result, Asana wishfully thinks of seeing her twin brother (Alusani) die for her to win back her mother (30). While Asana's views echo Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*,<sup>33</sup> *Ancestor Stones*, likewise, appears to

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<sup>33</sup> The protagonist, Tambudzai, in *Nervous Conditions* celebrates the elimination of patriarchal control (symbolically) through the death of her brother, Nhamo.



consider patriarchy one of the enemies of women's success in their struggle for empowerment. The narrative's suggestion that it is necessary to eliminate men who are obstacles to women's struggle echoes Foucault's theorisation of sovereign power. As Foucault observes, "if someone dared to rise up against him [sovereign power] and transgress his laws, then he could exercise a direct power over the offender's life as punishment, [and] the latter would be put to death" (*Power* 135). Arguing in line with Foucault, Mbembe in "Necropolitics" makes the point clearer by pointing to Foucault's concept of 'biopower' that "appears to function through dividing people into those who must live and those who must die" (16-17). Evoking the ideas of Foucault and Mbembe, Forna has created a woman who has authoritative power to decide on 'who must live and who must die', to borrow Mbembe's phrase. In such a decision made by a woman, patriarchal rule in the family is overturned to make room for both men and women to exercise their power equally.

Indeed, the ambition to build a society that grants power and authority to women and men equally is very central in this narrative. Forna depicts female characters that are determined to change. She juxtaposes the older generation (Gibril's eleven wives) and the contemporary generation (their daughters who are also narrators) to show their differences and how to resolve them. The narrative considers 'marriage,' 'bride price' and 'divorce' as concepts that depend on and influence each other. Marriage in the traditional context (as instantiated, in most cases, in the earlier generation narratives such as Ogot's *The Promised Land*, Nwapa's *Efuru*, and Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*) cannot be achieved without the bride price; it is a prerequisite for marriage. In contrast, for *Ancestor Stones*, the bride price is not a necessary condition for marriage. It is used as a tool for negotiating divorce. At the same time, the narrative introduces divorce as a counter-discourse to negotiate binary oppositions such as the husband/wife power relationship. For example, the frequent "travelling, [the] boarding, [the] buying and selling" (94) of Saffie, Serah's mother, aims to get money to pay back her bride price as a way to negotiate divorce. As Serah insists:

our mother's bride price equalled the price of a one carat diamond. Cash only. On top of which she received a cow which was hers for the milking. Non-returnable. Two country cloths and four double lengths of waxed cotton, one dozen sticks of salt at two shillings each, cowries, rice, cocoa beans, gold and one umbrella, distributed to guests and family: all were listed by the court and added to the debt. To be repaid in

full [...] she buys a three-legged stand and sets herself up in business selling eggs on the roadside. We buy our eggs for two pennies each, boil them and sell them for five pennies each. (97)

Thus Serah shows how her mother, Saffie, struggles for a divorce in a push for liberation. She has to work hard to pay back the bride price to Gibril however, she never manages to do this. The narrative makes the matter complex when Saffie fails to pay back the bride price and divorces Gibril. Such a complication engages readers in exploring the kind of resistance Saffie puts up to demonstrate her commitment in struggling for liberation. She knows how much she has suffered in the institution of a marriage engineered by the bride price. Therefore, she goes away (“heading to the South”) without paying back the bride price (101) as the court of elders agreed. Saffie’s rejection to pay back the bride price communicates her rebellion against patriarchy system. Likewise, Hawa says:

when he had accepted my bride price my father knew he was marrying me to a man who was beneath me. The amount was so little. Like I was worthless, the last item left behind at an auction [...] so one day I went to ask him to pay back this small amount of money, to free me from my marriage. (189)

Due to changes in the society, under the influence of modernity, even court elders have changed and realise the importance of treating women fairly in the institution of marriage. In this case, the court of elders (exclusively male) lays the ground for gender role negotiation. It establishes what Pienaar and Spoelstra call the “common ground” (4) from which some women come together with men to negotiate gender roles for their future betterment. The court of elders encourages divorce in circumstances where women are ill-treated “to teach a lesson to those young men who could not afford wives of their own” (94). The novel appears to discourage the payment of the bride price, as this diminishes the value of a woman. Apart from equating women to saleable commodities, the bride price facilitates the domestication of a woman and muffles her voice in the public sphere.

Apart from describing divorce and widowhood through Asana, the novel perceives motherhood as an essential aspect of African women. It represents motherhood as an institution that gives power to a woman. By underscoring the aspect of motherhood, Forna’s narrative revisits Ogunyemi’s ideas of womanism. For Ogunyemi, an African womanist

writer has to root her writing in the black context: “its ideal is for black unity where every black person has a modicum of power” of being a father, brother, mother, sister or any other sort of social stratification that brings power to an individual (“Womanism” 72). Her views are further supported by Arndt who, referring to Ogunyemi’s view on motherhood, comments that the point of departure for African womanists from their African-American counterparts is their “obsession to have children” (“Gender Trouble” 712).

Forna represents female characters that are proud of being mothers. They value motherhood as the sole institution that distinguishes them from men. Whereas Ogunyemi in her theorisation of womanism recognises the presence of men in the institution of motherhood, Fornas narrative pushes them to the periphery: they are muted and made invisible in the narrative as if they do not have anything to do with motherhood. For example, we see Asana’s granddaughter, Adama, being pregnant, but the narrative does not show the man responsible for the pregnancy. In this context, men are only needed by women when they crave babies. Here Asana indirectly introduces a ‘win-win’ form of gender role negotiation where, at different times, a man and a woman need each other. Thus, Fornas novel discourages wifhood and husbandhood. It creates single parent family structure headed by a woman. For example, Asana says: “in my dreams I lived in this house with my children, everybody fat and smiling [...] Nowhere. You see, in my dream there was no man. Just me and my house and my children. And I knew I was as happy as I ever would be” (244). It was a dream that later turns into reality. After the death of her husband, Asana refuses to marry again, despite pressure from her aunts. She decides to lead her own life by living like a man, becoming a ‘mambore’. She divides her time between selling in her shop and staying with her daughter (Adie), granddaughter (Adama) and her great granddaughter. This signifies the new direction in which Fornas narrative has ventured in the course of fighting for women’s empowerment. It has revisited Ogunyemi’s womanist approach by pushing men to the periphery, as I have argued elsewhere, to avoid competition with women in their struggle for gender balance.

Instead, Asana embarks on trading activities to navigate her way through patriarchal dominance. She exemplifies Andrade’s contention that West African women have historically been visible in the public sphere. Andrade notes that “West African women in particular are famous as traders, and they have had enormous influence over the domestic economy by setting prices and controlling the availability of goods” (“Rioting” 92). Fornas narrative portrays Asana as a woman ready to cast off the traditional ties that limit women to the

domestic space. She is closer to Madam Turay, a business woman, who draws her into business. Madam Turay makes Asana consider trading activities as the only means that can enable her to rid herself of the patriarchal yoke. For example, her travelling from Sierra Leone to Lagos and Accra to buy cloths for sale back home enables her to meet with women from other countries. As Asana explains, “We stayed with four other women. Two from Ghana. One from Guinea. Another from Upper Volta. All doing the same thing we were doing. All traders” (243). The narrative shows that the time has come for women to engage in trading activities. In their trading activities, the novel calls for co-operation and solidarity among women. For example, Serah co-operates with Madam Turay and they manage to open their own store, namely “Kholifa Turay Cloth Merchants” (244). Such advancement in business enables women to make decisions, not only in arranging prices for goods as Andrade suggests, but also in having a voice in the public sphere. That is why even other female characters such as Serah, Mariama, and Asana opt for politics, teaching and business, respectively, so as to have a space where their voices can be heard. Through their professional careers, they can not only challenge the socio-cultural activities that suppress women, but also participate in economic activities and have an authoritative voice to comment on the state of the post-colonial nation.

More importantly, the narrative bridges the gap between whites and blacks. It considers bi-racial marriage as one of the ways women can adopt to extend their power beyond the geopolitical national boundaries. The marriage of Abie to a Scottish husband echoes Ogunyemi’s womanist ideas because it strikes a balance between blacks and whites. Arguing on the link between blacks and whites in the black feminist struggle, Ogunyemi calls for the examination of racism in African women’s writings. The representation of Abie’s family as stable and “admired by [Abie’s] family and friends” (8) in Sierra Leone exemplifies the mutual co-operation between blacks and whites. While in Sierra Leone, Abie’s aunts call her husband “the Portuguese One, the *potho*, which has become [her] people’s word for any European” (8), because Abie’s husband reminds the Sierra Leoneans of their former colonial masters. They left wounds that are not easily healed. They “set up trading posts. Bred bronze-coloured Pedros and Marias. And disappeared leaving scattered words as remnants of their stay” (8). Here one would expect Abie’s husband to be hated by Sierra Leoneans because he reminds them of the traumas of Portuguese colonialism. Instead Abie, her husband and children are accommodated in Rofathane village. They work together planting coffee and manage to establish their own estate, namely “Kholifa Estate” (317). So, Forna imagines

marriage as a tool for negotiating identities between whites and blacks. Since the majority of Sierra Leoneans cannot distinguish Europeans in terms of their nationalities, Abie has united Africa and Europe. They produce children who are in a space between Africa and Europe.

Furthermore, the narrative introduces education as one of the negotiating tools women can use in their struggle for equal power with men. It advocates for women's formal education. Though one is aware of the side-effects of Western education, such as cultural alienation or what Ngũgĩ regards as 'dismemberment,' Forna's narrative makes readers consider education as a ground that women can use to make their demands heard in public. The narrator says, "when they saw the world changing the local people changed too, and decided now they wanted to send their daughters to the nun's school" (131). Forna represents how socio-cultural, economic and political changes have influenced the society to the extent of its valuing the contribution of some women in the making of the post-colonial state. She breaks the traditional construction of men as the sole eligible beneficiaries of Western education, with domesticity a preserve for women. Using her character, Mariama, Forna demonstrates the usefulness of Western education to women. The narrative makes readers sympathise with Mariama for being forced to change her name into Mary under the influence of "the Pagan-Baby Project" (132) for her to be baptised. Mariama says: "the nuns took it away and replaced [it] with something that sounded like my name that I learned to answer to" (299). It is not just a matter of sympathy; rather, the novel wants to draw readers' attention to the benefits one gets from Western education. For example, Serah is registered for postgraduate studies in England. Though she gives up immediately when her baby Junior is born, when back home she becomes a political activist. As a returning officer, together with her friend, Redempta, Serah is determined to change the regime through democratic means. She holds the view that free and fair elections are achieved when people are free to choose the person they want, without any intimidation that may come from the army. Failure to free and fair election, Serah was able to use undemocratic means to make sure that the leader of her choice wins the election. During the first election, when people do not show up at voting stations, Serah manipulates the votes by "filling in voting slips and making thumbprints" (274). In the second, she chains herself to the ballot box to make sure that the candidate of her choice wins the election. She criticises the government for using the power of the army to frighten people off as a means of denying people's rights to vote.

Whereas Forna represents education as a tool that empowers women to navigate through and achieve power amidst patriarchal dominance, Shoneyin in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's*

*Wives*, as I discuss in the sub-section below, uses it as a tool for negotiating power. She uses education as a tool to empower women at the expense of men. Nnaemeka reminds us about the disruption of the oppressor/victim dichotomy to bring about equality and equity in society. For her, victims can also be agents “who can change their lives and affect other lives in radical ways” (“Imag(in)ing” 3). To make African women agents for change in gender roles, says Ogun-dipe-Leslie, they “need to educate themselves about the rights and responsibilities of liberal democracy in a modern nation state for the woman as an independent individual and not as a dependent” (210). These scholars underscore the role of education in liberating women from patriarchal bondage.

### **Impotent Fathers, Productive Mothers and Family Secrets in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives***

In *African Gender Studies: A Reader*, Oyèwùmi suggests ways in which women can attain power to strike a gender balance. Oyèwùmi suggests the formulation of “different groups of marginalized women [that] can create new spaces and social locations for themselves within the dominant culture [...]. By creating these new spaces and locations, women take the margins to the centre and vice versa” (273). This idea resonates with Ekpa, who teaches African writers to focus on African sisterhood, co-operation, assistance and understanding among women (35) to promote gender equality and equity. Arguing in line with these scholars, in this section I explore how female characters in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* use polygyny as a social institution to challenge patriarchal power. My argument is that women in polygynous institutions, as represented in this narrative, use men’s impotence and irresponsibility as weapons to negotiate power in the family. I justify my argument by discussing the characters of the four wives of Baba Segi and their relationships with Baba Segi, and Bolanle’s parents in relation to their daughter, Bolanle. The concept of ‘impotence’ I use in this section refers to the inability to impregnate (for example, Baba Segi) and irresponsibility in taking care of the family (for example, Bolane’s father), whereas ‘productive mothers’ denotes women’s fertility or the ability to bear children.

Infertility in Africa is one of the aspects through which power and control are gained. One is considered an ‘incomplete man or woman’ if one is not capable of having children. Since society constructs a man as a powerful being, he is required to be fertile and, therefore, infertility is for women. This is what Agnes Odinga observed in her study of the Luo of south Nyanza province in Kenya. According to Odinga, the Luo construct “masculinity, manhood

and fertility through the ability of the man to have children [and] since male[s] are inherently fertile, infertility and childlessness were [historically] considered feminine” (463). This stereotypical construction of gender along the lines of infertility is a historical truism that contains social stigma. Nwapa, through her eponymous character, Efuru in *Efuru*, for example, describes how, historically, infertile women were looked down upon by society. Nwapa wants us to read the theme of infertility as a historical phenomenon that was attributed to women. Efuru accepts the societal stigma of being labelled as a barren woman and she opts for other professions. She becomes a business woman and goddess as alternative ways of leading her life.

Likewise, Wakota in his study of gender relations in Tanzanian fiction identifies the same theme of infertility in Aniceti Kitereza’s *Mr. Myombekere, his Wife Bugonoka, their Son Ntulanalwo and Daughter Bulihwali: A Story of an Ancient Community*. Looking at the symbols of a bow and arrow a bridegroom is given on the wedding day, as depicted in the fiction, Wakota perceives them as signifying power. These symbols, according to Wakota, mean that “any man who can marry and consummate marriage can have children” (40). Knowing the gender inequality and equity “reflected in images of barren women” (Davies and Grave 29), Shoneyin’s *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* subverts what is considered the norm by rendering the male character impotent. The narrative speaks what Odinga calls “the unspeakable” (465) and challenges patriarchal power by attributing infertility to male characters. By so doing, the novel confronts the traditional patriarchal system by placing male characters under women’s control. And women characters achieve the power to control their male counterparts through solidarity or what Oyěwùmi calls ‘social locations’, where the institution of polygyny acts as a podium where women organise to challenge male dominance in the family.

Thus one detects the narrative’s commitment to women’s empowerment. It elevates the female character, Iya Segi, to the status of being in charge of the family. As the senior wife, she knows the core weakness of her husband – that he is unable to produce children. And she wants to protect his manhood by keeping his impotence a secret, which later on she shares with her co-wives. Describing her power in the family, Iya Segi says:

my husband only thinks he controls this household and I let him believe that he does. I *want* him to believe he does but *I* am the one who keeps this household together. Good



things happen here because I allow them. *I* alone can approve vengeance and only *I* know how to bring calm. (104; italics in original)

The novel tries to communicate how illiterate women in traditional societies were able, at any cost, to conceal information related to their husbands, especially secret knowledge to do with reproduction. Iya Segi knows how far she has been exploited by her husband with the assistance of her mother. For example, her mother denies her mother the right to own money. Rather, she is told that only men have the right to accrue money and, therefore, all the money she collects from selling *fufu* is given to her husband who will use it to look after her. In revenge, Iya Segi, as ‘a mother-of-the-home’, advises the other two co-wives to have extramarital relationships and bear children that will be taken care of by Baba Segi. Such a mission is carried out in secrecy. Shoneyin wants us to read her narrative imaginatively in relation to how secrecy is used as a tool for the negotiation of power, inclusion in and rejection by family.

Through secrecy the three co-wives – Iya Segi, Iya Tope and Iya Femi – find themselves united because they share the same secret of having children outside wedlock. These women know how much the institution of patriarchy oppresses and exploits women. For example, Iya Segi loses her money for Baba Segi, Iya Tope is forced to marry Baba Segi and Iya Femi is victimised by her uncle and grandma and ultimately also forced to marry Baba Segi. When they meet in Baba Segi’s compound with their traumas, they form their own social group to get revenge against the patriarchal system by negotiating for gender power. In this regard, the narrator says: “the only chance we had was to be united” (70). They use what Nnaemeka calls the ‘give/take’ principle of negotiation by making Baba Segi pay the debts of oppression and exploitation through taking care of children who are not his biological offspring. Here Baba Segi is used to represent the institution of patriarchy. Since secrecy implies inclusion/exclusion principles, Bolanle (the fourth wife) is excluded because she belongs to a different social class from other co-wives (as a graduate), and hence has a different consciousness. She is not illiterate like them and they are scared of her. Bolanle’s exclusion from the secret is aimed at making Baba Segi abandon her for failing to bear him children because she has disrupted their sexual rotation and she is regarded as “a destroyer-of-homes” (60). Thus the narrator says: “when Bolanle fails to give him a child, Baba Segi will throw her out! We know she will not give him children so we should watch from a distance. I don’t want to see anyone scratching her doorframe with their toenails” (50). Baba Segi is also

excluded from the secret to ensure survival of the family or what Smart calls “preservation of relationship” (“Secrets” 563) in the marriage institution.

The solidarity of the three co-wives implies that in traditional African societies, ‘family secrets’ were one of the main ways of keeping the institution of family intact. These women, under the leadership of Iya Segi, were able to keep the secret for years without disclosing it to Baba Segi. Inwardly, these women hate and feel pity for him. When Kole, Iya Femi’s son, is proud of his ‘father’ (Baba Segi), saying, “Yes Baba. I want to be just like you!” [...] Iya Femi whispers ““God forbid”” (10). For Iya Femi, Kole’s ambition to marry as many wives as he can is not a problem. What Iya Femi does not want is the state of impotence, which she, together with the other co-wives, has treated as a family secret. Such language, manifested in Iya Femi’s whisper, is very strong among the first three co-wives and they commonly use it at the dining table and sitting room where they plan to victimise Bolanle. A whisper becomes the language of concealment. They know that Baba Segi and Bolanle cannot understand the language because “this is not a world [they] know” (49).

What the traditional women believed to be family secrets are challenged by the new class of the elites. By excluding Bolanle from the secret regarding how children in Baba Segi’s family are conceived, the co-wives want to marginalise Bolanle by rendering her seemingly barren so that she can be chased away by Baba Segi. This plan backfires when Bolanle takes a medical test that reveals the co-wives’ extramarital relations and the impotence of Baba Segi: “[n]othing! Not a solitary sperm swimming around!” (194). Here the narrative uses Bolanle to represent a class of educated women who fight against patriarchal power using medical science. By so doing, Bolanle has, as Odinga argues elsewhere, “challenged [the] traditional authority, which institutionalised the constructions of female identity based on their reproductive function and sexuality, especially a woman’s ability to procreate” (465). Thus, what is regarded as a family secret in traditional African societies ceases to be one in the modern world. This is because of what Chris Barker regards as the world of faith in the power of science that allows “value change, life planning and reflexivity” (191). Such changes in African traditional systems cause “cultural haemorrhage”, to borrow Nnaemeka’s post-colonial concept that means “an environment where internal systems are undergoing self-induced and externally enforced rearticulation” (“Imag(in)ing” 4).

The ‘impotence’ and ‘productive’ aspects discussed in this section communicate the reversal of roles and societal conceptions of masculinity and femininity. As productive beings, men

were to be regarded as unspoiled creatures, and whatever kind of abnormality might happen in the family, especially those to do with reproduction, was believed to be caused by women. In this way, a woman was pushed to the margins and forced to admit weaknesses, despite knowing that the fault was with the man. They were doing so to protect the institution of patriarchy, so families were encouraged to hide their secrets to keep the family intact. In the modern world, as Shoneyin represents it in her narrative, things have changed. The world of reflexivity and scientific truth questions the dichotomy between ‘unproductive’ and ‘productive’ as socially constructed concepts. What was regarded as weak can also be productive and therefore, a woman is able to be productive and vice-versa. But looking at these concepts in a reciprocal way, family secrets should be understood and used only when they do not oppress or infringe upon women’s rights in the family.

In the course of empowering women, Shoneyin, through her character Bolanle, suggests that the family can act as a central point for gender role negotiation and demonstrates how the society can help to empower illiterate and traditional women who are trapped in patriarchal control because of their circumstances. She holds the view that gender role negotiation should cut across different age groups – children, middle-aged and elders regardless of their orientation: illiterate, literate, urban, rural or semi-urban. Shoneyin’s novel also uses education as a means to help empower marginalised women who were forced by circumstances to fall victim to the patriarchal system. Thus the narrator says:

[L]iving with them has taught me the value of education, of enlightenment. I have seen the dark side of illiteracy [...] I offered to teach the wives to read [...] I have tried to help the children, too. I once told them to assemble in the dining room every evening so I could read to them [...] I will not give up on them. I will bring light to their darkness. (22)

Bolanle is determined to educate her co-wives in Baba Segi’s household for them to understand their roles, not only as women, but also as human beings, like men. She attempts to teach them how to read and organises classes for the children, but their response is very negative (22). Her self-dedication, “I just wanted the war between who I used to be and who I’d become to end [and] I didn’t want to fight any more” (16), becomes a motif in her struggle throughout the narrative. She emulates her mother by being an “able-bodied woman

who [fights] for prosperity and win[s]" (93). In the first place, Bolanle refuses to "consult herbalists and prophets" (14) (when advised to by her husband for failure to conceive) because she regards them as con men and she will not allow them to have power over her body. By so doing, she creates a new space that distinguishes her from other (illiterate and traditional) women. As one of the characters in the narrative, Teacher, says: "since the woman is educated, she will only listen to people from the world she knows. The place to take her is the hospital" (5). Baba Segi believes in the power of traditional healers after seeing Iya Segi 'conceive' after being force-fed with bitter concoctions from the medicine man. This convinces him that traditional healers are powerful in treating women's infertility. This creates dramatic irony, as the readers know the source of the potency and virility that makes Iya Segi pregnant. What Bolanle does is to denounce the power of traditional healers and prophets. She considers them as unscientific, male-centred and, therefore, they serve the interests of the patriarchal system. Rather, she favours the scientific means of discovering the truth.

In narrating her life history and how she came to marry Baba Segi, Bolanle shows how her mother's mistreatment of her daughters is unbearable. The mother is very harsh towards her daughters, with the excuse of 'bringing them into able-bodied women who can fight for their future and win.' It is because of her mother's mistreatment that Bolanle decides to marry Baba Segi to escape from these ill-treatments. Otherwise, Bolanle's mother might "find pools of blood" (16) in Bolanle's room because of her harshness. Therefore, Bolanle marries Baba Segi to escape from mother-daughter oppression and she initially finds peace in Baba Segi's family.

Through Bolanle's power, Baba Segi comes down to earth and holds a meeting with his wives to decide on what should be done after realising that none of the children in his household are his biological offspring. The meeting acts as a space in which this family negotiates gender roles by bringing together the two conflicting parties. Whereas Bolanle decides to divorce Baba Segi, the rest of the wives beg him to allow them to continue treating him as their husband because they have children who regard him as their father. Here the narrative questions fatherhood in the post-colonial state. The narrative reconfigures fathering as a state that transcends biological processes. As Iya Segi says, "it takes more than shedding seed to be a father" (241). Rather, it is a socio-cultural state of caring and physical presence. It also communicates hatred of polygyny by showing how co-wives can form cabals to cheat their husbands. In this regard, Baba Segi advises Akin, Iya Segi's son, thus:

[w]hen the time comes for you to marry, take one wife and one wife alone. And when she causes you pain, as all women do, remember it is better that your pain comes from one source alone. Listen to your wife's words, listen to the words she doesn't speak, so that you will be prepared. A man must always be prepared.  
(238)

This is the epilogue that summarises the narrative as far as gender role negotiation is concerned. Shoneyin represents how the truth about Baba Segi's impotence brings him down to the level of agreeing to continue taking care of his wives and their children. He desists from chasing away his cheating wives and their children to avoid societal censure; he can be regarded as an 'incomplete man' for not having children of his own. The presence of these children in his compound serves as a shield that protects him from shame and all sorts of social stigma. Therefore, Shoneyin's narrative appears to call for monogamous family structures in which couples can plan together and listen to each other for the well-being of the family. In this way, she foresees a harmonised family that is ready to accept challenges and work on them.

## **Conclusion**

As I have argued above, Forna's *Ancestor Stones* and Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives* demonstrate how the family structure and space are revisited in the writings of contemporary African women writers. They show that, in the course of revisiting the family space and structure, African women writers find themselves depicting, even advocating negotiating power struggles between men and women. In their writings, Forna and Shoneyin show different strategies that African traditional women use in negotiating for power in the family. They underscore the institution of polygyny as a centre where women could meet and negotiate power with men. The failure of this form of negotiation has made the contemporary generation of African women devise a way of modifying the negotiation tools. The forms of negotiation the narratives suggest include negotiation within the patriarchal system, emasculation and marginalisation of men, divorce in case of ill-treatment done by men, widowhood, women taking on professions and bi-racial marriage. It is through bi-racial marriage that people have children who are in-between the two dissimilar worlds or who operate in a liminal space. As I demonstrate in Chapter Four, these children born in bi-racial

marriages find themselves in a space where they fail to negotiate between the two identities and end up being outcasts.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **Betwixt and Between: Negotiating Parental Abandonment and Family Life**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter examines the dynamics that result from the disintegration of the family. In Chapter Three, I focussed on the juxtaposition between the traditional and the modern, as well as gender role negotiation at the family level. This chapter however, explores marriage and the parent-child relationship in relation to travel, the school environment, identity crisis and divorce as portrayed in Baingana's *Tropical Fish*, Evans's *26a* and Adeniran's *Imagine This*. To capture these multifocal dimensions of circumstances, I explore how these three narratives all use female protagonists to comment on the expectations of parents and the precarious state of the family as portrayed in these texts. Carol Smart, in theorising the parent-child relationship in the context of divorce, considers children to "have much to say about how their family lives have been changed or affected" ("Post-divorce" 156). This is because, in the context of divorce, children become the first victims of the separation of their parents. By using child protagonists, these three writers provide what Eagleton calls a peculiar freshness and immediacy in perceiving objects (85).<sup>34</sup> I argue in this chapter that these children are not only victims of circumstance who exist in 'betwixt and between' family spaces that are simultaneously familiar and strange, but they also attempt to reconnect the fragmented family bonds.

These writers' use of a child narrator/protagonist to epitomise post-coloniality and its impact on the family space harks back to African canonical texts such as Camara Laye's *African Child* (1955), Ferdinand Oyono's *Houseboy* (1966), Mongo Beti's *The Poor Christ of Bomba* (1971) and Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991). Whereas in these canonical texts the use of a child narrator/protagonist symbolises specific African problems, particularly alienation (in Laye), colonial violence (in Oyono) or post-colonial disillusionment (in Okri) (2),<sup>35</sup> these contemporary writers allegorise childhood to question the childhood space in contemporary writing and examine how children are endowed with a "vision of reality" (Eagleton 85) about

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<sup>34</sup> See *How to Read Literature* by Eagleton for more discussion on the use of child narrators.

<sup>35</sup> Nabutanyi theorises how the canonical literary texts that use child narrator/protagonist represent childhood. For more discussion on the topic, see "Representations of Troubled Childhoods in Selected Post-1990 African Fiction in English" by Nabutanyi.



the post-colonial state. As Bryce and Hron in different contexts<sup>36</sup> point out, the female childhood space becomes a centre of “exploring the repressed feminine in relation to a socially conditioned version of femininity” (Bryce 50). It further “represents a particular resistance of complex, on-going negotiation and articulation of differences that is perhaps not as readily accessible in the stable, socially structured world of adults” (Hron 30). Thus, these writers represent children as agents of change in different socio-economic, cultural and political spheres. The narrative technique of using child narrators does not only celebrate the flexibility of children in adapting to different identities, but could also be read in relation to the development of the post-colonial nation.

The term *Bildungsroman* has its origins in German, and etymologically comes from two words, as Ogaga Okuyade writes: “‘*Bildung*’ means formation, and ‘*roman*’ means novel” (“Weaving” 143). Earlier on, Mikhail Bakhtin – as translated by Vern McGee – in the course of problematizing the concept of *Bildungsroman*, shows us how we can read characters in the novel. His emphasis is on the development of the plot of the novel in terms of physical, mental, as well as social growth of the protagonist. Bakhtin writes, “[i]t is necessary, first of all, to single out specifically the aspect of man’s essential *becoming*” (20; italics in original). He further points out that “[a]ll movements [of the protagonist] in the novel, all the events and escapades depicted in it, shift the hero in space” (20) to imply the interplay between time and space or what he calls ‘chronotope’ in the growth of the hero. Bakhtin simply defines *Bildungsroman* as “the novel of education” (19) or a novel of formation that accounts for the growth of the protagonist and the challenges he or she encounters. Okuyade goes further to distinguish between the classical and contemporary *Bildungsroman*. Whereas ‘classical’ refers to the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the latter denotes the modernist and post-colonial, particularly the twenty-first century. According to Okuyade, whereas classical *Bildungsroman* was characterised by the depiction of a young protagonist growing towards the ability to live in society, the contemporary one is characterised by protagonists who are

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<sup>36</sup> Whereas Bryce is speaking of the depiction of twin children in Nigerian third-generation writers such as Diana Evans and Helen Oyeyemi, Hron discusses the representation of childhood in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Uzodinma Iweala’s narratives. See also ““Half and Half Children”: Third-Generation Women Writers and the New Nigerian Novel” by Bryce and ““Ora Na-Azu Nwa”: The Figure of the Child in Third-Generation Nigerian Novels” by Hron for more discussion on the depiction of childhood in contemporary Nigerian narratives.

unable to cope with society (155).<sup>37</sup> Arguing in line with Okuyade, Jose Vázquez is of the view that protagonists in the contemporary *Bildungsroman* “often find themselves incapable of choosing between two sets of values” (87). For Vázquez, this inability to choose a set of values results in “internal conflicts [that] remain unsolved at the end of the narrative” (87). While agreeing with Okuyade and Vázquez, I also observe that the protagonists in the three narratives do not only leave internal conflicts unsolved at the end of the narrative, but also create their own space, independent of their families. To justify my claim, I centre the analysis on how the selected writers depict their female protagonists with unsolved internal conflicts that push them to create a new space for negotiation. I demonstrate how Baingana, Evans and Adeniran represent female children who inhabit an in-between space: on the one hand, these child narrators offer a ‘vision of reality,’ to borrow Eagleton’s phrase, on the dynamics in the family; on the other, they attempt to negotiate family reunification.

Arguing against the backdrop of twenty-first century African women writers, Nigerians in particular, in their exploration of childhood memories, claim that there has been a subtle shift in the artistic curve of African literature in terms of style and thematic concerns. Okuyade appreciates this shift<sup>38</sup> especially in the novel genre that marks the beginning of a new epoch. Whereas Bryce asks a provocative question on where their works are taking the Nigerian and African novel, Okuyade expounds on their styles and thematic representation in their writings. As Okuyade observes, “their style and thematic concerns do not only bequeath the badge of newness and ‘nowness’ to their arts, but also give them a discrete position in the development of the African novel” (138). As exemplified by Baingana, Evans and Adeniran’s narratives, the *Bildungsroman* tradition has become an endeavour, one that makes children occupy a hybrid space that enables them to navigate between private and public spaces. Besides, it is through the eyes of child narrators that a different perspective on the struggles of the adult world becomes accessible.

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<sup>37</sup> See “Narrating Growth in the Nigerian Female Bildungsroman” by Okuyade and “Recharting the Geography of Genre: Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road* as a Postcolonial Bildungsroman” by Vázquez for a discussion of contemporary Bildungsroman.

<sup>38</sup> Okuyade compares first, second and third generation writers in terms of their stylistic and thematic representation. Using Ernest Emenyonu’s ideas, Okuyade calls for a need to evolve new templates (that identify third generation writers) to redirect and sustain the hopes and aspirations of the African people through narratives. See also “Weaving Memories of Childhood: The New Nigerian Novel and the Genre of the Bildungsroman” (p.137) by Okuyade for more discussion. Therefore, the shift I am discussing in this chapter is from the use of adult to child narrator or protagonist that dominates contemporary women’s writing.

By ‘parental abandonment’ or separation I refer to temporary and /or permanent isolation of children that occurs when parents travel, children move to get an education, or when political instability, arranged marriage and/ or divorce occurs. As Smart contends in the divorce context, it is an isolation that forces children

to negotiate new moral terrains on which they have to make decisions about how to act, how to relate, how to prioritise, how to safeguard [themselves] [...], how to balance their own needs against those of others, and ultimately how to reconstruct family living.(407)<sup>39</sup>

In this chapter I discuss two strands of familial abandonment: family abandonment and family separation. And ‘betwixt and between’ refers to the liminal spaces which these female characters locate as they try to negotiate between the biological family and elsewhere. Victor Turner uses it in an ethnographic context to mean ‘neither here nor there’ because it is an ambiguous space that communicates “social and cultural transitions” (95). It is similar to what Homi Bhabha, in “In Between Cultures”, calls a ‘borderline’ that encounters ‘newness.’ Bhabha contends that the borderline is “not part of the continuum of past and present” but rather a space in which “the past-present becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia of living” (109). It is this liminal, indeterminate and often contradictory space that this chapter interrogates in relation to how it unsettles the main characters as they struggle to construct an identity. This chapter poses the following questions: how does the mobility of characters impact on the family space and elsewhere? How do inter-racial relationships create a borderline for identity negotiation? How does divorce push “people to negotiate new moral codes or principles” that in return, generate new ways of reconnecting the family? (401).<sup>40</sup>

Based on these questions, I divide this chapter into three sections. The first section explores how *Tropical Fish* depicts location and mobility as sources of isolation and disintegration of the family. In this section, I focus on the motif of travel and education. The second section explores identity negotiation in inter-racial relationships and the intimate bond between twins in *26a*. And the last section discusses the idea of divorce and the abandonment of children in

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<sup>39</sup> See “Changing Landscapes of Family Life: Rethinking Divorce” by Smart for discussion on how children in a divorce context adopt different life styles in order to survive.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

Adeniran's *Imagine This* and how the abandoned children attempt to re-unite the family through various forms of negotiation.

### **Location and Mobility: The Politics of Family and Home in *Tropical Fish* (2005)**

Baingana<sup>41</sup> grew up in Entebbe, Uganda. She obtained a law degree from Makerere University, Uganda and an M.F.A (Master of Fine Arts) from the University of Maryland, in the United States of America. *Tropical Fish* is her debut novel. *Tropical Fish*<sup>42</sup> can be read as a narrative about the mobility of characters and its impact on the family space. It chronicles the story of three sisters: Christine, Patti and Rosa. This narrative is a compilation of eight short stories that form a fragmented novel. Christine, who is the protagonist of the narrative, speaks of her childhood memories and how she used to stay with Rusi (the house-girl) when her parents and sisters went to work and school. While staying with her parents in Entebbe, Christine experiences the irresponsibility of her father with regard to his family through his excessive drinking. It is because of too much drinking that Christine's father is sacked from his job and eventually dies. After her university education, Christine flies to the United States where she faces problems of language and race – being black – that result in her being lonely most of the time. When she returns to Entebbe, she is confronted by the problem of not conforming to traditional ties and values, which renders her lonely and isolated from the rest of her family members (mother and Patti). As Rosa dies of an HIV related illness, Patti stays with her mother; she is devastated and feels a sense of isolation when her mother does not visit her at Gayaza boarding school where she studies. The main theme of this story is mobility and its impact on familial relations. Baingana has crafted this theme well by creating Christine and Patti as victims of family isolation and showing how they negotiate family reunification.

This section focuses on only four stories: 'Green Stones,' 'Hunger,' 'Lost in Los Angeles,' and 'Questions of Home.' The term 'location' in this section refers to the physical space where an individual resides, which can be either temporary or permanent. And 'mobility'

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<sup>41</sup> See also <http://www.cca.ukzn.ac.za/index.php/tow-past-participants/35-tow-2007/196-doreen-baingana-uganda> for more information about Baingana's biography.

<sup>42</sup> This anthology of short stories has various titles, according to the publisher. The South African edition published by the Defunct Oshun is titled *Tropical Fish*, while the third and fourth editions published by Harlem Moon and Storymojo are titled *Tropical Fish: Tales from Entebbe*. See also "Writing Women in Uganda and South Africa: Emerging Writers from Post-Repressive Regimes" unpublished PhD thesis by Spencer (175).

refers to textual representation of the movement of characters across geopolitical and cultural boundaries. In *Home, Identity, and Mobility in Contemporary Diasporic Fiction*, Jopi Nyman identifies mobility in contemporary narratives as a post-colonial feature that necessitates border-crossings. The mobility of characters, as Nyman puts it, suggests that “culture is an on-going and dynamic process rather than a static product” (13). This mobility also communicates the issue of class in the representation of African characters who can afford to go or work abroad or have an opportunity to marry non-Africans. It is through this mobility and border crossing that Davies sees ways in which different cultures, identities, sexualities, geographies, gender and so on collide and interchange (3). For Davies, each “movement demands another definition and re-definition of one’s identity” (128). Thus, according to Nyman and Davies, a reading of mobility in the narrative enables one to interrogate how characters traverse between geo-political and cultural locations. In such movements of characters, the meanings of ‘family’ and ‘home’ become confused and ambivalent. In discussing the term ‘mobility’, I pay particular attention to the characters’ creation of a new space which they use as an axis to conflate the space between family and elsewhere.

In ‘Green Stones,’ Christine gives the reader a glimpse of some of her childhood memories. Christine forces her way into her parents’ bedroom despite its not being allowed, but she loves it most (1). Because she is impressed by her parents’ bedroom, in the absence of Rusi the house-girl she sneaks in to explore her “Maama’s forbidden treasure” (4). Christine, as Boehmer in *Stories* would argue, represents the post-colonial subject that negates traditional and colonial boundaries. By entering her parents’ bedroom with “no sense of the room’s sacredness” (2), Christine demonstrates how she can traverse private and public spaces. For Boehmer elsewhere, Christine “stands as a figure both embodying and transcending [traditional and] national boundaries” (33). She peeps into the bedroom and eavesdrops on what her parents are saying. By so doing, Christine moves between private and sacred spaces and, as a result of this mobility, she discovers the concealed image of her family: “a love wrapped in insults and complaints, drunken nights, slobbery sorries, and silent mornings” (12).

Like Lola in *Imagine This*, as I discuss below, Christine considers the father figure as an obstacle to women’s rights to decide on their own and struggle to achieve their desired goals in life. In this case, her father is a hindrance to her mother’s struggle because he exerts his authority over her. For example, Christine observes, while “Maama didn’t go out at night, not

for parties” [...] Taata would go to bars every night and attend night parties (8). His frequenting of the bar and night parties, as narrated in ‘Hunger,’ is caused by frustration at being sacked from his job because of excessive drinking. In consequence, he becomes bitter and irresponsible in failing to take care of the family. Part of the damage to the family caused by Taata’s drinking is brought about by irresponsibility that results in social instability in the family. Thus Maama complains: “do you know what the children eat, what they wear? [...] This roof needs repairs; the Rwashibingas need their taps fixed; [...] and what do you do? Drink, drink, drink! I can’t do everything, I can’t” (11). Because of Taata’s paternal failures, the family becomes doubly victimised by what I call the father’s ‘repressed trauma.’ Later on, in ‘Lost In Los Angeles,’ Christine ironically celebrates the death of her father: “that was the end of his dream. This was the beginning of mine in America” (96). She underscores the irresponsibility of Taata by downplaying the financial assistance he offers to his family when working as a senior accountant with Standard Bank. Thus, Baingana creates a space for women to demonstrate their power. She does so by suggesting a single-parent family structure and allowing women’s flexibility in their decisions. Christine’s departure for America makes readers explore women’s mobility and how, in the words of Boehmer, “women’s identity is formulated and reshaped [...] with shifting, often contested, conceptions of space and historical change” (192).

In similar vein, ‘Hunger’ explores Patti’s childhood experience and offers us a different perspective. The story takes us to the boarding school where Patti studies. The separation of Patti from her mother illustrates the impact of the absence of father as Maama struggles financially to take care of her children. Generally, boarding school represents a new space that allows an individual person to find herself/himself, isolated from her/his family. In this space of the boarding school, Patti begins to create a sense of self in relation to other students. At school, she meets Linette, the daughter of a minister of agriculture and Mary, who comes from a poor background. These two female figures from different social backgrounds make Patti recognise that she is from a middle class family. “My father used to be a senior accountant with Standard Bank. Taata went to England and Europe many times for work and bought us dresses and shoes you couldn’t find in Uganda” (23). The death of her father because of excessive drinking makes Maama the sole controller and caretaker of the family. When her mother fails to fulfil her family duties of visiting Patti at school, she keeps on consoling herself because “she has to do everything herself, and [Patti is] not the

only one she has to think about” (24). The pain of isolation from her family makes Patti seek refuge in church. Thus Patti says:

God will answer my prayers and Maama will come to see me this evening. (22). What do I want? I wish a prefect would come running in right now and announce that Maama is here. A miracle! Please, God, please [...] I prayed today for my family to come see me. They didn't. (25)

Here, Patti has created her own imagined space out of desperation and embarrassment seeking a reprieve from the hostile school environment because of the poor quality of food they get and the social differences between her and fellow female students. As the excerpt quoted above demonstrates, Patti sees the school environment – like Lola in *Imagine This* – as hostile and finds a new space (church) that enables her (through prayers) to negotiate the reconnection of fractured family bonds. She creates her own world of fantasy by trusting in God's power so that she can feel as if she is with her family: “do not be afraid; I am with you” (25). Therefore, the church acts as a site of consolation and refuge to children isolated from their family members.

When Christine moves to the United States she finds herself located between two spaces. She is there “but not [...] trying to be [there]” (95). As Steiner aptly observes in the migration context, “migration is characterized by a movement from an often oppressive system that made the exodus necessary in the first place to a host environment, which instead of facilitating the building of a new home rejects the migrant on racial or cultural grounds” (4). Christine's creation of a new home troubles her identity. In this new space, she suddenly becomes aware of her race and her accent. These differences render her strange:

[m]y teeth aren't white, straight, and perfect, like everyone else's here. My teeth disturbs people; they frown when I smile [...] Even black people don't look straight at me or talk, gesture, or act the way I do. I am just as strange to them. (101). And I thought I spoke English. But I do. I speak English, everyone speaks English, but it's not the English I know [...] I keep waiting for the accents to go away, to become normal. (102)



Christine finds herself in a different world. “I am alone and trapped in metal. I am lost” (103). She tries to negotiate a space for herself by attempting to speak ‘proper English’ like her fellow Africans who have been in America for a long time, but she fails. As a result, Christine resorts to keeping quiet. She finds refuge in modern and new technology that significantly reduces human interaction. Since she is employed in the ARCO twin towers of downtown Los Angeles, she gets her salary through an Automated Teller Machine (ATM), buys items in the supermarket using cards and drives her own car. Here Baingana’s narrative communicates that, in circumstances of migration and family detachment, characters find themselves experiencing a crisis of identity. They are on the borderline between two distinct socio-cultural, racial and geographical spaces and therefore forced to replace home and family identity with a new one. For example, Christine sympathetically opts for language as a means by which she can negotiate the new identity: “like a good colonial subject, I like to think I have a British accent, the proper one” (102). Failing to adapt to the desired new situation, Christine remains inhabiting the borderline between the ancestral and new home.

Through Christine, Baingana represents the majority of Ugandans who left their country because of military rule and political instability.<sup>43</sup> Baingana depicts Idi Amin’s rule and his policy of ‘economic war’ as the most oppressive regime. It forced people to go into exile. When President Munino calls upon all Ugandans in the diaspora to come back and “help rebuild the country” (125), Christine returns to Uganda to take part in reconstructing the nation, but also to reunite with her family. Upon her arrival at Entebbe International Airport from the United States, Christine notices a number of changes. As she narrates in ‘Questions of Home,’ “the town’s lights were scattered and weak; Entebbe was asleep” (120). And the plane that brings Christine back to Uganda is “stuck in the mud” (121). Besides, she is embarrassed when her mother shyly refuses her hug at the airport (122) – an act that communicates a cold welcome. Here, Christine encounters a hostile environment that makes her feel alien in the country of her birth and she continues leading her life in a liminal space, even when in Uganda. Her description of Uganda as a nation and her relationship with Maama confirms how inimical the home and family are.

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<sup>43</sup> According to Spencer, since gaining independence from Britain in 1962, Uganda has had its share of socio-political upheavals and militarised conflicts. For more discussion on Uganda’s politics and repressive regimes see “Writing Women in Uganda and South Africa: Emerging Writers from Post-Repressive Regimes” unpublished PhD thesis by Lynda Spencer (20).

After having stayed in America for eight years, Christine has gradually adapted to the American way of life in terms of work ethic, language, and the concept of beauty. However, her negotiation of a new identity in America becomes a problem when she returns to Uganda where she is forced to re-negotiate another identity and appear like a Ugandan girl and a *Munyankole*. She is confronted by the different work ethic and relaxed way in which the office is run in Uganda. When Christine is employed as an Executive Assistant to the Director of the Human Rights Commission (although she experiences a sense of human warmth and communal values from her co-workers), she also experiences the irresponsibility and hypocrisy of government employees, including the receptionist, the Director and his assistants. They “spend half of the morning chatting” (136). Also, Christine does not accept her mother’s idea at Entebbe of wanting her to be fat and get married. In fact, the paradoxical relation between Africa and the West is nuanced by juxtaposing slim and fat. Slim is “more than okay [for Christine] in the States” but in Uganda it is associated with “being a HIV/AIDS victim” (131). Related to fatness is the need for marriage that Christine’s mother wants her daughter to embrace to subscribe to Kinyankole traditions.

These challenges and collisions of culture make Christine temporarily move away from home. She leaves her home place after having quarrelled with her mother and “sat on a huge stone between the road and a garden [...]. She would have to learn all over again how to live in this new old place called home” (147). According to Barbara Boswell in her review of *Tropical Fish: Stories Out of Entebbe*, the creation of this new home “inevitably complicates [Christine’s] relationship with Uganda and Entebbe” (142). Yet, Christine’s creation of the home in Los Angeles causes her to fail to rekindle her relationship with her family in Entebbe and that, in turn, forces her to create her own family in a fantasy. Through Christine, Baingana shows how mobility unsettles and complicates the identity of characters. The narrative seems to argue that, in the transnational context, identities are not fixed as they keep on changing over time and, therefore, negotiation and re-negotiation of identities become a dominant discourse and a motif in travel narratives. Christine ends up with the dilemma of either conforming to the mainstream (of being Ugandan and a *Munyankole* girl), going back to America or creating her own space. As a result, she continues leading her life in liminal spaces. Her choice of a huge stone as a neutral point suggests her failure to negotiate her home and family identities. Therefore, the creation of this new space which, in the words of

Eze, lacks categorical definition, suggests Christine's vision: to see the world as becoming (n.p).<sup>44</sup>

In their theorisation of the concept of 'home' in the post-colonial context, Bhabha, Davies, Nyman and Nwakanma formulate it as a slippery term resulting from the migration of people. Davies, in narrating the migratory state of her mother, asserts: "in each home place, she sets up a network of relationships based on kin, community, spirituality and a fundamental presence organized around service and disruption of the very specific norms of that community" (1). In the same vein, Bhabha, while analysing the depiction of home in fiction, considers 'home' in relation to great homes of English Literature such as "Mansfield Park, Thrushcross Grange, Gardencourt, Brideshead, Howard's End [and] Fawlty Towers" (142).<sup>45</sup> Davies' home denotes familial relationships and friendship, and for Bhabha a home is a place of calm, security and settlement symbolised by a house. Bhabha's and Davies's theorisation of home is summed up by Nyman who, while quoting Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, asserts that home "refers to the place where one lives within the familiar, safe, protected boundaries" (24). Thus, according to these transnational scholars, there is no permanent place where one can claim to be at home. Rather, as Clifford puts it, "everyone's on the move [...] dwelling-in-travel" (2).<sup>46</sup> The fluidity of the term 'home,' as Nwakanma observes in her discussion on the concept of nation, suggests that "the postcolonial nation [i]s both an unstable and ambivalent domain of affiliation or belonging" (2).<sup>47</sup> Through Christine, Baingana reflects on what these scholars have theorised as the fluidity of the concept of 'home.' She perceives it as a place whose meaning depends on the context. Indeed, Christine sometimes regards herself as an African, Ugandan, Munyankole, and Mugisha, based on her skin colour, nationality, ethnicity and family, respectively. All these identities denote home. In this case, she can claim Africa, Uganda, Ankole, and the Mugisha family as different

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<sup>44</sup> Eze is discussing the post-colonial imagination and moral representations in African literature and culture in works by contemporary Ugandan women writers Monica Arac de Nyeko and Doreen Baingana. He focuses on how these writers interrogate the individual and how their characters enhance our understanding of difference and multiplicity of meaning and life styles. See also *Postcolonial Imagination and Moral Representations in African Literature and Culture* by Eze.

<sup>45</sup> See "The World and the Home" by Bhabha for more discussion about home.

<sup>46</sup> Clifford speaks about migration of people and their property and how they create 'homes' in their travels. See also *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* by Clifford.

<sup>47</sup> See "Metonymic Eruptions: Igbo Novelists, the Narrative of the Nation, and New Developments in the Contemporary Nigerian Novel" by Obi Nwakanma.

versions of home. Thus, based on the fluidity of these concepts, the narrative, in this context, seems to suggest a conflation and overlapping between the meanings of ‘home’ and ‘family.’

Baingana’s *Tropical Fish* communicates the impact of migration on family members, especially children, when they are isolated from family bonds. Through Christine, Baingana shows how individuals in transnational contexts are forced to re-negotiate their identities. By juxtaposing Christine and Patti, the narrative shows how travel, whether it is local or abroad, impacts on the family bonds. For Christine, travelling away from home (abroad) creates a sense of isolation. And for Patti, separation from her family (local) leads her to struggle to re-connect with the family bonds. The failure to re-connect with the family while travelling abroad is mainly attributed to language and different ways of perceiving things such as beauty, marriage, and the value of work that make Christine a person who fits comfortably neither in America nor in Uganda. Through imagining these unsettled and ambivalent spaces, Baingana shows the fluidity of the term ‘home.’ In her depiction of the character Christine, the identity of home varies according to geographical location. The identification of the home space from Africa, Uganda, and Ankole to the Mugisha family communicates how home identity conflates with family. Nevertheless, the family, for Christine, is not a welcoming space, Evans, however, attempts to resolve it by creating two spaces located in Nigeria and London, respectively, through interracial marriage and twinship so that characters can claim, at different times, Nigeria, the Edo language, London and the English language as their home and familial identities.

### **‘Black and White: Are We Two in One Sustained by Sisterly Love’?<sup>48</sup>**

Evans<sup>49</sup> was born in 1971 in London to a Nigerian mother and British father. She spent her childhood in Lagos, Nigeria. She had a twin sister who committed suicide. Apart from *26a*, Evans has published *The Wonder* in 2009. *26a* (2005) is Evans’s debut novel that focuses on twinship and identity crisis. It unfolds through the story of the twin sisters, Georgia and Bessi. Unlike their older sister, Bel, and young sister, Kemmy, Georgia and Bessi are

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<sup>48</sup> I have borrowed and modified the title from Julie Okpala and Elsie Ogbanna-Ohuche. The original version of the title is “Black and White: We are One, Sustained by Sisterly Love.”

<sup>49</sup> See [http://www.dianaommoevans.com/dianaevans\\_biography.asp](http://www.dianaommoevans.com/dianaevans_biography.asp) for Evans’s biographical information. See also the Interview between Evans and Zoe Paxton where Evans admits that her novel is a tribute to all twins because she once had a twin herself.

preoccupied with moments of indecision in life because of the complicated relationship between Ida, their Nigerian mother and Aubrey, their British father. By using her characters, Georgia and Bessi, Evans portrays the theme of identity crisis by demonstrating how these characters navigate the challenges of their Nigerian and British identities.

The narrative begins in an indecisive and questioning mood to epitomise the dynamics in the family in circumstances of interracial marriage and twinship: “[w]hat is it? Where am I? What am I?” (4). Such rhetorical questions tease out the need for self-identification in circumstances of identity crisis. In the light of the heading above, I discuss how *26a* represents Nigeria and England as spaces that destabilise the identity of the main characters. Whereas Okpala and Ogbanna-Ohuche delve into their discussion on oneness between blacks and whites through intermarriage, the struggle against apartheid and oppression of blacks, my discussion looks at the structure of the family in interracial marriages. I centre my discussion on Ida’s abandonment of her ‘home family’ to create her own family in a foreign land. As a result, the new family constructed in a foreign land remains in an unsettled position vacillating between Nigeria and Britain.

Georgia’s and Bessi’s mother, Ida, is a very significant figure, especially in relation to migration and family life. She resists by breaking up all the chains of patriarchal control and commodification of the female body. When Baba, Ida’s father, makes an arrangement with Thomas to marry Ida for two goats, four hundred naira and a portable television from England without Ida’s consent (29), she decides to abandon her family and escape to Lagos where she meets Aubrey, an English man, who becomes her husband. Unlike Aziza in *The Promised Land*, Ida does not worry about the bride wealth that her father loses for her refusal to marry a man of her father’s choice. Ida’s escape is spearheaded by the spirit of her grandmother on her mother’s side, Cecelia, and her uncle Aka: “[g]o and find it, child, your dreams are down that way, go and find them child” (30). Ida’s escape, as Boehmer argues elsewhere, resists a patriarchal system that perpetuates the oppression of gender, class and sexuality (*Stories* 90). Like Ida, Aubrey’s travelling to Nigeria is an attempt to escape from his father’s violence and his mother’s obsession. In fact, Aubrey’s mother is annoyed to hear that her son is going to Nigeria. She stereotypically questions the border crossing and cultural exchange between Africa and the West: “Nigeria? But where’s that, dear? [...] What d’you want to go there for? It’s full of flies, you know” (34). Eventually, “Aubrey Hunter and Ida Tokhokho met in darkness” (35). It is in the cinema hall in Lagos where the two acquaintances meet through which the narrative invites readers to grasp, on the one hand, the

psychological relief Ida and Aubrey feel because of their distance from family dynamics, and on the other, the cultural negotiation they engage in. Thus, their meeting is a “means of escape from an existence they despise” (6)<sup>50</sup> and eventually they leave Lagos for London.

Ida travels to England with a spirit of her mother, Nne-Nne, to sustain her family identity. According to Pérez-Fernández, Nne-Nne embodies the ‘other’ life for Ida – to be able to negotiate reality in London (6). The text suggests that Ida be read as a character who does not abandon her family but as one who rejects the traditional structures that oppress women. And since her father is a custodian of those traditional structures, she decides to disregard him and sides with her mother. Consequently, Ida becomes a victim of tradition but also navigates a new identity in London. As Clifford reminds us in his argument on the diaspora, displaced peoples maintain, revive, and invent connection with a prior home. For him, “this sense of connection must be strong enough to resist erasure through the normalizing processes of forgetting, assimilating, and distancing” (255). In this regard, Ida, as a diasporic subject, is confronted by an identity crisis. She finds herself isolated from what Clifford calls the ancestral home, her place of birth, and is forced to stay in a hostile environment that does not support or sustain her. For example, when the vicar in Sudbury fails to pronounce Ida’s name Tokhokho on her wedding day, she begins to feel a loss of identity: “[t]he name was about to be lost, sent drifting out to sea on a raft made of yesterday” (20).

As a result, Ida creates a space that enables her to keep connected to her ancestral home. This is because both Aruwa and London have failed to provide Ida with an opportunity to identify herself as a person who can decide on her own and interact with others freely. As Pérez-Fernández notes, Ida remains “surrounded by the ghosts of the past [...] and located in an in-between position” (6) that allows her to re-connect in an imaginary manner with her ancestral family in Aruwa. She does so by putting an ebony carving of an old spirit woman with horns opposite the mirror in the hallway and heads all over the house (37-38) to protect and bring wisdom into her family. Besides, the spirit of Nne-Nne is brought into Ida’s house as a presence to which she can talk and interact with freely in her Edo language. Ida also claims the ancestral family space by teaching her daughter Bel the Edo language and explaining how to talk to the spirit of Nne-Nne. Unlike her other daughters, Bel possesses “‘the powers of premonition’ [inherited from Ida’s] paternal grandmother, Cecelia Remi Ogeri Tokhokho”

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<sup>50</sup> Pérez-Fernández discusses the space of individual identity by focusing on the body as the primary space of interaction in Evans’s *26a*. According to her, the migration of Ida and Aubrey helps to solve family problems. See also “Embodying “Twoness in Oneness” in Diana Evans’s *26a*” by Pérez-Fernández for more discussion.

(13) and, as she grows, she comes to “know many secret things” (13). As Ida demonstrates, the Nne-Nne figure is both a familial and a cultural figure that links Ida to her ancestral home in Aruwa.

Whereas Ida suffers psychologically from abandoning her family in Aruwa because of an arranged marriage, the narrative, through the twin sisters, creates a space where Ida can offset the loss of her ancestral family. As Irene Pérez-Fernández observes, in such a family setting where Ida remains in a space assisted by Bel and the spirit of Nne-Nne, the loft created by Georgia and Bessi becomes a counter space of self-protection. For Pérez-Fernández, the loft allows the twins to disconnect from their disturbing family life and construct an alternative sense of identity that does not only separate them physically from the rest of Hunter’s family but also keeps them mentally detached (6-7). Although I agree with Pérez-Fernández’s interpretation, I also consider the loft as a space the twins create to deal with family matters. It is for them a place of thinking and making decisions, for example, a decision on “whether Ida and Aubrey should get a divorce or not” (6) and a decision on whether to be Nigerian or English. Thus the narrator describes the loft as the house of the twins located at 26a Waifer Avenue:

[o]n the outside of their front door Georgia and Bessi had written in chalk ‘26a’, and on the inside ‘G + B’, at eye level, just above the handle (5). At the end of Georgia’s bed next to the window, a whole upper wall of window that gave them church bells and sunsets and an evergreen tree in the far distance, was another triangle, an alcove, for thinking. Two beanbags whose bubbles smelt of strawberry were tucked into the corners and that was where they sat [...] But absolutely no one was allowed to sit there with them when they were thinking, especially when they were making a decision. (6)

The creation of the loft space, independent of their family members, enables the twins to have two roles: first, to negotiate the relationship between Ida and Aubrey and, second, to connect Ida’s ancestral family and the new family in England by disrupting the cultural border between Nigeria and England. In the context of displacement of identity, Bryce considers Georgia and Bessi as characters that represent the doubling effect of bi-racialism and



simultaneously presuppose a loss of spiritual link to Nigeria through physical displacement (63). I would differ from her by arguing that the twinship represents a connection between Nigeria and England. Thus, as the title of this section asks, ‘Black and White: Are we two in one sustained by sisterly love?’, and the narrative in this context calls for unification by celebrating the end of racial ideology. It does so by imagining characters that inhabit the indeterminate space to negotiate between the two identities. The doubling effect creates the possibility of traversing between Nigeria and England without restrictions, thus merging the two contested spaces. My argument is in line with Brenda Cooper’s who, in her analysis on the depiction of twins in Diana Evans’s *26a*, Esi Edugyan’s *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne* and Helen Oyeyemi’s *The Icarus Girl*, considers the doubling manifested as a “coded language for the writer’s own splitting, doubling and questioning for their identities in London or Alberta, as well as for their connection with Africa” (52).<sup>51</sup> The doubling and splitting of Georgia and Bessi manifest two facets – being identical twins and bearing bi-racial identity.

At the beginning, the narrative presents Georgia and Bessi as characters that do not see any difference between themselves. They are described as “two furry creatures with petrified eyes staring into the oncoming headlights, into the doubled icy sun, into possibility” (3). The narrator describes their similarity and, even differences, in terms of mental and physical body: “[t]hey were the same, like dolls. They were twoness in oneness” (42) and “what was Georgia’s was also [Bessi’s]” (21). This way of identifying twins, according to Stewart, results in stereotype, stigma and labelling. As Elizabeth Stewart points out, stereotypes and negative perceptions “about twins are based on the idea that twinship involves an emotionally close relationship between the pair, especially between same-sex twins, in which each twin’s needs and feelings are automatically met and understood by the other twin” (728). She further notes that “[w]hether the twins are identical or fraternal, people expect twins to be half a person, with each half having different, often complementary, characteristics” (728). Nevertheless, the narrative seems to counter those stigmas by showing the differences between the twins as manifested in their physical and mental development. According to the novel, such differences are external but the reality is known and concealed by the twins themselves.

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<sup>51</sup> For more discussion about twinship see “Diaspora, Gender and Identity: Twinning in Three Diasporic Novels” by Brenda Cooper.

Because of their physical differences, the twins' classmate Reena identifies them as follows: "1. Georgia's mouth is biggest. 2. Georgia has big ears, Bessi don't. 3. Bessi's eyes are smallest. 4. Georgia is half an inch tallest and a bit fatter. 5. Georgia has a beauty spot by her mouth – she is prettiest" (42). These dissimilarities are also felt by Nne-Nne when in Aruwa: "[n]o [...] they are not de same.'[...] 'This one *little fatta*'" (60). However, such distinctions are despised by the twins because to them they do not matter: "[t]he real differences, the ones that mattered most, were inside, under clothes and in the soul. There was light and there was shade" (43). By denying their differences, Georgia and Bessi, as John McLeod puts it, invite us to think about sameness and singularity as coexisting identities (48).<sup>52</sup> For McLeod, "twinning emphasises equivalence, correspondence and resemblance, without denying divergence and differences" (48). As such, Georgia and Bessi become central figures of negation, not only by sealing off all sorts of racial differences, but also by creating a space that enables Ida to reconnect with both Nigeria and England.

In Nigeria, the twins encounter another sort of doubling beyond twinship. They are Nigerians and English at the same time, which communicates double racial identities in one body: black and 'white.' Besides, the oneness of the twins begins to diminish as each of them begins to explore her potentiality as an individual person. For example, when they are enrolled at school, the headmaster thinks: "[i]t's very important they do not remain too attached to one another. The world outside is a world of separation, they must be prepared" (85). This goes against the principle of wholeness and indivisibility that the twins desperately want to maintain. Nigeria can be seen as a contested space that forces Georgia and Bessi to re-examine their sense of self and intimate relationship. For example, Georgia endures a rape attempt by Sedrick, the gate-man at the Lagos home, but she keeps quiet without even telling Bessi: "[i]t was the first time ever, in this land of twoness in oneness, that something had seemed unsayable" (69). Cuder-Dominguez considers the widening gap between the twins to be caused by the girls' "change from childhood to puberty" (279)<sup>53</sup> where everyone develops an "individual desire for self-growth" (9). However, the narrative teases out that such a separation between the twins is not welcomed. Georgia is depressed when Bessi travels alone

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<sup>52</sup> McLeod argues that twinning emphasises equivalence, correspondence and resemblance, without denying divergence and difference. See also "Extra Dimension, New Routines" by John McLeod for more discussion on twinship as depicted in Evans's *26a*.

<sup>53</sup> Cuder-Dominguez speaks of the journey of Aubrey Hunters' family as represented in *26a*. She discusses how the twins experience a change from childhood to puberty when in Nigeria. See also "Double Consciousness in the Work of Helen Oyeyemi and Diana Evans" by Cuder-Dominguez.

to St Lucia, and her loneliness “worsens as the twins follow different, separate lives and share fewer spaces of common and private interaction” (Pérez-Fernández 9).

Baba’s (Ida’s father) and their grandfather’s mythical story about twins offer a different way of reading the twins, in particular from a Nigerian perspective. His story is that twins, a long time ago, were believed to be from witches who lived in the forest. Thus, they were a curse on the society and were regarded as children of devils who had to be destroyed (62-63). Giving an example of a woman who had identical twins named Onia and Ode, Baba says, “Onia was first. Ode was second – they set her on fire. When Ode was burnt [...] Onia got sick and wouldn’t eat at all until Ode’s ghost entered her body” (63). According to Baba, the ghost of Ode came in Onia and “began to eat again from her cursed mother’s breast. But Ode could only stay for one year, because that was how long it took for the soul to be ready to leave the earth” (63). Ida dismisses the stories as untrue though she knows that “[a]ll the stories Baba told were true” (63). She wants to protect herself from being regarded as a ‘cursed mother’ for bearing devil’s children.

Reading the figures of Ode and Onia in *Georgia and Bessi*, one can agree with Elisha Renne and Susan Diduk that the mythical stories about twins are a traditional truism. Renne cites examples from the Yoruba in South western Nigeria in his ethnological study to justify his claim. According to him, the Yoruba denied the social existence of the biological fact of twin births by immediately killing one or both babies at birth, often by abandonment or by sacrifice (64).<sup>54</sup> Renne explains that twins were once considered to be extra human beings, spirits and a source of abomination in society, hence the societal inclination towards destroying them before they unleashed evil upon the community. They were believed to see things that are hidden, transform themselves into animal families such as snakes, rats, praying mantises, chameleons, and caterpillars (Diduk 34). According to Renne, the change towards worship and acceptance of twins came with the influence of Christianity. Renne’s research resonates with Achebe’s fictional character Nneke in *Things Fall Apart*, who came to be converted to Christianity after her seven pairs of twins were thrown into the evil forest.

Reading Evans’s *26a* against the backdrop of African traditions, one grasps how the text tries to interrogate African traditions by foregrounding oral narratives. However, Cooper is sceptical about Evans’s ability to represent African traditions, bearing in mind that she lives

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<sup>54</sup> See “Twinship in an Ekiti Yoruba Town” by Renne, “Reviewing Twinship in Africa” by Elisha Renne and Misty Bastian and “Powers, Problems, and Paradoxes of Twinship in Niger” by Adeline Masquelier.

in London and has little first-hand knowledge about Africa. Cooper insists that Evans's knowledge of Africa and its traditions "may be partial and imaginary" (52). For example, through reading Evans's biography, one realises that Evans was a twin and her twin sister committed suicide. Therefore Georgia and Bessi's scant knowledge of Nigeria, the Edo language and mythical stories about twins represents what Cooper considers as Evans's partial or imaginary knowledge of African traditions. Nevertheless, Evans does not leave her characters ignorant of Africa and its traditions. Apart from knowing the Edo language and having the ability to talk to the spirit of Nne-Nne to Bel, she makes Georgia and Bessi believe that they have two citizenships. They are British and Nigerian by virtue of their father's and mother's respective place of birth: "half your blood is proper Nigerian [and half of it is English because] blood is more than skin" (58). Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, calls this kind of identification 'hybridity' where cultural differences create a borderline of "cultural and interpretive undecidability" (206). As Bhabha would argue, the narrative, as seen through the twin characters, moves "beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and focuses on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences" (1). The narrative considers the twins with their two racial identities as occupying a hybrid space that links Ida's ancestral family and England. Furthermore, the novel seems to suggest that, in the era where everyone 'dwells in travel', as Clifford puts it – or what Bhabha calls 'the moment of transit' – the question of singularity in terms of retaining one identity is disputable because it limits people's interaction in the global sphere.

The death of Georgia who commits suicide and the constant reappearance of Georgia's spirit to Bessi appear to justify not only the reality about oral narratives as narrated by Baba, but also the separation of twins. Here the text immerses Georgia in African traditions by making her a participant and proxy to offset Evans's limited imaginary knowledge of African traditions. By so doing, the narrative does not only connect Ida with her ancestral family in Aruwa, but also counterbalances the author's partial imaginary knowledge about Africa and its traditions by making Georgia and Bessi her agents. The continual reappearance of the spirits of Onia and Ode to Georgia and Bessi makes the twins part of African traditions as induced by Baba. For example, Georgia encounters Ode and Onia when she slaps Bessi over their argument to separate and each one looks for her own opportunity in life: "Ode and Onia were standing in it, with leaves in their hair" (182). When Georgia has taken her own path by going to Tottenham to study and Bessi decides to be a musician, the former encounters Ode and Onia when coming to visit Bessi: "[a]s she climbed the lilac stairs, Ode and Onia waited

at the top. Their eyes had got very large, and their dress had got very dirty” (187) and Georgia is able to communicate with them: “[i]t’s nice where you are. Isn’t it” (187). These encounters, apart from linking Ida and her ancestral home, England and Nigeria, interrogate the Africanness and the whiteness in Georgia and Bessi.

Through Georgia’s death, readers get to know the mysterious nature of twins. For example, Georgia’s spirit keeps on visiting Bessi and having conversations: “[t]hat night, as they lay in bed, Bessi and Georgia agreed that it was a wonderful funeral” (220). To justify their twinship, Bessi develops a rash which symbolically represents the presence of Georgia in Bessi: “[t]he madness of the rash” (223) makes Bessi hear the spirit of Georgia more clearly and she decides to spend more time alone so that she cannot be “interfere[d with] when Georgia wanted to talk” (223). Indeed, the narrative’s effort to integrate the characters into African traditions is noticeable in this fiction. The text emphasises the African traditions by underscoring their belief systems. Bessi goes to Church with the hope that she can be healed from the rashes, but she fails. Thus the narrator says: “Bessi and [the spirit of] Georgia got dizzy [...] set the little one free! Get *out*, Satan and be *gone* with your treacherous fire!” (227; italics in original). As Heather splashes Bessi with holy water, Georgia, who is also scratching Bessi, asks, “Who is this cowboy?” (227). For Bessi, Georgia becomes omnipresent: “she’s everywhere.” (219). To show her mythical power, Georgia becomes manifested in birds, flowers and rainbow colours. By so doing, Georgia alludes to Baba’s story about twins that the soul of Ode stayed for one year before leaving the earth. Therefore Georgia finds ways of continuing to be together with Bessi, because they are not only twins, but also figures that have failed to negotiate between Aubrey and Ida, as well as between Nigeria and England. The narrator says: “[w]e’d have to talk another way. There’s a lot of ways [...] You listen to the birds and feel the wind on your face [...] You smell the roses more deeply and watch the sky more closely [...] You wait for rainbows to come and I am in the colours” (229). Finally, they agree to meet at “the evergreen tree” (230) to signify that the twins have failed to inhabit either of the spaces (Nigeria and England), despite their negotiation and re-negotiation. For them becoming birds, rainbow colours and flowers not only communicates African traditional power embedded in the folktale of Ode and Onia – as narrated by Baba – but also creates their own space for solace because they “weren’t made for this world” (162). According to Cuder-Dominguez, Georgia and Bessi “are unable to cope with both kinds of heritage” (284) and, thus, the narrative suggests that there is no “perfect union of identities” (284). On the whole, the struggle of the twins to use the in-between space

to connect the ancestral family and the family in the foreign land as well as Ida and Aubrey, fails. This failure is manifested in the death of one of the twins to suggest independent existence; on the other hand, the continued association of the twins following Georgia's suicide also suggests that there are other ways of co-existence worth exploring.

To sum up, Evans represents post-colonial subjects as in constant movement across geographical and cultural boundaries. These crossings of boundaries necessitate the negotiation of identities manifested in language and culture. As imagined in the narrative, Evans marries off Ida to Aubrey, a white man resulting in, among others, children such as Bel and Kemmy, Georgia and Bessi. Such kinds of mixture (interracial marriage and producing biracial children) reflects London in relation to intermarriage and multicultural issues. The novel appears to consider England as a state that accepts all people, regardless of their multiple identities. Through the use of twins in their oneness, twoness, and doubling, the novel suggests the connection and re-connection of fractured bonds. It uses the twins as figures that inhabit an in-between space based on their colour (being white and black), nationality (English and Nigerians) and having extra human qualities. Such qualities create for the twins a space that enables them not only to create a bridge between Ida and Aubrey, but also Ida and her ancestral family in Aruwa, Nigeria. Whereas Ida represents family abandonment, her daughters play the role of negotiators between Ida's ancestral home and her diasporic home. As the section below demonstrates, the need for family re-unification sometimes forces child characters to adopt new moral codes that can help them, in whatever way, to leave the hostile environment to join their ancestral families. I draw attention to the representation of familial abandonment in a divorce context by focusing on *Imagine This*. The preceding section in its preoccupation with twinship, downplays broader (and larger) familial issues.

### **Divorce and the Negotiation for New Moral Codes of Family Re-unification in *Imagine This***

Sade Adeniran<sup>55</sup> is a Nigerian by birth but lives in London. During her childhood, Adeniran's father took her to live in Nigeria with her relatives but later returned to London. In terms of publication, *Imagine This* is her debut novel. *Imagine This* charts the story of Lola, the

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<sup>55</sup> See <https://geosireads.wordpress.com/2013/10/07/interview-with-nigerian-writer-sade-adeniran/> for more of Adeniran's biographical information.



protagonist, and her encounters as she attempts to search for family stability. As a migrant child in Nigeria (she was born in London but forced by her father to live in Idogun, Nigeria), Lola suffers from being abandoned and mistreated by her paternal relatives. The mistreatment that Lola gets from her relatives makes her unsettled physically and psychologically, and forces her to constantly inhabit two spaces between Lagos and Idogun, a village in Nigeria. The disintegration of Lola's nuclear family caused by the divorce of her parents is one of the main causes of the hardship in her life. As a result, she remains lonely and depressed. She seeks sympathy and solace from an imagined character called Jupiter with whom she shares her life through writing letters. The central theme of this narrative is divorce and family instability.

In *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*, Carole Davies wants us to read the post-colonial narratives in a transnational context as a “series of boundary crossings and not as a fixed, geographical, ethnically or nationally bound category of writing” (4). For her, this way of migration through geo-political border and cultural crossing necessitates definition and redefinition of identity. Thus in a migratory milieu, Davies refutes the idea of a single cultural identity by suggesting what Nyman calls “shuffling between cultures by locating their subjects” (21) in an in-between space. As Nyman contends, the in-between space allows the hybridisation of identity that results in the free-floating of subjects entering new worlds and acquiring new identities. Although Adeniran's narrative appears to agree with Davies and Nyman, it rejects the notion of forced identity construction at the expense of family detachment. Adeniran represents her protagonist as one who is conscious of her acquired identity in the diasporic home and refuses to accept the ancestral one. In this stance, the novel refutes imposed traditions as oppressive and geared towards sustaining patriarchal hegemony. Concomitant with the new identity is the patriarchal control that finds its root in African traditions. Therefore, denying the heroine the Idogun cultural values in Nigeria signifies the narrative's struggle to discard traditional values that glorify patriarchal power over women. As I argue in this section, the imposed traditions result in the negotiation of new moral codes that foster family re-unification. To develop and support this argument, I discuss *Imagine This* in relation to parent-children relationship in the migration and divorce contexts. I focus my discussion on how Adeniran articulates the new strand of feminist struggle to free women from the yoke of tradition and patriarchy by positioning the female child at the centre of the negotiation for family re-unification.



Irene Tucker's "Writing Home: *Evelina*, the Epistolary Novel and the Paradox of Property" is an analysis of Frances Burney's *Evelina*, in which Tucker comes up with the characteristic features of an epistolary novel. Her ideas centre on Charles Porter's theorisation of 'actual letters' (the ones written to be posted) and the letters in an epistolary novel. Whereas actual letters have "an author known to and readily identifiable (even if vaguely) by the intended reader, [...] the epistolary novel departs most strikingly from its 'real-life' counter-part with regard to the identities of author and reader" (422). Tucker holds that, in the "epistolary frame, the letter is limited as an act of self-representation of its author within the text not only because it must be received and read before it can effectively represent, but also because it is literally the representation of another author – the author of the novel" (422). This is vindicated by the use of the first-person narrative point of view to indicate that the "person behind the 'I' is a fictional construction of the novel's author" (423). Tucker goes a step further by showing the use of dates in the epistolary novel to be "draw[ing] attention to the coincidence of a 'natural' (shared by all people and not been learned) passage of time and the novel's narrative motion" (423). Thus, according to Tucker, date and time "suggest the extent to which human action [...] depends upon the disruption of the 'natural' passage of time, or, further, the way in which that passage of time only gains meaning through its disruption" (423). Tucker's problematisation of the epistolary novel makes one read *Imagine This* not only as a *Bildungsroman* but also as an epistolary novel. And, since the protagonist is a female child who, as Okuyade writes, grows and "becomes aware that her condition of life is a limitation to her aspiration for a better future [and] begins [...] display[ing] tendencies of resentment" ("Weaving" 145), I consider the novel, in Okuyade's terms, a female *Bildungsroman*.

Adeniran admits in her interview with Wilson that the novel "is and isn't an echo of her own life [as] some things in the book are based on real incidents" (1). Like the fictional character Lola, Adeniran faced the experience of being taken back to Nigeria from London by her father when she was nine years old and forced to stay with her relatives in the village under the guise of "gain[ing] an understanding of the Idogun culture and the ways, which are different from the white man's" (238). As Adeniran confesses in her interview, "what happens to the character Lola is not what happened to me [but in the village], the restrictions that are placed on you there as a woman are extreme" (1). Here Adeniran invites readers to read *Imagine This* not as an autobiography but rather a fictional work that draws from the author's childhood memories and her struggle to achieve a better life. Thus the author's life

experience becomes not only an event that catalyses the author's creativity but also, as Pucker puts it, fictionalises the author's construction of self.

In representing the theme of parent-child relations and dynamics in the institution of family, *Imagine This* underscores divorce as one of the striking forces that create family instability. Through Samuel, Lola's father, the narrative blames patriarchal power for mistreating and oppressing women. For example, Constance Olufemi, Lola's mother, has "many defects in [her] body as the result of [Samuel's] beating" (304). As Constance writes in her letter to Samuel, he is "beating me like [an] animal daily – these defects I have to repair" (304). This is the reason Constance divorces Samuel, but for a naïve Lola, this is a sign of her mother escaping family responsibilities and showing a lack of passion for and perseverance with reference to her children: "[i]f that's why she left, why didn't she take us with her?" (299). Smart points out that the ethos of divorce needs to emphasise reconfiguring family life after divorce, with the aim of preserving the welfare of the children ("Landscapes" 403). As a consequence, Samuel entrusts his children to the care of his relatives in the village, to train them and prepare them "for when [they] get married" (91). Samuel's approach does not work, as Lola and her brother, Adebola, become victims of their parent's divorce and relatives' ill-treatment: they remain outcasts in Nigeria because they fail to conform to the Idogun traditions and end up blaming their parents and relatives. It is in this context that Lola spearheads the struggle to re-unite her family by devising different ways to make "everything [...] go back to the way it once was, with Daddy, Adebola and [Lola]" (4) – living like a family.

As a representative of the contemporary African woman, Lola rejects all forms of subjugation that deny women a voice in the public sphere. Through Lola, a young female teenager, the story can be read as "a critical perception of and reaction to patriarchy, often articulated through the struggle of a victim or rebel who must face a patriarchal institution [...] [and] a metamorphosis leading to female victory" (Ogunyemi, "Womanism" 65). Arguing in a similar vein to Ogunyemi, Nadaswaran views the girl's growth into a womanist through experiencing a traumatic event as justifying womanist theory (28).<sup>56</sup> For Nadaswaran, Lola, as a young girl-child, her Nigerian and British identities "offer a complex account of the hybrid spaces [...] [in which she] locates [herself] within, countering patriarchal repression

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<sup>56</sup> Nadaswaran uses the concept of 'womanism,' propounded by Ogunyemi, in order to differentiate Black feminism from Western and African-American feminism. See also "Rethinking Family Relationships in Third-Generation Nigerian Women's Fiction" by Nadaswaran.

and feminine submission” (29). By so doing, she seeks independence for herself by refusing to “fall into the same trap as [her] mothers” (20) such as Nyapol and Nnu Ego in Ogot’s *The Promised Land* and Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood*, respectively. More significantly, she occupies an in-between; a hybrid space that enables her to struggle to pull together the fragmented family ties, but eventually she fails. The liminal space Lola inhabits limits her in re-connecting with her family. She is shut out by the patriarchal powers of her uncles, aunts and paternal grandmother.

Lola’s life in Idogun is unbearable, though it nostalgically reminds her of life in London. Like Georgia and Bessi in Evans’s *26a*, Lola comes to know who she is when in Idogun. In Idogun, Lola feels abandoned by her parents: “my struggles really began in Idogun. I prevailed because to resign oneself to one’s fate is to be crippled fast” (3). The narrative gives Idogun a metonymic space to represent Nigeria and the African continent as a whole. Thus Lola’s struggle is a call for transformation among African women by fighting against all forms of stereotyping and oppression. As Nadaswaran observes in his theorising of Ogunyemi’s womanist theory, “Ogunyemi is particularly interested in the development that women characters undergo in fiction. Womanists choose to highlight the process of transformation because it shows the progression of the women in the context of the wider community” (Nadaswaran, *Silence* 35). Since transformation requires change by rejecting and accepting certain sets of norms, Lola develops a hatred of Idogun culture and everything the Idogun people do. She constructs Idogun through images of lice, worms, witchcraft, superstition, poor supply of services such as water and electricity, riots among university students and the closing of universities, brutality from teachers and relatives. These images, as Mbembe would argue, communicate the instability of the post-colonial state that is characterised by violence and identified by “the world it produces; the type of institutions, knowledge, norms, and practises” (“The Banality” 4). Indeed, this is what Christopher Ouma also had in mind when, in his study on “Childhood in Contemporary Nigerian Fiction,” he regards the twenty-first century Nigerian fictions as being marked by identity (dis)placement caused by military governance that shaped Nigerian life in the late nineteen-sixties up to the late nineteen-nineties (1).

Lola wants a stable family where the roles of mother, father and children are well-articulated and exercised: “[a]ll I’ve ever wanted is to have a family of my own, a Father, a mother and a brother of my own” (193). The need for family re-unification becomes a cliché in Lola’s complaints against the hostile environment of Idogun. It is true that Constance on her side

fighters against patriarchal hegemony by introducing divorce as an alternative in order to gain self-determination and independence but, according to Lola, she [her mother] “fail[ed] to divorce in the proper manner” (Smart, “Post-divorce” 168). Thus Lola says it is her father’s fault for letting his wife leave, but “why did she leave [her children] behind?” (304). Pondering the conduct of Lola’s mother, Nadaswaran views Constance as a second generation woman, the likes of Emecheta’s Nnu Ego, who “find themselves immobile and shackled with the patriarchal dominance propagated by tradition and culture [...] the women who have internalized this form of living as a norm as a result of colonial displacement, experiencing a triple colonization” (“Rethinking Family” 27). However, as Nadaswaran notes, this kind of struggle to get rid of patriarchal shackles, as Constance exemplifies, occurs at the expense of her relationship with her children.

In this context where the mother seeks self-independence at the expense of her relationship with her children, Smart suggests resorting to extended family members to take care of the divorced couple’s children. Whereas Smart underscores the role of grandparents in providing a safe haven for children and “supporting contact between a father and his children” (“Landscapes” 406), the narrative suggests a betwixt space independent of parents and grandparents. By locating the protagonist in the in-between space, perhaps, apart from negotiating for family re-unification, Lola rejects what Nadaswaran would call first and second-generation women by creating a new space where women are free from patriarchal and traditional oppression. Thus, Lola envisions the significant change in power relations between men and women in the twenty-first century. She considers childhood as a stage where youngsters can be prepared and take centre-stage in the fight against all forms of oppression against women. Lola says, “I can’t wait to grow up and make my own decisions” (5). To achieve that power, the novel suggests constructing the institution of family as a solid base that will nurture morally-upright children who, in turn, will bring about a stable and harmonised society. Using the character of Lola, Adeniran holds the view that the gender stereotype free state will be achieved through what Ogunyemi calls “the unity of blacks everywhere under the enlightened control of men and women” (“Womanism” 71). That is why Lola calls upon her brother, Adebola, to join hands in their fight against the cruelty of their relatives in Idogun.

However, the narrative mutes Adebola in his struggle for family re-unification in order to give an unmitigated voice for the text’s heroine, Lola. Like Lola, Adebola is victimised by divorce and is taken to live with his uncle, Joseph, in the village where he contends with

harassment and torture of different sorts, imposed under the pretext of ‘masculinising’ him. The silent mode makes Lola create a new space where she can express her feelings: woes, loneliness, and all forms of desperation. Ramatoulaye in Bâ’s *So Long a Letter* seeks sympathy from her childhood friend, Aissatou, and readers are invited to experience the pain of betrayal and neglect by her husband which Ramatoulaye is undergoing. In the same vein, Lola creates an imaginary friend, Jupiter, as a counterspace to replace Adebola. Jupiter becomes the source of Lola’s comfort and friendship and is an embodiment of the universe from which Lola looks for solace. Thus the novel appeals to readers to feel the pain Lola is going through by being treated as an outcast. To vindicate the power of the familial bond over friendship, the narrative on some occasions juxtaposes Adebayo and Jupiter. For example, when Adebola gets an opportunity to come to Idogun during the burial of their grandfather, Baba, Lola stops communicating with Jupiter. She says, “now that Adebola and me are talking again I really don’t have to tell you everything” (55). The death of Adebola because of ill-treatment from his relatives, unlike Nhamo’s in *Nervous Conditions* and Alusani’s in *Ancestor Stones*, epitomises the anger the text invites readers to share with regard to the forced separation of children from their biological parents under the guise of ‘acquisition’ of cultural values.

To ensure that a stable family is constructed, Lola adopts ‘new moral codes’ that will make her leave Idogun for her father in Lagos or resume life in London with her family members. I use the term ‘new moral codes’ in this context to mean going against what is considered ‘normal’ in a given society at a particular time. It is what Gikandi considers as a ‘morality tale’ that varies according to time and cultural space. As Gikandi suggests, these sets of values open “vistas to discourses about self and community, art, and gender” (4) and, thus, call attention to multiplicity and *differences* based on time and culture. Like Gikandi’s question he echoes from his American student on Okonkwo (why did he beat his wife during the week of peace or kill Ikemefuna?), *Imagine This* intrigues readers by asking why Lola opts for a new moral code to re-connect with her family.

To respond to this question, one has to consider twofold factors that prompt Lola to become rebellious: the situation that forces her to be rebellious and the age factor. In discussing the situation, I focus on time, physical environment, and the people against whom Lola reacts. And, in terms of age, I read Lola’s physical and mental growth. Here I would agree with Tucker on the use of dates as a marker of timeframe in epistolary novels. The two aspects of timeframe (date and time) accentuate the temporality of human action. It is not surprising that

the narrative uses dates linearly to show what Tucker calls the ‘natural passage of time’ and the growth of the protagonist. The development of Lola from childhood to adulthood falls between the late nineteen-seventies to early nineteen-nineties, which, according to Ouma, is the period characterised by military governance and political instability in Nigeria. Adeniran nuances this instability in the Nigerian government through the frequent beating of Lola by her relatives, riots among university students and the closure of universities.

Adeniran begins her narrative by teasing out the story of her protagonist when she is already in London after more than ten years of hardship and sufferings in Idogun. It is a childhood memory and a way towards future success: “[n]ow I am older, and wiser. I have put my childish ways behind me and view the world with a weary cynicism that has become hard to shake” (3). By beginning her narrative with the 1991 event when Lola is already back in London, Adeniran uses the flashback structure of her narrative to underscore the achievement of her protagonist. She introduces her narrative with an African proverb: “[t]he spirit that keeps one going when one has no choice of what else to do must not be mistaken for valour” (3). This proverb, according to Olutoyin Jegede, “prepares the reader’s mind for the struggles of the protagonist’s life” (280). Such a narrative structure (flashback) does not only communicate the aesthetic quality of the story (through incorporating short oral formulaic forms) but also accentuates the fruits of struggle among women. The narrative uses this proverb to prepare readers to interrogate the struggle Lola engages in against all the forms of oppression she faces as a migrant child and daughter. The other events take place from 1977 to 1987 in Idogun where Lola is forced to defend her position as an abandoned female child, a girl, and teenager. It is within the Idogun setting that I interrogate Lola’s adoption of new moral codes as a way of escaping from the hands of oppressive relatives and re-joining her family.

Lola’s struggle in Idogun and attempt to retaliate against her oppressive extended family members remind us to consider the Yoruba proverb: “[w]hen the jackal dies the fowls do not mourn, for the jackal never brings up a chicken” (*Imagine This* 317). Lola uses this proverb to convey her message about the death of her father. Like Agbadi in *The Joys of Motherhood*, the death of Lola’s father means the end of patriarchal power and a new light for women. Lola, however, sympathises with the death of her father, not because of “what he was but what he wasn’t and the possibility of what he could have been” (319). As Njegede observes, the binary opposition between death and life, which Lola uses in the proverb, symbolically communicates that more space that will be created as a result of her father’s death. Although



I agree with Njegede's interpretation of the proverb, I read it much more broadly by including Lola's devising of new plans that lead to her expulsion from Idogun to re-join her family in Lagos and eventually London. These plans include engaging in sexual intercourse, failing exams, thinking of becoming a witch, and advocating the death of her relatives. She thus puts herself in a position where she can be ostracised and subsequently banished from her traditional society.

Lola holds the view that a family, as an institution, should consist of a father and mother who live together and cherish their children. Therefore, the loss of parental love makes Lola not only an orphan but also a survivor who has escaped death from her relative's brutality. As a result, she yearns for love from and acceptance by her family. Knowing that the aspect of indiscipline (opening her legs)<sup>57</sup> did not help her get expelled from school, Lola resorts to failing in class. Thus she says, "I've missed most of the classes this term, so I'll probably end up at the bottom of the class again" (71). She continues, "It seems I'll have to work harder at failing the end of year exams. Not that it would be very difficult, since the only lessons I've attended are English and Literature" (103). Here one thinks of Adeniran's partial depiction of her personal life through Lola. As she reveals in her interview, "When I was growing up, my dad and I didn't get on at all. I'd try and talk to him and felt like he didn't listen to me, so I started writing him letters and slipping them under his door" (3). Besides, Adeniran's studying English and Media Studies at University is reflected in Lola's passion for English and Literature. Thus Adeniran uses her personal experience to show how it feels to be detached from one's parents. But "things would get better after" (3) Adeniran's father having read those letters would see the need to take good care of his children. Yet, Adeniran makes her narrative fictional so it transcends her personal life by showing how Lola is not on good terms with her father until his death. Through Lola, therefore, Adeniran creates an atmosphere in which abandoned children negotiate family ties.

Besides, Lola is envious of Fatima, her fellow student, because she is likely to be expelled from school, having been accused of witchcraft by her fellow students. Fatima is so traumatised by the accusation that she attempts to commit suicide by drinking "half a gallon of gamoline which is used on the cocoa plants to stop insects eating them" (88). Jumoke, a student who initiates the hunt for witches in the dormitory, is expected to report the case to

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<sup>57</sup> When Moyin, a student in Lola's class, was expelled from school because she 'cannot keep her legs closed', euphemistically to mean engaging in sex, Lola interprets it literally and she goes to the Principal's office where she sits while her legs are open so that she can be expelled from school.



the Principal for Fatima to be expelled. Jealous of what could happen to Fatima, Lola says, “[m]aybe I should say it was my fault as that way I’d get expelled instead. I’ll go and talk to her” (88). Here the novel invites us to read the three incidents – witchcraft, attempt to commit suicide, and expulsion from school – as forms of what Cazenave would call women’s rebellion. Cazenave reads women’s rebellion as being infused within a larger systematic provocation, which is itself articulated thus:

through a choice of female protagonists who are marginal in relation to their societies [...] [and] through a search for alternatives to socio-political questions about a stagnant postcolonial Africa and through the creation of a stable feminine/feminist voice that breaks with canonical masculine authority. (4)

As a figure of rebellion, Lola is aware of how much Idogun society and the school environment have marginalised her. She seeks for power that will enable her to disrupt patriarchal dominance and have a voice in society. Lola considers witchcraft and being expelled from school as viable solutions that could make her have power to decide on her own and have a decent life with her family. In this context, Lola uses the ‘witchcraft’ trope to symbolise power dominance and control by juxtaposing it with Christianity: “[i]f I did become a witch I’d like to be a good one, I’d feed all the starving people like Jesus did with his five loaves of bread and fish” (86-87). For Lola, the two powers (witchcraft and Christianity) are similar because, apart from centring their belief on the supernatural power, they can be grounded in helping a human being to have a good life. The evocation of the two supernatural powers makes Lola’s rebellion more appealing because it is not vengeful but is rather orientated towards creating a good and harmonious society: “I’d like people like Mama to do good things only and I’d make Daddy love me and my mother come back and live with us so we could be a family” (87). In this case, the text makes us read Lola as a rebellious female character who has created her own space that enables her to negotiate the fractured family bonds by adopting witchcraft and being expelled from school as viable routes to re-connecting with her family.

Lola, as Smart would argue, has a vision of what a proper childhood should be and what constitutes the responsibilities of her parents (“Post-divorce” 168). That is why Lola is so embarrassed when her father fails to play his parental role by loving and taking care of his

children. Lola defines her father as someone “who had a part in [...] germination but didn’t bother to water the seeds so that they would bloom into flowers. [He] doesn’t care” (109). In contrast, she also describes a “[d]addy as someone you love, someone who kisses away your tears, tells you everything would be alright with your world, someone who is there for you” (109). According to Lola, Samuel has lost the right to be called a daddy. As a child, Lola wishes to have a daddy but ends up having not only a father but an irresponsible father. Whereas Boehmer in her theorisation of the post-colonial state considers the male figure as an icon in administrative structure, policies, and leadership (*Stories* 22), *Imagine This* challenges his power and control. By rendering Samuel irresponsible, the narrative, as Boehmer would argue, disrupts the symbolic inheritance wrapped in African traditions that pushed women to the periphery to elevate the status of men. Instead, Adeniran creates a strong woman destined to nurture her family for the well-being of the society.

To demonstrate annoyance with parental abandonment, the novel subjects Lola to tragedies that enable her to find love and solace. Adeniran represents Lola’s sickness and the death of her relatives in Idogun as tragic events that ironically provide Lola with an opportunity to be cared for and get enough food. Thus when she is sick, “[e]veryone was really nice to me, maybe I should get sick more often” (41). When Baba, Lola’s grandfather on her father’s side, dies, she enjoys eating a lot of food: “[i]f someone dies every week or so for the next five years then I’ll never go hungry again, but I might run out of relatives” (50). Even when Mama is admitted to hospital for “leaking blood from her bottom” (140) Lola is in peace and prays that she dies there because “there would have been mourners and lots of food to eat” (141). Lola can get away with these morbid thoughts because of the innocence and amorality associated with a child persona. Also, the narrative’s resort to tragedy is a result of the failure of other means to make Lola – as a desperate child – gain familial and parental love.

Reading *Imagine This* alongside *Ancestor Stones*, one grasps the struggle of contemporary African writers to eliminate obstacles that are likely to hinder women in achieving equal power with men. Whereas Forna’s narrative, as I argued in Chapter Three, suggests eliminating men who hinder women in their struggle, Adeniran’s goes further by including other women who oppress their fellow-women. Adeniran’s narrative slightly refutes Nnaemeka’s concept of sisterhood “that underscores the power of African women to work with patriarchal/cultural structures that are liberating and enabling while challenging those that are limiting and debilitating” (“Sisterhood” 4). Rather, in this context, where a female child is abandoned by her family, *Imagine This* suggests an individual struggle: “I was inside

myself but outside myself too” (36) and “I’d rather be by myself” (309). Therefore, although the desire to be sick communicates Lola’s pursuit of love and solace, the death of Baba and her desire for the death of Mama alludes to the burying of traditional systems that are oppressive to women. It is a call for a new generation that is gender oppression-free and grounded in a solid and loving family.

Besides negotiating for family re-connection, like Forna and Shoneyin’s texts, Adeniran’s does not hide its stand on the new strand of African feminism. For example, Baba Segi in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* and Samuel in *Imagine This* are depicted as paradoxical father figures to represent the patriarchal institution. Whereas Baba Segi is impotent and, therefore, takes care of children who are not his, Samuel refrains from caring for his biological family to the extent of making his children suspicious that “[m]aybe he’s not really [their] father [and] that’s why [their] mother left” (13). These father figures enable readers to question fatherhood in contemporary African women writing. For example, Baba Segi demonstrates his parental care by being physically present in his family and looking after ‘his children.’ Thus, according to Lola, Baba Segi plays the role of a father and a parent. In contrast, Samuel is only a biological father. Ultimately, the two father figures are both rendered incapable and irresponsible. Like Shoneyin, Adeniran’s narrative dismantles the traditional and colonial mentality that underlies the male gaze. Instead, it envisions a gender-balanced society that recognises men and women as equal beings who respect each other without enforcing any sort of oppression based on their sex differences.

However, Adeniran’s novel goes a step further by challenging Ogunyemi’s theory of womanism. Whereas Ogunyemi considers motherhood as a central institution that gives power to African women, *Imagine This* discourages this practice by rendering it oppressive. By so doing, as I have argued in Chapter Three, the narrative suggestively joins hand with Nnaemeka in her principle of evacuation, where a woman can remain without having children. It is worth noting that, for Lola, the denial of womanhood and motherhood is circumstantial. She grows up in a system where womanhood and motherhood connote pain to women. For example, when aged ten, Lola witnesses her aunt Bunmi delivering a baby and she is forced by this circumstance to be a mid-wife. The act of delivering communicates women’s endurance of pain in birth-giving but Lola is not convinced: “I’m never going to have children if it was this painful” (39) and “I’m never getting pregnant if it makes you sick” (70). This makes her begin to hate her body: “I never want breasts” (70). Through Lola, Adeniran makes readers grasp the commitment the contemporary generation of African

women writers evince in demonstrating their power by using the family institution. Through Lola, the narrative discourages the circumstances in which children are abandoned by their families and end up being negotiators of family ties instead of concentrating on building their own future life. The implication is that it is Samuel's incapacity to have a solid and well-loved family that drives Lola to live with her relatives in Idogun where she is subjected to negative images of womanhood and motherhood.

## **Conclusion**

On the whole, Baingana, Evans, and Adeniran as emerging African women writers produce narratives which challenge the narratives of their older generation counterparts. Their protagonists, as Nadaswaran would argue, are "magnified and fully realised: responsible, courageous, audacious, wilful and whole" ("Rethinking Family" 22). In their narratives, these women writers give a voice to a female child to symbolise the need for growth and challenge the post-colonial state to achieve equal development for both men and women. The different stages of growth of characters in these narratives are what prompted me to read them as *Bildungsroman* narratives. Reading these narratives in the context of parental abandonment one encounters the creation of a third space, the in-between, where characters stand to negotiate between the two conflicting sides. It is unfortunate that Baingana's Christine ends up being lonely for failing to conform to the Banyankole norms on her return from the United States. Georgia and Bessi fail to negotiate between Ida and Aubrey, as well as between London and Nigeria; instead Georgia dies leaving Bessi alone, despite their meeting in a different world and in a different form. This suggests co-existence amidst differences even amongst twins. Lola fails to re-unite her family and ends up leaving for London. Generally, the narratives leave readers to wonder about what could eventually happen to Christine, Bessi and Lola. Because of not being able to re-connect with their families and being victims of the precariousness of the post-colonial state, are they going to be 'street children' or end up being prostitutes? What sort of families are they going to form? These questions, among others, are answered in Chapter Five, where I discuss the constituted family and the embracing of prostitution as an offshoot of the failure of the family institution to create a peaceful and loving environment for children.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Affilial Relationships and the Precariousness of Urban Life

#### Introduction

Chapter Four examined the representation of dynamics in the family that result in separation among family members, and their failure to attain family reunification. This chapter picks up from where Chapter Four ends by examining how Lema's *In the Belly of Dar es Salaam*, Atta's *Swallow* and Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* represent characters who are victims of economic and political pressures that force them not only to be migrants but also to negotiate alternatives in order to survive by forming affilial relationships. I explore the selected narratives in relation to what Young calls "the webs of conflict, violent social patterns and governmental dysfunctionalities" (24)<sup>58</sup> that disturb post-colonial subjects in Africa, thus rendering migrants detached from their biological families. Since their protagonists move from rural areas to urban spaces, these writings offer an opportunity to read post-colonial cities as agent spaces in the production of meanings and re-construction of identities (Demissie 1).<sup>59</sup>

This chapter focuses on the representation of marginalised groups from the voices on the fringes of urban society. As I probed the sort of family Christine, Bessi and Lola were going to form after having failed to pull together the fragmented family bonds in Chapter Four, in this chapter I suggest that Lema, Unigwe and Atta's writings seem to respond by creating characters that are street-children, prostitutes, and drug traffickers to construct what the anthropologist Maximilian Holland calls a 'nurture kinship family.' According to Holland, a nurture kinship family is social bonding that is constructed and may be independent of genealogical relatedness (5).<sup>60</sup> As such, I read their narratives in relation to how they relate to my larger project on the politics of the family by going beyond blood-related family

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<sup>58</sup> See "The End of the Post-colonial State in Africa? Reflections on Changing African Political Dynamics" by Young for more discussion on the post-colonial state in Africa and how it began experiencing crises from the 1980s that resulted in violence, coups and civil wars.

<sup>59</sup> Fasil Demissie argues that African cities are spaces where urban inhabitants reconfigure and remake urban worlds by deploying their own forms of urbanity born out of their historical and material circumstances. By so doing, they forge new identities for certain needs at a particular time. See also "Imperial Legacies and Postcolonial Predicaments: An Introduction" by Demissie.

<sup>60</sup> Holland theorises how the genealogical relatedness of family can be replaced by nurturing kinship family in circumstances of family detachment. See also *Social Bonding and Nurture Kinship: Compatibility between Cultural and Biological Approaches* by Holland.

institutions. I am suggesting that the precariousness of urban spaces provides an opportunity to explore the dynamics of marginalised groups and these voices from the fringes, and ways in which they negotiate affilial relationships amongst themselves, as relegated or displaced characters.

To conduct this study, I set up a conversation between Lema's *In the Belly of Dar es Salaam*, and the diasporic writings of Atta and Unigwe to interrogate their similarities and differences in their depiction of the post-colonial cities of Dar es Salaam and Lagos, respectively. Whereas Lema, writing from within Dar es Salaam, represents the city as a 'mother' city that plays a maternal role in the reconstituted family, Atta and Unigwe depict Lagos as a hostile space that does not supply sustenance for the institution of family. The reason for their negative portrayal of the city of Lagos is given by Adeniran's protagonist, Lola – when justifying her plea for diasporic identity – that it is a place of problems: moral decay and extravagance make people seek refuge in Britain. This impression is intensified by a "group of people [Nigerians] queuing at the British Commission chasing for a visa" (*Imagine This* 287) to Britain.

These writers depict female characters not only as victims of patriarchal and post-colonial systems but also as agents for change [see for example, Huma Ibrahim (1997), Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi (1997) and Françoise Lionnet (1997)].<sup>61</sup> For example, Sara, the protagonist in *In the Belly of Dar es Salaam*, Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce, the four main figures in *On Black Sisters' Street*, and Tolani and Rose, the two protagonists in *Swallow*, are all determined to get a good education and take care of their families, but their hopes are shattered by the states' ruling system and patriarchy. As I discuss later, Sisi and Rose die in the course of their struggle; while Ama, Efe and Joyce are forced into prostitution, though later they determine their own destinies. Whereas Sara reinvents herself in the city, Tolani returns to the village to her mother. These narratives seem to suggest that the post-colonial state is an unstable space that devastates the hopes of its subjects. This appears to concur with Mbembe who, in *On the Postcolony*, views contemporary Africa as understood through a negative interpretation as of little value (1). Mbembe appears to reach such a conclusion because of the occurrence of military coups, civil wars, corruption, poverty, kidnapping and tyrannical leadership that have

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<sup>61</sup> Ibrahim, Nfah-Abbenyi and Lionnet in different contexts discuss how post-colonial women's narratives are dominated by the representations of female victimisation and resistance. Ibrahim discusses the themes of agency and victimhood in Bessie Head's *A Question of Power*, Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* and *In the Ditch*. Likewise Nfah-Abbenyi focuses on a similar theme in relation to Calixthe Beyala's *Tanga* and Lionnet in the fictions of Gayl Jones, Bessie Head, and Myriam Warner-Vieyra.

been the characteristic features of African states since their attainment of political independence from the mid-1950s (the early African independent states) into the 1960s (when the bulk of them got their political independence) and finally, the 1970s (when former Portuguese colonies finally got their independence). In other words, the post-colonial state is a “chaotic plurality” (1).<sup>62</sup> As such, I find it useful to use Mbembe’s ideas on the instability of the post-colonial state in this chapter to demonstrate how the selected fictions depict this problem and how the problem is linked to the disintegration of the institution of family. Arguing along the same lines as Mbembe in the context of corruption, Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi blames post-colonial African leaders for being self-centred. They “abuse political power and resources for personal gain and for ruling elites, at the expense of ordinary citizens” (245). The instability of the post-colonial state pushes post-colonial subjects to the margins in the sharing of national resources. Failure to receive an allotment of resources creates circumstances that force post-colonial subjects to become migrants in search of better lives thus detaching from their biological families.

I am using the post-colonial concept of ‘migration’ interchangeably with ‘dislocation’ in this chapter to denote the willing and unwilling crossing of the boundary of a political or administrative unit for a certain period.<sup>63</sup> My focus is on the displacement of people from their traditional livelihoods to urban centres for reasons of economic well-being. As Douglas Massey points out, wages are generally higher in urban than in rural areas, thus creating a pull that prompts people to migrate to urban centres where their labour power can be commodified (304). I draw special attention to the characters’ migration from rural to urban spaces, then from urban to diaspora spaces, and how they negotiate between these two spaces in an attempt to reconstruct their own familial identities.

In theorising family therapy and attachment theory, Wayne Hill offers an insightful description of a space which inhabits the displaced individuals who are in need of social relatedness to offset family detachment. She points out that “when children and young children are separated from a nurturing individual with whom an attachment has developed,

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<sup>62</sup> See “The Banality of Power and the Aesthetics of Vulgarly in the Postcolony” by Mbembe and “Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis” by Mbembe and Roitman on the theorisation of the post-colonial state, crisis and subjectivity.

<sup>63</sup> See *Exploring Contemporary Migration* by Boyle, P., Halfacree, K. and Robinson, V. for more discussion on migration in the twenty-first century. See also “International Migration at the Beginning of the Twenty-First Century: Global Trends and Issues” by Castles.



separation protest occurs in which the child will cry and make attempts to regain the lost relationship” (5). In such a context of separation from the biological family, Hill suggests that they develop a “continuum of attachment styles or patterns identified as affilial relationships” (6) to allow children to suppress the feelings of separation from their families. Affilial relationships become a soothing and nurturing space that replace the biological family bond. Thus I read the selected narratives in relation to how: (i) they interrogate rural-urban and diaspora migration in relation to the ‘failure’ of the post-colonial state; (ii) they represent the precariousness of the city that results in the marginalisation of some social groups such as street children, prostitutes and women; (iii) they reconfigure the institution of the family by creating an affilial relationships to suppress the loss of familial bonds. To capture these three dimensions of my discussion, I divide this chapter into three parts. The first part interrogates rural-urban migration and examines how characters forge new identities in the urban space. The second part dwells on the representation of Nigeria in general as a post-colonial state and the third section focuses on the representation of African and European cities, and the dangers associated with inhabiting these spaces.

### **Rural-Urban Migration and Identity Negotiation in *In the Belly of Dar es Salaam* (2011)**

This section focuses on the migration of characters from rural to urban areas and explores how the precariousness of urban life forces them to renegotiate identities in different ways by either being criminals or forming affilial relationships. Biographically, the Tanzanian female author, Elieshi Lema, was born in 1949 and grew up in a village on the slopes of Mount Kilimanjaro, Tanzania. She appeared on the writing scene in 1995 with the publication of *Safari ya Prospa (Prospa’s Journey)*, a novel for children written in Kiswahili. In 2001 she shifted her writing from Kiswahili to English by publishing *Parched Earth: A Love Story* which has captured a wide audience beyond the East African region where Kiswahili predominates. In both her works, Lema critiques the patriarchal system by creating a single-parent family as a way of subverting male power dominance in the family. Her struggle to empower marginalised groups through fiction remains centre-stage in her *In the Belly of Dar es Salaam*, which won the Burt Award for African Literature.

*In the Belly of Dar es Salaam* is about ‘street children’ and the precariousness of life in the city of Dar es Salaam. The story is largely told through Sara, the protagonist that brings together a strand of varied narratives of an assortment of characters. Sara migrates from her home district Same in Kilimanjaro region, Tanzania, to Dar es Salaam by means of lorry

transport- tagging along with Prospa who is going to Zanzibar via Dar es Salaam to look for his lost nephew, Merisho. She leaves home at the time when life is very hard – because she stays with her grandmother, her mother died without telling her the whereabouts of her father. Her departure for Dar es Salaam is caused by life difficulties in the village: for example, she is denied education. For her, Dar es Salaam is the city where her dreams of being a successful woman will materialise. The central theme of the novel is rural-urban migration. Lema captures this theme precisely by using a linear, simple, straightforward and easy-to-follow plot. Her use of actual names of places – such as Same, Dar es Salaam, Mtwara, Kibaha, Kariakoo, Magomeni, Kigogo and many others – that are real and traceable blurs the lines between fact and fiction.

*In the Belly of Dar es Salaam* invites readers to read how the phenomenon of street-children, in the precariousness of the urban space and the reconfiguration of affilial relationships, can be understood as a result of the socio-economic instability in rural areas. The narrative begins by appealing to readers to sympathise with the protagonist, Sara, for being unable to remain in her home in the rural area. The unnamed narrator brings to the fore the paradoxical image of Sara smiling while concealing her fate, which symbolically stands for an “uncertain future and destroyed hopes of [the] troubled society” (Irmi Maral-Hanak 39).<sup>64</sup> This image of Sara, in a rural setting, is reminiscent of Adeniran’s character, Lola (in *Imagine This*) who also hates rural life and Atta’s character Tolani in *Swallow* who considers the rural area as a space for people who have lost hope in life. As the narrator *In the Belly of Dar es Salaam* describes, Prospa meets Sara with rivulets of blood “dripp[ing] from the head of a slaughtered cow she was carrying” (3) to the Same Guest house and Bar for making soup: “[t]he cow’s last expression on its face was of surprise and fear” (3-4). The two images – Sara and the head of a slaughtered cow – are suggestive of firstly, the multiple and contradictory roles of a child in a rural setting. For example, Sara is an embodiment of child labour and, at the same time, she looks for money to take care of her grandmother. And, secondly, as the narrative unfolds, it becomes evident that the detachment between the body and head of the cow metaphorically signifies the separation between rural and urban inhabitants and between older and younger family members’ locations, values and choices.

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<sup>64</sup> See “*Safari ya Prospa*”: A Novel for Children” by Maral-Hanak on Lema’s use of child protagonists in her narratives.

Bakhtin in “Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel” reminds us, using his concept of the chronotope, that “the image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic” (16) (to mean time and space) and the primary category in the chronotope in literature is time (15). Applying the concept of the chronotope to *In the Belly of Dar es Salaam*, one thinks of the use of the Mwalimu (which translates as “teacher” in Kiswahili) Nyerere figure in the novel as a signifier of time and space.<sup>65</sup> In this sense, I read Nyerere as a post-colonial figure that represents the past (1960s- mid-1980s) and Sara, Kaleb, Ali, Belinda and Safina as post-colonial victims of the subsequent phases of leadership, from the late 1980s to the present (2010s).<sup>66</sup> Whereas Nyerere is an allegory for a well-built and unified society, the subsequent regimes, as depicted in the narrative, are characterised by governmental dysfunctionality because of internal and external forces.<sup>67</sup> The narrator says: “Mwalimu Nyerere was a teacher like us and he wanted the workers and peasants to live like two cotyledons in a bean seed, side by side, each for the other” (29) to signify equality among people by disrupting social differences.

Here the narrative alludes to the Arusha Declaration of 1967, a brand of ‘African Socialism’ proffered by Nyerere, which was aimed at “breaking the gap between the needs of Tanzania’s predominantly rural peasantry and modern socialist statecraft” (Paul Kaiser 229 and Hazel Gray 2013).<sup>68</sup> However, as Jumanne Wagao and Kaiser in different contexts observe, the efforts to develop Tanzanians, especially in raising the welfare of village dwellers, failed miserably. Instead, the difference between urban and rural inhabitants in terms of capital increased dramatically (Wagao 9). “[B]asic consumer goods were rarely available, the transportation infrastructure was collapsing and the government was unable to provide many

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<sup>65</sup> In Tanzania, people tend to use the Kiswahili expression ‘enzi za mwalimu’ to refer fondly to Mwalimu Nyerere’s era. Nostalgically, they remember the heyday of Nyerere’s selfless leadership aimed at building a society built on egalitarian principles.

<sup>66</sup> My categorisation of dates is based on leadership phases. Nyerere came into power initially as Prime Minister and then President of Tanganyika in 1960 and retired in 1985. From 1985 there were the other successive regimes of Ali Hassan Mwinyi (1985-1995), Benjamin Mkapa (1995-2005) and Jakaya Mrisho Kikwete (2005-2015).

<sup>67</sup> In this context, the external forces include the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the Breton Woods Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs). See also “Structural Adjustment and the Fragile Nation: The Demise of Social Unity in Tanzania” by Kaiser p. 227.

<sup>68</sup> See “Structural Adjustment and the Fragile Nation: The Demise of Social Unity in Tanzania” by Kaiser. See also “Adjustment Policies in Tanzania” by Wagao, “Industrial Policy and the Political Settlement in Tanzania: Aspects of Continuity and Change since Independence” (2013) by Gray for more discussion on the principles of the Arusha Declaration, especially efforts towards uplifting rural peasants.

of the basic health care and education services that were promised immediately following the Arusha Declaration” (Kaiser 231).

*In the Belly of Dar es Salaam* captures how the different leaders in Tanzania have been formulating and implementing different policies – to offset the failure of the Arusha Declaration – to restore the economy of the country, but ended up widening the gap between rural and urban dwellers.<sup>69</sup> Consequently, the rural peasants are left behind in the socio-economic planning cycles of the country. This dichotomy between rural and urban areas in terms of socio-economic gain in the narrative is exemplified by the death of Sara’s mother of a severe headache because of failure to get proper treatment. Thus, when the narrator says, “[t]he doctor examined her and said that there is a swelling in mother’s head [...] it could only be treated outside the country, [...] In India” (12), it nuances the economic disparities and poor accessibility to medical services between rural and urban residents. And when also the narrator says, “[p]eople did not go there with money from maize and sweet potato sales” (13), it implies how difficult it is for peasants to access medical amenities. Here, the narrative seems to criticise the existing power relations between rural peasant and urban residents in terms of accessibility to decent services. By using India as a global space, in this context, the text communicates how the rural peasants are not only barred from better medical services, but also distanced from the world of globalisation.

Indeed, Lema’s depiction of the widening gulf between rural and urban in contemporary Tanzania is pervasive. *In the Belly of Dar es Salaam* seems to question the pillars of Education for Self-Reliance (ESR)<sup>70</sup> and the centralisation of government and public organisations. For example, the character Kaleb blames the education system for failing to

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<sup>69</sup> Ali Hassan Mwinyi, in an attempt to restore the economy of Tanzania, began implementing the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), which included the adoption of political and liberal economic policies and privatisation of government sectors. He also sanctioned the sale of government parastatals and adopted trade liberalisation under the Economic Recovery Programme (ERP) in 1986-1995. Benjamin Mkapa came in power in 1995-2005 and accepted globalisation as a way to integrate Tanzania into the global world. Jakaya Mrisho Kikwete (2005-2015), apart from implementing the globalisation policy, came up with the Big Result Now (BRN) policy aimed at ensuring high productivity in every sector of the government. In all these post-Nyerere leadership phases, the emphasis is more on capitalist ideology than on socialist ideas manifested in Nyerere’s *Ujamaa* philosophy, which has actually died a natural death. See also “Structural Adjustment and the Fragile Nation: The Demise of Social Unity in Tanzania” by Kaiser.

<sup>70</sup> Education for Self-Reliance (ESR) was among the principles of the 1967 Arusha Declaration geared towards providing education that is relevant to Tanzanians and one that could enable graduates to be self-employed. Among the drawbacks of this philosophy of education is the failure of curriculum implementers to teach students how they can employ themselves. This resulted in producing graduates who were prepared for ‘white colour’ jobs. In fact, the all-important universal primary education system failed to equip the pupils with life-relevant skills that would prepare them for the world upon finishing the primary school cycle.

control examination leaks (27). He attributes the whole process of examination leaks to the country's ruling system, for not providing better infrastructure and payment to teachers which forces them to get involved in stealing examination papers and selling them to students as a way of fraudulently getting money. Rural peasants still become victims of such exam leaks. Exemplified by the character Kaleb, the son of a rural peasant, he is a victim of several interlocking stereotypes. Because of the government's failure to fight corruption, Kaleb cannot get better education and, thus, cannot access employment in either the formal or informal sectors. Brian Cooksey and Sibyelle Riedmille's analysis of the Tanzanian education system appears to speak about Kaleb's complaints. Cooksey and Riedmille challenge the government system in Tanzania for failing to implement the ESR policy. For example, miscommunication between the curriculum designers and implementers (mainly teachers) resulted in "practical activities, mainly agriculture in rural schools, [...] not [being] integrated into the primary syllabus, [so that the system] degenerated into exploitation of child labour by poorly paid teachers and school management" (Cooksey and Riedmille 122). And the quality of education was and has been "of paper qualifications" (123), with the aim of getting certificates without placing emphasis on the practical skills that could make the candidates self-employable. In contrast, rich people, mainly from cities, send their children to study abroad, where there is quality education. Under such circumstances, children from rural areas have to contend with poor quality education (based on 'paper certificates') which ill-prepares them for either formal or self-employment. Inevitably, there is a widening gap between rural and urban, rich and poor, which is well captured by Kaleb when he says, "higher education was a contest of the clever and the strong. The weak and the poor had no part in it" (29) to imply the socio-economic differences between rural and urban residents. Thus, the novel uses Kaleb to represent the majority of rural children as 'victimised' by the failure of ESR and the corruption of government leaders. Education in this context becomes a tool not only for separating the clever from the weak ones, but also for widening the gap between rural peasants and better-off urban dwellers.

Thus Kaleb, Sara and Ali see the rural areas as spaces that offer few opportunities for them to survive, and Dar es Salaam as a space for their salvation. It is here in Dar es Salaam that the narrative maps out different ways through which these characters negotiate identities and yearn for social bonding to offset familial detachment. For example, on the one hand, Mansa, a boy who migrates from a little village in Kibaha because of the harshness of his father and

step-mother, becomes a *machinga*<sup>71</sup> in Dar es Salaam, street-hawking cashew nuts and groundnuts, but if buyers are scarce he begs or washes cars, or pick-pockets when an opportunity arises (21). In a similar vein, Ali, also a street child, identifies with “business men” (71) and bar patronisers (85) who employ him as a gangster and drug courier. However, the novel shows that the selling of drugs abroad is done by business men but Ali, apart from being promised a trip abroad in future, gets only fringe benefits out of the business. The narrator says: “Ali had a house rented for him and his gang at Kigogo. They played pool during the day and at around 10 p.m. in the night they went to their boss for instructions [...]. The gun made Ali feel POWER-FULL” (75). Through Mansa and Ali, the narrative – apart from exploring identity negotiation among ‘street children’ – makes readers see Dar es Salaam as a city and a business hub that variously force children to fit into the organised criminal world and the informal economy. Connected to the structure of the economy in Dar es Salaam is the contestation for power, where the rich business people deploy desperate, unemployed individuals to work for them.

In this context, the gun signifies a waging of war against economic pressure. Since the war is clandestinely organised and aimed at “maim[ing] and kill[ing]” (71) people for personal benefit, a gun, apart from being a weapon for economic liberation, signifies the ‘cleverness’ and ‘intelligence’ that enable neo-urban migrants to survive in Dar es Salaam. Reading *In the Belly of Dar es Salaam* in this trajectory, one sees how Lema’s depiction of the gun resonates with Calas’s theorisation of Dar es Salaam. Bernard Calas discusses the coexistence of two names: Dar es Salaam and Bongoland<sup>72</sup>, describing the same geo-political and cultural space. According to him, the name, Dar es Salaam, is formal and dates back to the 1900s, whereas Bongoland, which means the land where one uses one’s brains to survive, is current and informal invented by neo-urban migrants. Whereas Dar es Salaam signifies a mother trope, Bongoland signifies that ‘the post-modern individual is alone and has difficulty surviving in a cruel world: from collective faith to individual cunning, [...] from enduring confidence to future uncertainty’ (4). In such circumstances, ‘cleverness’ or ‘intelligence,’ as the name ‘Bongoland’ suggests, becomes a means by which people can earn their living.

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<sup>71</sup> *Machinga* is a Kiswahili term Lema uses which in her glossary she defines as a term to describe young people who walk the streets selling various items.

<sup>72</sup> ‘Bongoland’ originates from the Kiswahili language. It is a combination of two words: bongo (Kiswahili for brain) and land (English). Thus Bongoland is a place or land that requires ‘cleverness’ or ‘intelligence’ manifested to survive. See also *From Dar es Salaam to Bongoland: Urban Mutations in Tanzania* by Calas for more discussion on the two toponyms.



It is this concept of Bongoland which the narrative invites readers to interrogate as the precariousness of Dar es Salaam. The precariousness of life in Dar es Salaam with regards to the street children is exemplified by the depiction of the city police who chase and beat street children when they hawk in the streets. Thus the narrator says, “they were chased by the city police [...] they [city police] managed to steal from those who could not run without their wares” (48), a condition which amplified the chaos, insecurity, and bitter experience these children faced in the city. While in this context the novel challenges the city council for not having proper planning for small business men and women, it also underscores the paradoxical relation amongst dwellers of Dar es Salaam. For example, the mention of residential places such as Jangwani valley, Manzese and Kariakoo on the one hand, and Masaki, Oyster Bay and Mbezi Beach, on the other hand, communicates socio-economic instability manifested in the unequal provision of better social services such as roads, water, and security. Whereas the former indicates insecurity, chaos, poverty and vulnerability to disasters such as floods, the latter evokes ‘heaven,’ aristocracy, abundance, security and is a place for ministers. Thus, “ministers lived in a world removed from the reality of the people they led” (54). Lema’s depiction of these contrasted locations is reminiscent of the way the Tanzanian Kiswahili poet Teobald Mvungi’s poem ‘Manzese Mpaka Oyster Bay’ (translated as ‘from Manzese to Oyster Bay’) exposes the instability of Dar es Salaam in terms of insecurity of existence and unequal allocation of funds in the city, which particularly affects lower-class people who are mainly living in vulnerable places such as Manzese. Lema, like Mvungi, underscores exploitation by leaders in power and armed robbery as among the causes of the chaotic conditions that make Dar es Salaam a precarious city – or ‘siyo salama,’ to use Mvungi’s phrase meaning ‘not secured’ (41). Capturing these socio-economic dynamics in the city, *In the Belly of Dar es Salaam* shows how street children are frustrated by the city in their attempt to fight for a good life (70). As a result, they have to negotiate their way in order to survive.

The complex socio-economic relations and cultural diversity in Dar es Salaam reveal a fragmented landscape. The colonial name, Dar es Salaam, which means “haven of peace [that] entrusts the city to God for protection” (Calas 4), is depicted in the novel with a romantic gaze to show the extent to which the market economy has affected the livelihood of its residents. The depiction of Kariakoo, a hub for socio-economic exchange in Dar es Salaam, as a ‘belly’ to imply the trope of mother and nurturer – which manifests in images of embrace, tenderness, tolerance, welcoming, sympathy, hospitality and open-heartedness –



makes us read the city as an idyllic space that allows interaction and positive cultural exchange. These images, as depicted in this narrative, counter-narrate the father/male figure in relation to masculinity and crime manifested in Mansa and Ali. The narrative captures these two images paradoxically co-existing in the same geo-political and economic space, using a “basket of secrets” (67) that conceals information and creates its own world. The differences among residents reflects the “hues and the parenting of the city” (80). This points to the different ways in which characters adopt life in the city.

The narrative seems to agree with Boehmer that the “epithet ‘father’ cannot be used interchangeably with that of ‘mother’ [...] the meanings that collect around the mother metaphor when applied to lands [...] are incommensurate with the idea of the father” (27). The narrative celebrates the mother trope by representing Sara and Dar es Salaam, and Kariakoo in particular, as mothers to the urban migrants. By so doing, I argue, the narrative suppresses the characters’ feelings of isolation from their biological families by creating a nurturing kinship family or affilial relationship headed by a mother figure. Lema validates this power of affilial relationships by depicting the other side of the city, where Sara and her ‘family’ stay, as the “venue for fundamental conflicts and contradictions on all levels of the social formation: economic, political, legal, religious and cultural” (Kurtz 103).<sup>73</sup> In such a setting, “children on their own in the city have to be protected” (22) because they are threatened by the insecurity of life in the city. “The thing that all of them feared united them [...] and they had become a community” (45) of migrants under the care-taking of Sara as their ‘mother.’ The manifestation of the mother trope in the Dar es Salaam city through the depiction of Sara is evident right from the beginning of the story, where she is regarded as a mother for Prospa, and is defined as “the caregiver and pillar of strength” (15). Sara evokes the same spirit of giving and embracing other ‘street children’ when she meets Mansa, the leader of the gang, that “made the street boys and girls nick name [her] ‘Maza’ meaning mother” (16). Thus the institution of family, in this context, is a constitution of the “person[s] [one] worked with or talked to” (89).

The attribution of the mother trope to Sara makes one think of the juxtaposition of the two related institutions of motherhood and wifehood. Nnaemeka warns us against conflating wifehood with motherhood. She illustrates this by referring to Adaku and Aissatou in Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood* and Bâ’s *So Long a Letter*, respectively, as characters

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<sup>73</sup> Kurtz theorises the contradictions and conflicts people face in cities in their attempt to inhabit them.

who accept motherhood but not wifhood (“Imag(in)ing” 5). Although Nnaemeka speaks about biological children, *In the Belly of Dar es Salaam*, through Sara, Lema offers an alternative way of mothering. Sara becomes Safina’s and Belinda’s mother, which implies Sara’s rejection of wifhood. Similarly, Safina’s and Belinda’s mothers are depicted as single parents. They have never thought of having husbands: “[t]hey [husbands] were redundant in their lives. [Husbands] were not mentioned, were not seen and were neither missed by the mothers nor by children” (82). Lema’s narrative, like Forna’s *Ancestor Stones*, seems to challenge Ogunyemi’s assertion in her views about womanism. According to Ogunyemi, “the ultimate aim of womanism is the unity of blacks everywhere under the enlightened control of men and women” (“Womanism” 71), which implies the recognition of men in the struggle of women for gender equality and equity as well as the presence of men in the institution of motherhood. But Lema’s *In the Belly of Dar es Salaam* appears to suggest that the presence of male characters in the institution of family is not necessary and declares that a single parent family headed by a woman is equally functional and viable.

However, as Sara’s stay on the streets normalises, the motherhood trope becomes complicated. She becomes the mother of ‘street children’ and an embodiment of the city of Dar es Salaam. As such, Sara becomes a symbol of family unity by reconstructing new family bonds out of desperation. Jacques Lacan, elsewhere, calls this kind of family renewal a symbolic order that determines our gender identity and our place in our families (441). As we learn to make symbols, says Lacan, we also learn to separate ourselves from the childhood world to achieve an independent selfhood that is experienced as loss. It is this loss that for Lacan cannot be healed, that pushes human desire to yearn for it. The craving for the lost object makes one create one’s imaginary identification to offset the missing desire (441).<sup>74</sup> Although Lacan speaks of the transition from childhood to adulthood, I find his ideas useful here in discussing Sara in relation to her fellow street children because, even though still children, in many ways they are living as adults in having to fend for themselves and consorting with adults in criminality in order to survive in the city. Sara tells Safina and Belinda to call her mother (88) and she introduces them to her landlord at Kigogo street as her children (114) “because they cared for one another” (157). Sara’s stature is further increased when she is engaged to sell food at Kariakoo with the help of her ‘daughters.’ It is because of Sara’s kindness in giving food for free to the two boys who keep a space for her to

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<sup>74</sup> See the introduction of Lacan’s essay “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience” for more discussion on the loss of the childhood world and the yearning to hark back through imagination.

sell food and “loan[ing] [it] to those who could not afford to buy” (156) that other ‘street children’ including boys begin calling her “a true maza” (154) – a true mother. That is why Mansa envies Sara to the extent of wanting also to be part of the family Sara is “attempting to start” (169) with her ‘daughters.’ Here the narrative celebrates the glory of a girl who assumes the responsibility of a woman and mother, as a powerful figure endowed with an ability to take care of a family. It further teases out what Nnaemeka calls “the philosophy of evacuation” (“Imag(in)ing” 5) by introducing the idea of adopting children as a way of constructing an institution of family and of genealogical relation by entrusting street children to Sara as their mother. In an attempt to epitomise motherhood and humility, Sara is portrayed in a way that conforms to Lacan’s ideas by suppressing the loss of family attachment through constituting a new family structure. As such, the ‘street children’ become substitute relatives through whom Sara can reconstitute her lost family attachment.

Towards the end of the novel where Sara and Dar es Salaam city are conflated as ‘mothers’ to street children, one gets a sense of the city as ‘mother’ and Sara as its embodiment. Sara and Kariakoo share the common denominator of being mothers of the ‘street children.’ The two of them (Sara and Kariakoo) not only provide refuge to urban migrants, but also help them suppress their feelings of being homeless and detached from their home families. Although the city provides accommodation (sleeping along the corridors), Sara offers them food. Thus, they make the ‘street children’ feel part of a wider community of Dar es Salaam residents. For example, the narrator describes motherhood as a space which ‘street children’ could “confide in when things got tough” (148), which has the natural attraction (the word ‘mother’) that feeds their “mind and spirit” (148) as well as being the mother city as a “basket of secrets” (67) that conceals information on illegal businesses. Thus, the narrator says, “Kariakoo was a smiling *maza* who became bloated because she could not refuse anyone who came to her for accommodation in her streets” (148), including thieves, drug pushers, Indians, Arabs, and Chinese. These traits of the city are akin to Sara’s and the two of them make Dar es Salaam homely to urban migrants. Therefore, reading Sara as a metaphor for the city, one thinks of the cataract that Sara has, which refers to poor vision among town council leaders when it comes to city planning. However, readers are left in suspense regarding what the viable solution is to this problem. It ends with Sara having raised enough money from her boyfriend, Derek Mapolo, to go for an operation to remove the cataract. This suggests the possibility of a bright future for Dar es Salaam.

Lema's novel depicts the current rural-urban drift in Tanzania and how it swells the army of street-children. The rural space has proven to offer fewer opportunities for the contemporary generation of Tanzanians, and they seek refuge in Dar es Salaam where the ways of negotiating survival and self-identity vary. Crime is one of the moral misconducts the narrative captures in characters suffering from the problem of identity in the urban space. The narrative challenges this behaviour by underscoring the importance of the mother trope, not only in reconfiguring the family institution in spaces where there are no biological relatives, but also in nurturing the youngsters. As such, affilial relationships become a conduit for characters such as Sara, Belinda, and Kaleb to suppress their feeling of being detached from their biological families. The section below takes us to Lagos in Nigeria to interrogate how the post-colonial state of Nigeria and its city Lagos in particular can be compared with Dar es Salaam in terms of precariousness of life for its inhabitants and how it victimises individuals.

### **‘Who Knows Tomorrow?:’ A Representation of Nigeria in *Swallow* (2010)**

The phrase ‘who knows tomorrow?’, is a slogan on the bus that the protagonist Tolani and her friend Rose use. The slogan captures the central concern which can be articulated as two paradoxical trajectories. On the one hand, it suggests desperation in the post-colonial context and on the other hand, it predicts a better future. I analyse Atta's representation of the post-colonial condition in Nigeria by using the image of a bus – a public means of transportation that links private and public spaces – in relation to how it (Nigeria) marginalises women and denies them an opportunity to reconfigure the familial relationship in the context of family disconnectedness.

Born in Lagos, Nigeria in 1964, and currently living in Mississippi, USA, Atta joins other African writers in the diaspora who, in the words of Rushdie, reclaim their homelands through fiction. As he expounds, “exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back” (10) to restore the past. However, Rushdie makes it clear that alienation from home makes writers fail to reclaim precisely the lost past, instead “creating fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands” (10). This aptly articulates Atta's recovery of the past and reconnections with her hometown, Lagos, through her fictions such as *Everything Good Will Come* (2005), *News From Home* (2009), *Swallow* (2010) and *A Bit of Difference* (2012).

*Swallow* is a story about unemployment and drug trafficking. The story follows Tolani and her roommate and co-worker Rose who migrate from their hometowns, Makoku and Port Harcourt respectively, to Lagos where they work in a bank and, at different times, are sacked from their jobs by their boss Salako, who attempts to rape them. The novel explores how unemployment leads to dubious choices in the quest for survival. The narrative begins in Lagos at the time when Tolani and Rose are employed as secretaries in the Federal Community Bank. Tolani's past is encapsulated in the memories of her mother as a hard-working woman determined to dismantle the patriarchal yoke but who ends up being trapped by it. Tolani cannot be sure about the identity of her biological father under the pretext of a 'family secret' which haunts her to the extent of her sometimes hating her mother. Similarly, Rose's family history is alluded to through the fact that she is the third daughter of Sisi, and that her family is devastated by the civil war that leads to Sisi's first husband's disappearance (54). The novel gives a brief reference to Tolani and Rose's past but centres the story in Lagos, a cosmopolitan and commercial city that metonymically represents Nigeria in the present as a post-colonial state. The narrative interrogates how economic pressures, detachment from family and post-coloniality intersect and overlap in victimising women.

The depiction of Tolani and Rose as post-colonial figures and their representation of domestic and public spaces can be likened to Ama in *On Black Sisters' Street*. Whereas Ama is sexually abused by her step-father, Cyril, who rapes her, Tolani and Rose are abused in the office by their boss, Salako, who attempts to rape them. This denotes domestic and public spaces as potentially precarious for women. As a result, Rose opts for a 'better' future by trafficking drugs for a pusher 'boy friend', but this option is fatal as she ends up dying. In similar vein, Sisi in *On Black Sisters' Street* dies in her attempt to break free from the patriarchal and matriarchal yoke of Dele and Madam, who are human traffickers.

*Swallow* begins by describing the threat of a bus accident caused by "a group of pedestrians [who] were running across the expressway [and] one of them lag[ing] behind the others" (7). In this accident, the daily urban commuters, including Tolani and Rose, narrowly escape death. The bus, named 'Who Knows Tomorrow,' is described as being full of an assortment of passengers from different parts of Nigeria, including secretaries, clerks, couriers and security men who share sweat, seats and gossip (8). This image of the bus alludes to some

parallelism between *Swallow* and *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*<sup>75</sup> by Armah. Thus the bus depicted in *Swallow* is not only an actual means of public transport, but a travel and migratory trope and also a metaphor for the country, Nigeria. This metaphor becomes more evident as the focus shifts from the bus to Nigeria. Rose regrets being born in Nigeria, and “she wished she had been born in Czechoslovakia because the name sounded sophisticated” (11), and consequently, life had to be sophisticated there. Towards the end of the narrative, Rose says, “We never should have been given our independence [...] we were a bunch of ignorant Africans who needed the British to come back and whip our asses [...] I blamed the military. I also blamed the elite. They were usurpers of the land” (215-216), which illustrates that her views about Nigeria remain unchanged. Elsewhere in the novel, a filthy image of a septic tank intersects with the bus image to describe the same dire post-colonial condition of Nigeria. When Rose comes back home (in Lagos) from staying with her boyfriend OC, she laments the stinking smell coming from the broken septic tank in her flat where she stays with Tolani and other tenants such as Mama Chidi. She metonymically uses the flat, representative of her views on the country, to communicate her hatred of misrule and social disintegration in Nigeria. Thus Rose says, “Look at us in this place, one problem after another, one disaster after another. Instead of sticking together, we’re fighting each other. I can’t stand it [...] I’m getting out” (105) which suggests anger and abandonment of the country because of its precariousness.

These two images of the bus and septic tank suggest how the contemporary generation of African women, despite their education and advocacy by feminists, are plunged into desperation and uncertainty because of political disorganisation and corruption and an underdeveloped economy. Atta ironically represents Rose as a character that prefers colonialism to independence to underscore the transgressions of the post-colonial leaders in Nigeria. Rose’s yearning for the West resurrects the discourse of the coloniser-colonised relationship and the ‘civilisation’ of the ‘uncivilised.’ She does not have hope that leaders will assume their responsibility. However, in this context, the discourse, apart from showing desperation, serves to remind African leaders of the responsibility, accountability, and patriotism that they are obliged to uphold to bring about development of their people. In other words, the narrative, in the words of Derek Wright elsewhere, calls for the bringing of light

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<sup>75</sup> Armah uses the image of an old bus with the slogan *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* to represent the post-colonial state of Ghana.



and clear vision to the people as promised during the struggle for independence, but not dragging light “back into the cave to be consumed by darkness” (211).<sup>76</sup>

To capture the complexity of post-colonial Nigeria using the image of the bus in relation to the victimisation of women, the novel explores the visibility of men in public space as leaders in the military government and heads of institutions, specifically in the Federal Community Bank. Although this gender-biased hierarchy in leadership is a cultural truism and is highly pronounced in narratives by male authors such as Achebe, Ngũgĩ, Soyinka and Sembène, *Swallow* positions the educated and professional women differently. Thus, Tolani and Rose as professional secretaries are characterised as women who are compatriots working in the same institution. They bitterly and violently resent it when their bodies are fetishised by their male counterparts. This fetishisation of the female body is also evinced in Ogot’s short story ‘Elizabeth’ in *Land Without Thunder* (1988), where Elizabeth represents the challenges educated women – she is a secretary by profession – face in the modern city of Nairobi. She is raped by her boss, Mr. Jimbo, and eventually, she commits suicide. In *Swallow*, Rose slaps her boss Salako and at a different time Tolani “pushed him back [and abused him, calling him] ‘[F]ilthy’” (85) for his attempt to rape her in his office. In this regard, the narrative invites us to read Tolani and Rose as contemporary women and post-colonial figures that are endowed with vision and “bear the potential of changes that are promising” (Cazenave 5).<sup>77</sup> But, because of the “institutionalised, hierarchical female spaces,” which are characterised by male dominance (Nnaemeka, “Imag(in)ing” 19), Tolani and Rose find themselves staging a dual counter-struggle to smash patriarchal control and, by extension, show resistance to the hostile post-colonial state. Therefore, Rose’s drug-induced death and Tolani’s departure from Lagos back to her mother in Makoku can be interpreted in relation to, first, the failure of the post-colonial state to provide a better environment for women and men to compete patriarchy equally in the job market and, second, as illustrating how the post-colonial state and economy intersect with in marginalising women.

Atta demonstrates the unlikeness of a mutual friendship between female and male characters in her narrative because of patriarchal hegemony and objectification of the female body. She

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<sup>76</sup> Wright is discussing the depiction of corruption in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and how it contributes to underdevelopment in Ghana. See also “Totalitarian Rhetoric: Some Aspects of Metaphor in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*” by Wright.

<sup>77</sup> In this context, Cazenave in *Rebellious Women: The New Generation of Female African Novelists* speaks of how women can act as agents for change to get rid of oppression.



imagines the post-colonial city space of Lagos as a predominantly male construct and hostile to women. The relationship between Rose and her boyfriend OC amplifies the fetishisation and manipulation of the female body for men's power and economic gain. Atta captures the initial attraction between Rose and OC in their celebratory gaze, resulting from Rose's passion for foreign countries to where she will courier drugs for OC. She says, "Let me first go where people are civilized, and for once on a plane that doesn't shake" (238). This passion for overseas, travel, spaces and circumstances in turn forces an ironic collection of slave trade narratives, where African slaves were forced to leave their home countries for Brazil, the Caribbean and Spanish-speaking regions of South and Central America<sup>78</sup> for coffee and sugarcane plantations, and Rose being desperate and eager to leave takes on a suggestion of tragic outcome. The novel depicts another, contemporary sort of migration, in which, the space of abroad is a fortunate standpoint.

Atta represents this form of migration as oppressive and humiliating to women because it forces them to rely on their bodies for economic gains. OC looks for women who are not employed so that he can employ them as drug carriers. As Rose tells Tolani: "[h]e looks for women like you and me. He will give us drugs to swallow and arrange for us to travel overseas. We get there and come back. That's all we need to do and we get paid" (138). Rose and Tolani have to swallow condoms filled with cocaine, or push them into their vaginas (211). The vagina, which Nkiru Nzegwu in her theorising of the devouring vagina esteems as "the seat of women's power" (264)<sup>79</sup> because of its ability to attract all people regardless of sex, class and social status, has been relegated to a pocket in which drugs are transported. This practice dis-empowers women and objectifies them into carriers to be manipulated by men for their economic benefit. Rose goes to her boyfriend OC to request a change in the means of transporting the drugs because of her excessive vomiting, but he refuses. As a result, Tolani decides to go to church where she changes her attitude towards drugs. She says, "I received a message in a stealing pastor's church. My spirit will not allow me to be a smuggler" (227). Whereas Rose dies when the drug-filled condoms burst in her stomach, Tolani resolves not to smuggle drugs for OC after all results from her discovery that the church pastor (who in her view preaches so that naïve churchgoers will surrender their

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<sup>78</sup> See "Atlantic Slave Trade" on <http://www.paulrittman.com/AfricaReadings.pdf> for more discussion on the slave trade in Africa.

<sup>79</sup> See "'Osunality' (or African Eroticism)" by Nzegwu for more discussion on the power of vagina over penis in sexual intercourse.

money) is merely another example of masculine power figures exploiting and abusing weaker. Thus Tolani is disgusted with the church as yet another exploitative space that appropriates money from ‘normal’ people so that corrupt pastors (post-colonial state leaders and drug dealers) can get rich.

This malice of the post-colonial state recalls yet again the image of the broken septic tank. This image of the ‘stinking septic tank’ can be related to the insult ‘filthy’ which Tolani throws at the rapist, Salako. Whereas the latter is olfactory, the former is olfactory and visual. In this narrative, the two images overlap and are mutually inclusive, that is, one defines the other. Since the septic tank exemplifies filth and filth is attributed to the errant boss Salako as an individual and representative of the institution, he is synonymous with the stinking septic tank. As such, the coalescence of these images communicates moral decay and irresponsibility pertaining to the institution – the state – that Salako as a person with power represents the business world that acts in alliance with the state and is a parallel figure to OC and the village chief in the ruthlessness with which he harms, exploits and disempowers women. Armah also uses the image of ‘filth’ in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* as a metaphor for the “totalitarian mentality of a corrupt nationalist state” (Wright 211).

Corruption is depicted through attributing it to men who are in power and the way they intensify it for their benefit. In other words, Atta depicts corruption as a weapon of power that men strategically use to enhance what Mbembe calls phallic domination that is based on a mobilisation of the subjective foundations of masculinity and femininity as well as close connections with the general economy of sexuality (*On the Postcolony* 13). Salako “steals from the bank, tak[es] money from customers, tak[es] bribes,” (22) attempts to rape Tolani and Rose and eventually sacks them from their jobs. Rose captures the rampant corruption when she says, “Government minister steals, [...] State governor steals, contractor steals. President steals. You work, work, work. Can’t even afford meat to eat at lunchtime” (23). When women are accused of being corrupt – for example, Sanwo’s aunt – they do not enter the business directly but rather have ‘connections’ with the ruling system.

When the smell of the septic tank becomes intolerable and Mrs Durojaiye, the mother of the child (Ayo) who breaks it is unable to fix it, Rose and Sanwo (Tolani’s boyfriend) threaten to leave Tolani alone because the “smell is terrible” (110). Here Atta’s narrative, like Armah’s, invites readers to “notice [the] links between natural filth, waste [...] and [the stinking] corruption in the sense of moral decay through the fraudulent acquisition of material wealth”

(Wright 214) and how it adversely affects individuals who do not want to be part of the ‘business.’ Like the unnamed character, Man, in *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, Tolani is directly affected by OC’s threat and a broken septic tank, which is associated with the state. She feels rejected and is forced to return to Makoku for solace from her mother. Tolani’s departure for Makoku communicates not only the failure of Lagos (as a metonym for the post-colonial state in not providing a better environment for women to enjoy rights equally with men), but also accentuates the centrality of the mother figure in the making and pacifying of the family.

In *Swallow*, Lagos, which metonymically stands for Nigeria, is a source of self-indulgence, moral corruption and a place where “ugly sexism [is] structured into the formal economy, where religious and cultural rights are protected but not women’s” (57).<sup>80</sup> Tolani and Rose are victims of this culture, and the former ends up going back to her hometown as unemployed adult and a refugee from the threat of violence, and the latter dying. The narrative introduces us to the friendship between Tolani and Rose while in Lagos and how they negotiate their familial relationships. They stay in the same flat: “[w]e lived together, and at work, kept to our separate departments [which served as a] “way of preserving [our] friendship” (14). The narrative concentrates on the cosmopolitan nature of Lagos and the social relation among city residents. Through the characters, Tolani (who speaks Yoruba) and Rose (who speaks Ijaw), we read Lagos as a social space that discourages ethnic differences.

In this friendship between Tolani and her flat-mate Rose, as *In the Belly of Dar es Salaam*, one could see the reconstituted form of family away from home. And yet, it is only when Rose dies that Tolani speaks of her and Rose as a family. She writes: “[t]he newspapers might try to trace her to her family. I rubbed my arms as if to ease the news of her death in” (250) order to communicate her reaction to Rose’s death. OC comes to threaten Tolani and she has to flee for her life, though Rose’s identity is unknown to the state. Tolani quits the flat immediately to go to her hometown, Makoku, to lie low and find some peace of mind. Moreover, in several instances Tolani describes Rose as a dirty and excessive drinker because of the distress of being sacked from her job. Their discord comes to be evinced when they choose differently regarding continuing as drug mules. Whereas Tolani withdraws from drug trafficking, Rose gets sucked into it. This disparity suggests the failure to reconstitute the

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<sup>80</sup> Gagiano speaks of how the characters Tolani and Rose are mistreated by their boss Salako in *Swallow*. See “Women Writing Nationhood Differently: Affiliative Critique in Novels by Forna, Atta and Farah” by Gagiano for more discussion on the interpretation of Salako’s firing of Rose and Tolani.

family institution due to a defective Lagos city and the absence of nurturing of urban migrants. Unlike Sara and her fellow street children who navigate their way to settle in the hostile city of Dar es Salaam, Tolani and Rose (apart from Rose being an ‘ancestral’, advisory spirit to Tolani, which reinstals her in a ‘familial’ relationship to Tolani and confirms the role and loyalty that bonded them into sisterhood despite their differences and quarrels) fail. Tolani’s return to Makoku, in the words of Kehinde, “becomes a symbol of healing, invigoration, psychic quiet, solace, strength renewal, traditional order, continuity,” (238) and reunification with her biological family. This good and nurturing rural setting for Tolani, unlike Sara’s in *In the Belly of Dar es Salaam*, is justified by the presence of a mother.

While still in Lagos, Tolani experiences loneliness in the community in which she expected to work together with others and be treated as family. She wonders why her problem with her boss, Salako, results in conflict with the whole community of workers at the Federal Community Bank. Tolani falls into misery and psychosomatic troubles<sup>81</sup> that make her feel doubly isolated from her biological and reconstituted families. She says, “I stopped speaking to everyone at the bank and ate lunch on my own (87) [...] Rose too ran away [...] But me, I have nowhere to go” (109). Moreover, she observes: “I wanted to escape Lagos; on the other [hand there] was the possibility that, in my home town, I would discover that I was not my father’s daughter” (180). Tolani considers returning to her hometown to pick up a hoe as highly idealistic (147). These dynamics make Tolani feel like a failure when associating with others and she blames herself for not advising Rose against drug trafficking because she was her friend despite their fights. Thus the work environment fails to provide Tolani and Rose a home away from home or a new family, owing to patriarchal ideology where the boss, being male, sees the women simply as objects for his gratification. This suggests the extent to which sexism and the collapse of the post-colonial state combine to disrupt the characters’ sense of family in urban space.

The community in Lagos where Tolani and Rose stay, gives another perspective on the septic tank event and how it galvanises the whole community to look for Ayo who is suspected to have fallen in it, and its (the community) relation to the affilial relationships in the city space.

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<sup>81</sup> Cazenave uses the term ‘psychosomatic trouble’ in discussing the representation of the female body in Francophone African women writers’ fiction. According to her, women writers from the 1980s have renewed the traditional frame of the female body as an object that can be a manifestation of troubles, worry and expression of female desire. See also *Rebellious Women: The New Generation of Female African Novelists* (p.127) by Cazenave for more discussion on the concept.

The narrative depicts that Africans normally create conditions for their existence with others where ‘being’ is complemented and defined by other ‘beings.’<sup>82</sup> Like friendship and close relationship between Ochola and the Jaluo old man in Ogot’s *The Promised Land* and Nnaife and Ubani’s family in Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood*, *Swallow* subscribes to African philosophy by depicting characters who abide by communal relationships, but which do not necessarily conform to the family institution.

Atta’s portrayal of born urban and rural communities is hardly traditional or conventionally African. The narrative challenges the Ubuntu philosophy by representing a complex relation between Rose and other communities in Lagos. Rose does not trust Mama Chidi’s family because they are Igbo and she is Yoruba (242). She describes Mrs Durojaiye as a “frustrated old fowl” (59) though they share the same ethnic group, Yoruba. In this context, the novel wants readers to read Rose as ill-disciplined, asocial, and frustrated because of being victimised by patriarchal and post-colonial forces. Tolani co-operates with other community members as sisters and neighbours (60). This is why Mrs Durojaiye trusts Tolani to look after her kids in her absence and Tolani is very upset to hear that Ayo has fallen into the sink though, in actual fact, it is Ayo who has broken the sink and has to run away to escape censure and punishment from his fierce mother. This episode epitomises the dynamics in the city of Lagos in terms of its precariousness. It is in this context that we read the complex nature of Lagos and how difficult it is to reconfigure the institution of the family through affilial relationships.

Towards the end of the narrative, Tolani is with her mother, and the interplay between city and village spaces comes into sharp focus. Reading Tolani in the rural context and across generations, one grasps how Lagos city has hardened and awakened Tolani to the extent of challenging her older-generation counterparts. She refuses to marry as her mother wants, responding that, “A woman doesn’t have to be married to have a child anyway” (289). Atta depicts this rejection of wifhood, which is prevalent in contemporary African women’s writing, as more appealing by rejecting the feelings of the older generation (represented by Tolani’s mother) in the statement: “[i]t’s my turn to speak [...] Your story is already told” (295) that ends the narrative. This assertion may be interpreted as a call for the contemporary generation of African women to speak out and challenge their older counterparts who marginalise women under the auspices of patriarchally engendered traditions.

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<sup>82</sup> Nabudere theorises using the Ubuntu philosophy and how it defines Africans in his article “Ubuntu Philosophy: Memory and Reconciliation.”

To conclude, *Swallow* explores the post-colonial condition of Nigeria in relation to how it victimises women and denies them an opportunity to forge familial bonds that will stand them in good stead in an unfriendly city. Instead, they are sexually abused, objectified and eventually subjected to miserable death or end up forced to return to the village to renegotiate familial identities. Thus, Lagos as a post-colonial city becomes a precarious space that does not necessarily support women and familial relations. The precariousness of life in Lagos is also explored in Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, which I discuss in the section below examining how it forces characters to migrate to Europe.

### **Negotiating Family Identity in African and European City Spaces in *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009)**

Chika Unigwe is a Nigerian writer based in Belgium. She was born in 1974 in Enugu, Nigeria. Following her marriage to a Belgian husband, she lived in Turnhout, Belgium and in 2013 migrated to the United States. Unigwe has authored fictional works such as *The Phoenix* (2007), *On Black Sisters' Street* (2009) and *Night Dancer* (2012), written in English but unusually first published in Dutch translation. This uncommon way of changing the language medium from English to Dutch establishes Unigwe as one of the prominent writers of African descent on the literary scene in Belgium and the Netherlands.<sup>83</sup> In all these writings, Unigwe raises the themes of loneliness, migration, prostitution and gender relations. In her interview with Daria Tunca, Vick Mortimer and Emmanuelle Calzo, Unigwe admits that her writings result from her experiences in Belgium, particularly the migration and loneliness she personally faced and the experiences of Nigerian women working as prostitutes in Belgium, in Antwerp's red-light district.<sup>84</sup>

*On Black Sisters' Street* is a story about prostitution. It is told through relating the experiences of four black African women, Sisi/Chisomi, Ama, Efe and Joyce/Alek who are forced by circumstances to be prostitutes in Belgium. The narrative underscores the patriarchal hegemony of the character Brother Cyril, the step-father of Ama, and hardship in Nigeria brought about by 'irresponsible' leaders as the cause of massive unemployment and sexual abuse. Sisi, Ama and Efe, who are Nigerians by origin, and Joyce, a Sudanese victim

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<sup>83</sup> See "An Interview with Chika Unigwe" by Daria Tunca, Vicki Mortimer and Emmanuelle Del Calzo on, among others, the biographical information of Unigwe.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

of the civil war that claimed the lives of her family members and who is brought to Lagos, Nigeria by a peacekeeping soldier (Polycarp) who meets her in a refugee camp in Sudan. These four women find themselves unemployed in Lagos and struggle to find ways of surviving in this city. In their search for employment, these characters – at different times – fall into the hands of Dele, a human-trafficking dealer, who assures them of getting employment in Belgium. Unigwe captures the theme of unemployment effectively by using characters who vocalise what she really experienced in her research on Nigerian prostitutes in Antwerp, Belgium.

Unigwe centres her narrative on Lagos (an African city) and Antwerp (a European city in Belgium) to interrogate the precariousness of these cities and the danger associated with inhabiting those spaces. In this section, I demonstrate how these female characters are marginalised in their familial homes and Lagos as well as how Antwerp becomes an ‘alternative’ space to accommodate them and negotiate their family relationships.

In her narrative, Unigwe maps out how the post-colonial state of Nigeria begins to lose track in fulfilling its ambitions. She depicts the history of Nigeria to track how and when things start ‘falling apart’ and its impact on the institution of the family. She represents Brother Cyril’s house in a compelling way to show time, the ‘failure’ of the post-colony and its accompanying consequences. In this context I use ‘home’ and ‘house’ interchangeably to mean a place that is supposed to provide accommodation and security. Here one is confronted by questions such as: what is a house in a post-colonial context? And how is the house linked to the post-colonial state? To answer these questions, I begin with Unigwe’s description of Brother Cyril’s house:

[t]he music of the world was to be kept in the world, away from the confines of the house. As were alcoholic drinks. And cigarettes. And magazines with lewd pictures. And bad language. Their house was a house of holiness. And if Brother Cyril had his way he would have had the entire house painted white for its sanctity. But the harmattan wind that graced Enugu from November to around August made such an undertaking impossible. Not only did it carry debris from one part of the town to the other, it turned grass to rust and sprayed



dust over houses, so a white house was out of the question. (129)

Theorists consider the meaning of house as “difficult to pinpoint but [something that] can be contextualised” (Sydoine Moudouna 21). Kwame Appiah offers an insightful interpretation of the term ‘house’ based on the moral disposition and teachings one gets from parents. Using the example of his relationship with his father, Appiah says, “in my father’s house... ‘there are many mansions’, *and* the biblical understanding that, when Christ utters those words at the Last Supper, he means that there is room enough for all in heaven” (x). Therefore, it is in his father’s house where he learnt to be a Pan-Africanist “without racism, both in Africa and in its diaspora” (xi) and to have multiple attachments to his identities: “as an Asante, as a Ghanaian, as an African, and as a Christian and a Methodist” (xi). Such multifaceted legacies make Appiah a ‘complete’ being who is “morally, aesthetically, politically, and religiously” (xi) upright. For Appiah, a house entails parental care. Bhabha in “The World and the Home” goes further by defining the concept ‘house’ in a post-colonial context and showing how it is depicted in narratives. For him, a house is an image that “has always been used to talk about the expansive, mimetic nature of the novel” (142) that represents the reality about a particular society.

According to Douglass Bailey, a house is a “building which serves as the ordinary dwelling place”<sup>85</sup> whose signification conflates with home, place of birth, a place where one lives, the environment or habitat of a person or animal, a person’s country or city [see for example, Shelley Mallet (2004), Jeanne More (2000), and Douglass Bailey (1990)]. Whereas Appiah underscores the moral composure manifested in the house, Bhabha invites us to read the physical building and its significations. For Bhabha, a house is a “social space in the organisation and reorganisation” (Ileana Rodriguez 19)<sup>86</sup> of identities. Thus a house as a socio-political and spiritual space can be conflated with home to “reflect forms of sociality associated with and/or peculiar to any given cultural and historical context” (Shelley Mallett 66) that identifies a particular group of people in a certain geopolitical space or imagined community.

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<sup>85</sup> Bailey is problematising the concept of ‘house’ and shows how it signifies continuity in the social life of a human being.

<sup>86</sup> Rodriguez in *House/Garden/Nation: Space, Gender and Ethnicity in Postcolonial Latin American Literatures* speaks about how the majority of women writers deploy the image of houses, gardens and nation to signal ongoing struggle and the territorial administration of the globe.

Drawing from these scholars' perspectives on the house, I suggest that Unigwe represents a house as a contested space with multiple significations. To justify my claim, I discuss a house as depicted in *On Black Sisters' Street* in terms of its accommodability, specifically the physical building and parental care, and a house as an image that signifies the expansive and mimetic nature of the novel. Since my focus is on the 'failure' of the post-colonial states in Africa, I also consider a house as a metaphor for the nation and I centre my discussion on Sisi's, Ama's, Efe's and Joyce's houses in Nigeria and Sudan. Whereas Sisi's house signifies a social space for moral and intellectual development, Efe's, Ama's and Joyce's represent a hostile space that exacerbates women's and children's subjecthood. Sisi, Efe and Ama share the same geopolitical space, Nigeria, but Joyce has a different national identity – Sudanese. Their diversity in terms of different qualities of houses within the same geographical space (Africa) is captured by the narrator as the failure to have "the entire house painted white for sanctity" (129). Such differences also communicate the heterogeneous nature of Africa.

By evoking the house of Brother Cyril, an assistant pastor at the Church of the Twelve Apostles of the Almighty Yahwe, Unigwe's novel draws our attention to the history of the post-colonial state in Africa and how it began falling apart. The narrative sarcastically represents pre-colonial Africa with a 'holy' gaze. The novel seems to suggest that pre-colonial Africa was morally and spiritually a stable space on its own and if it continued in that way "God would never destroy the earth" (131). By so doing, Unigwe's novel appears to agree with the historian Walter Rodney who, in his seminal book *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, considers Africa and Europe to have been at the same level of development up to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. For Rodney, the incidences of mercantilism in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the slave trade and eventually the colonisation of Africa were the sources of Africans' underdevelopment and instability. Unigwe's novel nuances this historical event – which is widely explored in earlier narratives by Achebe, Soyinka, and Ngũgĩ. However, by situating her narrative in the post-colonial context, we read Brother Cyril and his wife in relation to Ama as post-colonial bodies representing the second and third generations in the genealogy of a literary family. Therefore, Brother Cyril's hypocrisy to maintain the 'holy' state of his house communicates irresponsibility and inefficiency in African post-colonial leaders.

What Unigwe presents as the harmattan winds that grace Enugu from November denotes time: the end of the 1970s when African nation-states begin facing a setback in different development sectors. As Young puts it: "the post-colonial state was not only falling short of

its ambitious designs, but facing a systematic crisis” (37). By the 1980s, most of the African countries “were facing negative trends in many primary commodity markets, shunned by much of international capital [and] African states had little option but to accept, at least formally, the structural adjustment programme” (38). One of the notable causes of the crisis in post-colonial Africa, Young observes, is corruption among African leaders who came to power immediately after independence. They came with a nationalistic spirit to reinstate the the economy of the African state, but ended up being corrupt and selfish, thus failing to allow people to enjoy the fruits of their independence. They ended up replacing independence euphoria and exuberance with disillusionment.

In *On Black Sisters' Street*, this governmental dysfunction is fictionalised through the depiction of the Joint Admissions and Matriculation Board (JAMB). Recounting the story of Ama's failure to enrol at a university, the narrator says, “If she'd had the money to pay someone to take the examination for her she would have. [...] She knew people less deserving of a place at the university than her who had either bought examination papers from corrupt JAMB officials and practised at home, or who had paid others to sit the examination for them” (146). By fictionalising the corrupt JAMB officials to represent the inefficiency and greed of government officials, the inadequacy of the post-colonial state in failing to combat corruption is laid bare. This matriculation board is depicted as a centre where the dreams of the upcoming youngsters are being shut down. In this context, one is persuaded to agree that the ‘debris’ and ‘dust’ that came with the harmattan wind indicate the corruption and other forms of mayhem that make Africa, through its governments, a hostile space for its people. Besides, it is through the depiction of corruption that readers grasp what Bhabha calls the ‘mimetic nature’ of the house in a post-colonial context in relation to the ‘reality’ concerning bribery in Africa. This reality of corruption in governments in Africa, as I discussed above concerning *In the Belly of Dar es Salaam* and *Swallow*, has become a serious agenda in fiction because it is a condition that widens the gap between people in the same geopolitical space and women are victimised more than men.

In a similar vein, the story of Sisi whose parents' given name is Chisomi, tells how the post-colonial state shatters the dreams of women by making them “agents of insurrection and

change operating within an oppressive situation” (Nnaemeka 4).<sup>87</sup> Sisi has a Bachelor’s degree in Finance and Business Administration and she expects to get

a job with a bank, one of those new banks dotting Lagos like a colony of palm trees. She might even be given a company car with a company driver [...] expected also to have a house with room enough for her parents [...] a large coloured TV [...] A garden with flowers and food. (20-21) ‘I don’t want to become like my mother.’ (28)

Here the counter-narrative becomes the dominant discourse to the older generation’s narratives that emphasises formal education for boys, leaving girls with childcare and house chore activities. But, as Mbembe in *On the Postcolony* argues, “the state as a productive structure has failed in Africa” (78) to create a good environment for women to explore their potentialities and, consequently, they are pushed into another form of gender oppression, mostly being unemployed and often ending up being prostitutes. Despite a number of application letters for jobs, “[n]o envelopes came addressed to her [...] [but] less intelligent classmates with better *connections* worked” (22; italics in original). When her ambitions fail, she begins to dream of leaving Lagos: “*This place has no future*” (18; italics in original). In this context, *On Black Sisters’ Street* interrogates the subsequent patriarchal control that affects contemporary African women who have battled to get educated. It suggests that the failure of the post-colonial state to combat corruption has concretised the patriarchal system. As such, the narrative seems to agree with Boehmer who argues that “the new postcolonial nation is historically a male constructed space” (*Stories* 22) and operates in favour of patriarchy. Thus Sisi’s departure for Belgium does not only communicate the failure of Nigeria as a post-colonial state in not offering a better environment for women to exercise their rights equally with men, but also requiring a continued struggle against all forms of female subjectivation. However, ironically, Sisi’s oppression deepens in Europe.

In Efe, we see female subjectivity from her childhood. Following the death of her mother, she has to live with her irresponsible father who spends much of his time drinking and does not care about his family. Efe has to drop out of school and concentrate on taking care of her

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<sup>87</sup> See “Introduction: Imag(in)ing Knowledge, Power, and Subversion in the Margins” by Nnaemeka on how women – in the selected essays in the anthology *The Politics of (M)Othering: Womanhood, Identity and Resistance in African Literature* edited by her – act as agents for change and subversion of patriarchal hegemony.

siblings Rita, Faith and Nicholas. As Eze tells us, Efe “began trading her body for cash with Titus, a forty-five year-old man” (“Feminism” 98) as a way to get money for herself and “her younger brother and sisters” (Unigwe 58). She becomes a sexual object to sustain the well-being of the family. When she falls pregnant, Titus rejects her and she has to do menial work that enables her to support her siblings and her baby. A meeting with a human trafficker, Dele, and his promises of ‘better’ life abroad make Efe think of nothing beyond the opportunity of terminating her menial work to go abroad – where she ironically becomes a prostitute. The narrative makes readers sympathetic towards Efe by making them understand the circumstances that force her to become a sex worker. It underscores the tyranny of patriarchy in her father, Titus and the post-colonial state for failing to create a better environment for women to exercise their rights, such as the right to education, in the same way as their male counterparts.

Joyce whose other name is Alek gives another perspective on how the house in the post-colonial context is imagined. Her migration from Sudan to Belgium via Lagos does not only convey the mimetic and expansive nature of the novel in a Bhabhaian sense, but also the instability of the post-colonial state in Africa. Unigwe takes us to Darfur in Sudan to show how the disintegration of the institution of the family can come in different guises. The novel alludes to military coups and civil wars that happened between the 1980s and the 1990s in Darfur. Although political instability in Sudan pre-dates the present regime of President Omar al Bashir, says Flint, the notable war is that of 1989 when the National Islamic Front (NIF) seized power in Darfur, and where a number of villages were burned on suspicion of having helped the invaders (16). Unigwe captures this mayhem by depicting Joyce’s family in a plan to leave their village, Daru, for a refugee camp: “they could get resettled somewhere close to Khartoum. And eventually a migration to the United Kingdom or America” (187). This suggests the migratory routes that post-colonial subjects are forced to take because of instability in their home countries.

Furthermore, the depiction of the Janjaweed militia and their atrocities – killing villagers including Joyce’s family and raping her – makes the story interrogate political and socio-cultural boundaries. The fight against the government regime shifts to the family level and women are more traumatised than men. Joyce experiences the ruthless killing of her parents and other villagers and she is also brutally raped by several soldiers. Like Ama, Joyce’s home is a space where she is raped and witnesses the death of her entire family. Joyce goes to a refugee camp where she “[s]crubbed the dust off her feet [u]ntil it seemed they would bleed”

(195) to signify purification and forget the bad memory captured in her thinking that had the effect that “[s]ometimes she wished the soldiers had killed her” (196). Through the story of Joyce, readers are made to think about the parallels between the post-colonial state and the family. It is through this traumatic war experience and tearing apart of the family institution that Joyce is forced to marry Polycarp, an African Union peacekeeper who ‘sells’ her to Dele before she eventually becomes a prostitute in Belgium. Since Joyce, like Sisi, Ama, and Efe are, is ‘sold’ to Dele in Lagos, the novel invites readers to interrogate the danger associated with inhabiting this space. It is in this city that women are pushed to the margin and forced to renegotiate alternative identities in Europe for their survival. Thus Joyce also becomes a subject victimised by the post-colonial state and falls into the hands of a human trafficker, Dele, with the aim of commodifying her body in Belgium.

In his discussion of Nigerians’ involvement in narcotics and human trafficking, Osiki notices the extent to which the business has taken huge profits since the 1980s when “major cities in Africa became major supplying, transit and destination points” (127). Women in Nigeria began actively entering the business in 2008 because “they were subjected by traffickers to the dual roles of victims of human trafficking and as couriers for the movement of hard drugs across international borders” (127). One of the notable reasons Osiki brings to the fore for the escalation of women’s role in drug and human trafficking, besides political instability, militarism, civil unrest, internal conflicts and natural diseases, is

the failure of existing economic, political and social structures to provide equal and just opportunities for women to work [that] has contributed to the feminization of poverty, which in turn has led to the feminization of migration, as women leave their homes in search of viable economic options. (128)

Clifford shares a similar view with Osiki when he asserts that women have their own histories of migration linked with and distinct from those of men (5).<sup>88</sup> Osiki’s reasoning supports my argument in this section on the failure of the post-colonial state to create a better environment for women to compete equally with men in the job market. In this sense, *On*

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<sup>88</sup> Clifford discusses the different reasons for migration. He gives examples of women who migrate to the Middle East, South Asia, the Philippines and Malaysia to clean, cook and look after children. For more discussion on the topic see *Routes: Travel and Translocation in the Late Twentieth Century* by Clifford.

*Black Sisters' Street*, like *Swallow*, represents women as both victims and agents of the drug trade and human trafficking.

Daria Tunca looks at the characters' movement from Nigeria to Belgium in terms of subjection and subjectivity. To illustrate her point, Tunca underscores the pressure from society and the demands of powerful members that accelerate women's subjugation. On the other hand, the characters' wish to exert agency to satisfy their own aspirations relates to the expression of subjectivity (n.p). Arguing about the change of names (from Alek to Joyce and Chisomi to Sisi as well as the selling and parading of girls in Belgium), Tunca considers the novel to be invoking the slave markets of the past. Tunca's argument resonates with hooks's who, in theorising the African slave trade, elucidates the traumatic experience and subjugation women faced. As she observes: "in the preparation of African people for the slave market [there was] the destruction of human dignity, the removal of names and status, the dispersement of groups so that there would exist no common [...] sign of an African heritage" (19) to signify 'dismemberment.'

However, the co-operation between Dele and the character Madam in transporting girls to Belgium to work as prostitutes under the guise of aiding them in their economic struggle shifts our attention from a slave market narrative to that of human trafficking. As Omon Osiki in a different context observes, it is a new trend in money making which involves deception, illegality and controlling women's "lives through coercion, abuse or physical violence, debt bondage or threats to reveal their illegal/illicit status and activities to the local authorities or their families back home" (128). The narrative's use of Dele and Madam as key human traffickers reminds us of the institutionalisation of the illegal business and the intersection between patriarchal and matriarchal control over women's bodies. In fact, the "madam has the police in her pocket" (290) and she organises with Dele to hire the police who kill Sisi in her attempt to escape from Madam's brothel. Such a well-plotted incident echoes Osiki's assertion that some Ministers in the government in Nigeria were alleged to be involved in the human trafficking business. Therefore the narrative, apart from accusing the government system of failing its people, also seems to suggest that solving the human trafficking problem is not isolated from the other problems Nigeria is facing. The novel appears to concur with Adewale Rotimi, who maintains that Nigeria should not be treating the symptoms of human trafficking by punishing the dealers but rather go deeper to address the root-causes such as



unemployment, lack of political stability, executive lawlessness, a seriously depressed economy, corruption and the weak value of the Nigerian currency (325).<sup>89</sup>

The characterisation of Dele and Madam allow one to read how prostitution is used as a weapon of power to suppress women who are desperately looking for jobs and who are victims of economic pressure. In this context, prostitution is represented as a manifestation of not only subjugation and oppression of the female body, but also (on the parts of the ‘prostitutes’: to Ama, Efe and Alek) suggests professionalism and subversion against the older generation represented by the prostitutes’ parents. Such twofold and contrasting approaches to prostitution challenge the facts raised in scholarly debates on prostitution and prostitutes. Tamale maintains that scholars such as Gayle Rubin (1975), Andrea Dworkin (1981, 1993), and Catherine MacKinnon (1987, 1993) view prostitution as gender-based violence and see sex workers as vulnerable victims of systematic patriarchal exploitation. On the other hand, S.R. Bell (1994), Lisa Law (2000) and Prabha Kotiswaran (2001) view prostitution as legitimate labour that needs to be recognised (148). For example, Sisi, Ama, and Efe are forced to send Dele “a minimum of hundred [euros every month] without fail” (42). Alek is exempted because her former boyfriend, Polycarp, will pay for her. Unlike her fellow prostitutes, Sisi is a character who unmasks the objection of prostitution through her interaction with Dele and Madam; the rest are forced by circumstances and they accept prostitution as a profession and as a way to solve financial problems.<sup>90</sup>

Sisi’s rejection of her body when she discovers that she is subjected to prostitution in Antwerp suggests the fetishisation of the female body. She cries in her first encounter with a man who “inaugurates [her] into [...] new profession” (213): *“This is not me. I am not here. I am at home, sleeping in another body. Not mine. This is not me. This is somebody else* (212; italics in original). This mood continues surfacing throughout the novel. The narrator says, “she had never been comfortable in her job” (247). According to Tunca, Sisi “loses all humanity and becomes mere merchandise” (n.p) for consumption: “[s]he learned to stand in her window and pose in heels that made her two inches taller. She learned to smile, to pout,

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<sup>89</sup> Rotimi discusses, from a legal perspective, how Nigeria can curb the problems of drug trafficking. According to him, the government has to deal with the essence of the problem first before punishing the drug traffickers. See also “Drug Trafficking and Penal Policy in Nigeria” by Rotimi for more discussion on drug trafficking in Nigeria and the laws enacted to prevent it.

<sup>90</sup> See also “An Interview with Chika Unigwe” by Tunca, Mortimer and Del Calzo, where Unigwe agrees that the characters were forced into prostitution by circumstances.

to think of nothing but the money she would be making” (237). And she has to wear earrings and short skirts, which she “could never get away with in Lagos” (203). Thus a smile and expensive dresses become Sisi’s trademark. In other words, Sisi is “socially constructed through exotic, sexualized codes of black womanhood” (20)<sup>91</sup> to nourish the sex industry. As a way of re-defining herself, she begins to attend the Pentecostal church for solace and wanders along the Antwerp streets alone. Sisi’s creation of her own space independent of her fellow prostitutes, Madam and her co-worker, Segun, communicates a form of resistance against prostitution and a struggle to repossess her body.

Reading Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce against the backdrop of voluntary and involuntary involvement in prostitution, we find it was only Joyce “who did not enter prostitution voluntarily” (Tunca n.p), thus implying that the rest entered the institution of prostitution naively. Whereas Sisi represents the educated women’s class (she has a Bachelor’s degree in Finance and Business Administration) the rest have not gone beyond secondary education for various reasons linked with patriarchal hegemony, family responsibilities at home, and civil war. Against this backdrop, one can perhaps view Sisi’s struggle to resist female oppression through prostitution as a manifestation of the value of education in empowering women to attempt to have a voice in the public sphere. In contrast, Ama, Efe and Joyce have accepted prostitution because of their obsession with living abroad and their ambitions to be successful economically in future. For example, Ama is happy about “being in Europe [and] earning [her] own money” (177) and plans to build a mansion for Mama Eko, her aunt and “the only person [she] really miss[es]” (177). As the character Joyce says, being in “Europe and go[ing] back empty-handed” (177) seems unthinkable. As a result, she has a plan to open a boutique on Allen Avenue in Lagos (235) in memory of Sisi, because they once shared this dream before her death. Efe, for her part, looks for money to take care of her child and allow her younger sister, Rita, go back to school. These dynamics communicate some of the circumstances that force someone to be a prostitute. Thus the narrative invites readers to see prostitution from different viewpoints rather than only the negative side of it. As exemplified by Ama, Efe and Joyce, prostitution becomes a weapon of solace and power for desperate and victimised women in the post-colonial context.

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<sup>91</sup> Mul discusses the construction of blackness in Belgium in Unigwe’s Authorial Self-Representation and *On Black Sisters’ Street*.” See “Becoming Black in Belgium: The Social Construction of Blackness in Chika Unigwe’s Authorial Self-Representation and *On Black Sisters’ Street*.”

As in *Swallow*, in *On Black Sisters' Street*, Lagos city is portrayed as a chaotic space with mixed sadism and beauty, a place with broken infrastructure, a central point in transnational networks and a discomfoting environment that unsettles those who have already arrived from rural areas [see for example, Roger Kurtz (2000), Ayo Kehinde (2007), Alfred Ndi (2007), Meg Samuelson (2007), Chris Dunton (2008), and Kizito Muchemwa (2013)]. This explains why human trafficking and the longing to go abroad in the hope of seeking a 'better life' has become a recurring motif in this narrative. The narrative takes us from Lagos to the red light district of Antwerp city in Belgium where "many of the African prostitutes [...] were from Nigeria" (55)<sup>92</sup> so as to interrogate the roles of the city in a transnational context. The narrative charts the journey of the characters in a celebratory mood because they are leaving the "city of death" (Unigwe 98). For example, Sisi's refusal to take a pumpkin that her mother insists she should carry implies border crossing and cultural negotiation as well as a disavowal of traditions. She likes pumpkins but she is going to a community where people eat bread. As a result, she throws the pumpkin into the dustbin at the airport (98).

Ironically, the Belgium (Antwerp) Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce are yearning for receives them with antipathy, annoyance and with different forms of objectification. In the words of Sarah, they enter "a social imaginary [...] a discursive space where subjects are already imagined, constructed and treated as 'African' by hegemonic discourses" (13). In other words, these female characters, according to Mbembe elsewhere, become perfect figures of a shadow subjected to a triple loss of home, loss of rights over their bodies, and loss of political status (21).<sup>93</sup> The novel captures precisely this loss of identity through the conversation between Madam and Sisi: "[m]y dear Sisi, it's not your place to ask questions here. You just do as you're told and you'll have an easy ride. I talk, you listen. *You understand?*" (120; italics in original). Thus, they are muted and objectified. They become 'things'; less than human and mechanically driven by principles of silence, and total obedience, and being seen but not heard (120). My analysis hence concurs with Kehinde's in the belief that the characters jump "from the frying-pan of one agony to the fire of another trouble" (240) and the Zwartzusterstraat house becomes a centre for the commodification of female bodies.

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<sup>92</sup> See "An Interview with Chika Unigwe" by Tunca, Mortimer and Del Calzo on Unigwe's views about her narrative, *On Black Sisters' Street* and how she interviewed some prostitutes in the red light district in Belgium.

<sup>93</sup> Mbembe is alluding to the slave trade period where African slaves were deprived of their rights. See also "Necropolitics" by Mbembe.

It is in this house of Zwartzusterstraat that the narrative invites us to question the familial relations among the migrant inhabitants. Caged like animals, Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce are excommunicated from different social realms. As objects of production, they are “thrown together by a conspiracy of fate [by] a loud man called Dele” (26) and Madam. They have become objects of men’s desire by being displayed in “glass windows” (178) and sexualised through their dress, for example, putting on skimpy and short skirts. More importantly, the pornographic pictures Madam displays on the walls in the Zwartzusterstraat house orient and further expose these women to the sex industry. From a postmodern perspective, these pictures “reveal a slice of the moral decadence” (Kehinde 238) and manipulation of the social body for sex business. As such, the Zwartzusterstraat house, which metonymically represents Antwerp city, becomes a social space of moral decadence. Since Sisi, Ama, Efe, and Joyce have different backgrounds in terms of family and migratory routes the city thus becomes a space for collective identity and recollection of memories about the past.

Joyce has no family anywhere apart from Sisi, Ama, and Efe, as well as Madam. She feels comfortable being in the Zwartzusterstraat house together with her fellow ‘prostitutes’ as her ‘family.’ The novel maps out this idea by introducing communal domestic spaces such as a kitchen and living room that these women share. It invites us read these domestic spaces in relation to how they contribute to identity negotiation and re-construction, apart from life giving interaction. Through these spaces, Joyce does not feel like an isolated orphan any more but part of a community where she can positively interact with them. Because of the atrocious death of her family members in Darfur, Joyce finds solace and new meaning in these new surroundings, as the narrator explains: “the women in the house on Zwartzusterstraat were the only family Joyce had” (235). In other words, they help her establish a reconstituted family to suppress the loss of her biological family.

The death of Sisi communicates the novel’s rejection of prostitution. Based on taut ethics manifested in her parents’ subscription to Christianity and their asking for God’s blessings for her safe journey, I am obliged to agree with Kehinde’s reading of Sisi’s death as a curse on prostitution and the narrative’s refusal to endorse it (prostitution). The narrator says, “her mother thanked God in a voice that brought in the neighbours from both sides” (45) and her parents kept on “reminding her to pray” (261) while in Belgium in order to continue abiding by Christian moral ethics, which, among others, condemns prostitution. As Kehinde points out, this is why she (Sisi) is unmourned and the narrative ends without telling us how she is buried and whether the remains of her body are transported to Nigeria or buried in Belgium.

Besides this, the narrative depicts Sisi as a crucial figure in the unification and intensification of other ‘prostitute’ alliances in the Zwartzusterstraat house. Her death galvanises the other prostitute characters who feel as one solid family. In fact, they go as far as to threaten to overthrow Madam’s power. Unigwe evokes their outcry: “[w]e’re human beings! Why should we take it? [...] We fit go to de police” (289). It is because of the terror Madam has imposed on them that their “different thoughts converge and meet in the present, causing them to share” (40) and feel the sense of familyhood. The narrator says, “Sisi’s death has re-enforced what she [Joyce] already knew, that the women are all that she has. They are all the family that she has in Europe” (41).

It is worth noting that even Madam regards them as sisters who constitute one family away from home and, therefore, they have to respect each other. Ironically, these women, stirred by the spirit of Sisi, team up and become a formidable force to fight for the rights of their bodies (290). In other words, they become a family of revolutionaries that want the two culprits (Madam and Dele) punished but they fail because the duo has their own police. This implies that, as I have discussed in the section above, human trafficking is institutionalised and practised by leaders or those with immense power in the post-colonial states and in the West. Thus this business has become a means of power to control women through the commodification of female bodies.

The fact that Sisi is forced to enter the profession of prostitution out of desperation to look for employment makes one think of other characters and their acceptance of prostitution because of family dynamics back home: Ama is a victim of rape and patriarchal control of her ‘father’ Brother Cyril; Efe is jilted by her boyfriend, Titus, who leaves her with a baby to care for; and Joyce is a victim of civil war in Darfur and is also abandoned in a foreign land by her boyfriend, Polycarp. In other words, Ama, Efe and Joyce are traumatised characters and, therefore, the Zwartzusterstraat house acts as a place where they recollect their past memories: “when they think about their past they have different memories” (40). However, the narrative becomes complicated when – at the end – we see Efe dreaming of “becoming a madam herself” (278), by buying girls and using them as prostitutes in brothels; Joyce plans to “set up a school in Yaba [...] [and] call it Sisi’s International Primary and Secondary School” (279) to commemorate Sisi; and Ama plans to “open a boutique” (279). Apart from Efe, the other two ‘prostitutes’ think of positive outcomes from these traumatising experiences. Efe, on the other hand, appears trapped in this kind of life and will perpetuate it

by luring more victims into it. In other words, the outcome of traumatising experiences is not uniform.

As a matter of fact, the novel, apart from problematizing prostitution, wants us to pay attention to the circumstances that force these characters to enter this misery, but not how they assert themselves to hope and dream once they are in it. Being victims of multifaceted and overlapping forces, these women cannot get access to education, and if they do, as is the case of Sisi, they are denied an opportunity to thrive as professionals. In contrast, Madam has a Master's degree in Business Administration, a higher qualification than Sisi's Bachelor's degree in Finance and Business Administration, whose involvement and ulterior motives in this nefarious trade have to be explained differently. Thus, the decision of these women (Ama, Efe and Joyce) to get involved in prostitution simply implies a counterbalance to offset their loss of education or job opportunities. For example, Efe plans to send her young sister, Rita to school using the money she generates through prostitution. In the same vein, we see how Violet in *Swallow* runs a hair salon business in Lagos with the money she garners from prostitution in Italy. Therefore, the narrative invites us to consider the circumstances that force people to take decisions which are not necessarily ethical in a particular society. In this context, we read human trafficking and prostitution as unethical and forced businesses that characters have manipulated to make it useful for their future lives. It is used by the characters as a weapon of struggle and familial maintenance, and as a weapon that non-educated women can use to offset the loss of education. Thus in this sense, Ama, Efe and Joyce can be labelled as a family of victimised characters who are forced by circumstances to seek liberation through prostitution. And the novel appears to condemn the circumstances that necessitate prostitution, rather than the individuals concerned.

## **Conclusion**

The selected narratives speak to each other on how the failure of the post-colonial state in Africa has resulted in the creation of marginalised groups of street children, drug traffickers and prostitutes. Focusing on the institution of family, these narratives imagine how post-coloniality and patriarchal hegemony intersect, not only in marginalising children and women, but also in causing the disintegration of the institution of the family. Related to the disintegration of the family is the nature of the urban centres to which the victims of family instability migrate, which Kehinde calls antithetical to love. Although the diasporic writers nuance the precariousness and hostile nature of the taut cities in Africa that make characters

migrate to Europe, their non-diasporic counterparts suggest rebuilding the city so that it can become a better environment for its residents. Still the challenge in this context of socio-economic and political instability, remains: how can we build it? Is it possible to stabilise the post-colonial state by building the family again from a grassroots level? And how can we make family a microcosm of the nation? In the next chapter, I unpack these questions through a critical examination of the relationship between the family and the nation.



## CHAPTER SIX

### Intimate Family Affairs and Re-imagining Nationhood

#### Introduction

Chapter Five explored the representation of voices from the fringes and how they negotiate familial relationships in city spaces in the contexts of migration and socio-economic instability. This chapter examines how the narratives of Mohamed and Abdi, both born in Somalia, and Mengiste, born in Ethiopia, echo sentiments articulated by voices which are calling for the reconstruction of ‘failed’ post-colonial nations in order to establish hospitable living spaces for broken, marginalised and reconstructed families. I read Mohamed’s *Black Mamba Boy*, Abdi’s *Offspring of Paradise*, and Mengiste’s *Beneath the Lion’s Gaze* by interrogating how these writers from war-torn nations portray the family as a vital institution in restoring peace and, thus, reconstructing their nations. I argue that the institution of the family plays a significant role in reforming nations wracked by wars. In other words, it is the very institution that serves to recast the role of the nation in social and political life (169).<sup>94</sup> My argument resonates with Nuruddin Farah’s idea of the need to construct a nation. Farah offers a moral criticism of prevalent paternal and patriarchal practices in ‘traditional’ Somali families as well as clannism. In his interview with Patricia Alden and Louis Tremaine, Farah offers intriguing insights into how to fight against autocratic regimes in Africa. Using the example of Somalia and the dictatorial regime of Siyad Barre (who ruled from 1969 to 1991), Farah is of the view that Barre is a product of the family and, therefore, his tyrannical nature in leadership can be attributed to the kind of nurture and orientation he received within his family. Farah gives an example of democracy in India asserting that “[w]hat I am interested in is to be able to work within the family as a unit, and if there is no democracy in the house, there can certainly be no democracy in the capital” (31) to imply the importance of the institution of the family in making the geopolitical nation. “It’s just starting with the small and moving towards the big” (Farah 31).

Farah clearly – while discouraging clanpolitics claiming that “a victim has no clan name” (30) – underscores the importance of the family in the making of a nation. And, in solving national

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<sup>94</sup> Haney writes of the roles of familial narratives in Hungary and the Czech Republic. According to her, a family is a reflection of a nation and therefore if a family is cared and nurtured according to the norms of a given society, there is a likelihood of making a stable nation. See “Welfare Reform with a Familial Face: Reconstituting State and Domestic Relations in Post-Socialist Eastern Europe” by Haney for more discussion on the relationship between family and state.

problems, he suggests starting with the family. He points out that “[l]et’s change our ways and let’s start with the family. Let’s start with the father, the son, and the mother. Let’s start from the man in the kitchen. Let’s start from sharing duty, sharing responsibility, whatever it is” (30). Farah values the power of social organisations such as family and he recognises that domestic and public spaces interrelate and shape each other. While Farah wants us look at the family as a progenitor of the national space on the one hand, McClintock on the other hand, ‘domesticates’ the nation by making it a family due to its shared socio-cultural, political and economic borders. She also notes that “[n]ations are frequently figured in the iconography of familial and domestic space” (63). I use Farah’s and McClintock’s theories of the nation and family as a point of departure to examine how the narratives of Mohamed, Abdi and Mengiste theorise and put into practice the interplay between the two spaces (family and nation) and how they suggest alternative ways of reconstructing the Somalian and Ethiopian nations respectively.

The nexus between family and nation reminds one of the fictional representation of victims of war and violence in nations or states in works such as *Lysistrata*, the Ancient Greek comedy written in 411 BC by Aristophanes, and Sembène’s *God’s Bits of Wood*. These writers portray the interaction between familial space and nation by demonstrating how the state or nation can shape the institution of family and in return can be shaped by it.<sup>95</sup> It is in this context that one encounters the symbiotic relationship between these two institutions. Despite the differences in time, cultural and geographical contexts in the works of Aristophanes and Sembène, the connection between family and nation is one that is, remarkably, an ever-present motif. Similarly, Mohamed, Abdi and Mengiste write in the context of war and violence to imagine how the institution of family can trigger a change towards reconstruction of the nation. In this chapter, I pay attention to the contribution of these East African authors’ portrayal of the family in a way that contributes to the transformation of nations torn apart by wars and violence that result in refugeeism and nomadism as well as the family’s struggle to build a ‘new’ nation away from home.

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<sup>95</sup> The Peloponnesian war in Greece, fought between the states of Athens and Sparta, caused a number of family problems, one of which was the disturbing of family stability by leaving women alone with children and preventing young women from marrying because men were away fighting for almost twenty years. Such a situation made women think of measures that would make their men stop the war. The protagonist Lysistrata engineers a strike by encouraging women to withdraw from sexual relations with their husbands and lovers who come home once in a while for sex. In the same vein, Sembène describes how the workers’ strike in 1947-1948 on the Niger railway caused by French brutality and harassment of Senegalese workers solidified the mobilisation of people, especially women, who saw the need to transform the Senegalese nation for the betterment of all Senegalese.

The protagonists Jama, Hana, and Hailu in *Black Mamba Boy*, *Offspring of Paradise* and *Beneath the Lions' Gaze* respectively offer a literary perspective on family as a contested space. These characters are not only family figures, but also allegorical figures that are used by authors to teach their nations about courage, compassion, responsibility, accountability and the living of a purpose-driven, meaningful life.<sup>96</sup> As I claim in this chapter, these families are metonymic of both fragmentation and reunification of the nation. They represent the horrors and trauma Somalis and Ethiopians recall from civil wars caused by the dictatorial regime of Siyad Barre in Somalia, and the failure to anticipate and provide for the drought and famine problems that culminated in the overthrow of Haile Selassie in Ethiopia. These characters, Hailu's family in particular, represent the Derg revolution and its consequences, such as the emergence of the 'Red Terror' regime and the atrocities committed by it – as I discuss in the section on *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*.

Ernest Renan in "What is a Nation?" defines a 'nation' as a "large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future" (19). Renan's definition implies, firstly, the presence of shared cultural and political attachments among people in a certain geographical space and, secondly, the determination that is associated with patriotism and is geared towards achieving a better future. Renan emphasises suffering as a key cause of nationalism amongst members of the same nation. He notes, "having suffered together and, indeed, suffering in common unifies more than joy does [...]. [G]riefs are of more value than triumphs, for they impose duties, and require a common effort" (19). In this view, a nation is a site through which a particular relational brand of politics maybe organised (210).<sup>97</sup> I find Renan's conceptualisation of 'nation' useful here because it communicates how horrors, terrors, and violence play a unifying role in making people strive for a 'new nation' and make them feel a sense of nationhood. Using Renan's ideas, I examine how the writers attempt to represent the turbulent period of war and instability that Somalis and Ethiopians have been subjected to and how their narratives interrogate that history with the aim of reforming their nations. On the one hand, *Black Mamba Boy* deals with the time before the civil war of 1969, while

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<sup>96</sup> I have paraphrased Mulugeta's argument on family in her analysis of Mengiste's *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*. See also "A Thematic Analysis of *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* and *Held at a Distance: My Rediscovery of Ethiopia*" by Mulugeta for more discussion on the topic.

<sup>97</sup> Boehmer problematises the meaning of nation and demonstrates identity formation by focusing on women in the post-colonial context. See also *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* by Boehmer for more discussion.

*Offspring of Paradise* examines the 1991 civil war in Somalia and its impacts on the Somalis. On the other hand, *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* explores the 1974 revolution in Ethiopia to overthrow Haile Selassie. This chapter is divided into two sections; the first section interrogates family-nation reconstruction in nomadic and refugee contexts as depicted in Mohamed's *Black Mamba Boy* and Abdi's *Offspring of Paradise* and the second section focuses on the re-making of the Ethiopian nation as represented in Mengiste's *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*.

### **Re-inscribing the Fragmented Nation: Mohamed's *Black Mamba Boy* and Abdi's *Offspring of Paradise***

Peter Hitchcock in "Postcolonial failure and the Politics of Nation" offers an intriguing analysis on what it means for a nation to be regarded as a failure. Quoting Gerald Helman and Steven Ratner, Hitchcock is of the view that the nation is considered a failure if it fails to sustain itself as a member of the international community, and is characterised by the presence of civil strife, government breakdown and economic deprivation (733).<sup>98</sup> Based on those criteria for failure, Hitchcock goes further saying, specifically, "Somalia is a failed state" (729) meaning that it "has lost the capacity to rule the territory in which it has a physical presence" (Menkhaus 407)<sup>99</sup> because of the escalation of civil war and military coups.

It is an undeniable fact that in East Africa and the Horn of Africa, Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Sudan have been blacklisted by global communities such as the United Nations (UN), the International Criminal Court (ICC) and the African Union (AU) as unstable nations because of continued civil wars, coups, violence, genocide, drought and famine that have resulted in the migration of people with their property. However, Mohamed and Abdi, through their narratives, offer an opportunity to read this instability or 'failure' in Somalia and suggest ways to address it. Their narratives appear to pose pertinent counter-questions such as what should be done with these so-called failed nations? Should we let them continue dying or help them recover from death? How can we reform the Somali nation? And for those who migrated to other countries as long-term refugees, how are they involved in the reconstruction

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<sup>98</sup> Helman and Ratner talk about the failure of states such as Haiti, the former Yugoslavia, Somalia, Sudan, Liberia, and Cambodia.

<sup>99</sup> Ken Menkhaus speaks of Somalia as a failed nation in its not maintaining peace and security. See "State Collapse in Somalia: Second Thoughts" by Menkhaus for more discussion on the failure of the Somali state.

of their nation? As responses to these questions, these writers seem to be grappling with ways of revitalising Somalia. As such, they join hands with their fellow countryman and literary precursor Nuruddin Farah, to show how literature portrays the state of the nation and keeps Somalia alive. In the words of Farah in “Why I Write,” these writers put words “down on paper, for prosperity’s sake, the true history of a nation” (13) and envision how it can be rebuilt. Reading Mohamed’s *Black Mamba Boy* and Abdi’s *Offspring of Paradise* alongside Farah’s *From a Crooked Rib* (1970), *A Naked Needle* (1976), *Sweet and Sour Milk* (1979), *Sardines* (1981), and *Close Sesame* (1983) in their portrayal of the Somali nation, one understands how the socio-political and historical atmosphere has shaped their critical narratives.

Farah’s narratives (mentioned above) centre mainly on women’s subordination and the need for their emancipation, the disastrous effects of clan competition and clan struggle, as well as the role of the “educated intelligentsia in acting as both a force of opposition to and a maintainer of the ruling regime” (Peter Schraeder 207).<sup>100</sup> The narratives of Mohamed and Abdi, however, take a different angle by suggesting ways to rebuild the Somali nation. Their works appear to provide different answers to the question: how can we reconstruct the Somali nation? On the one hand, Mohamed depicts the refugees who left Somalia to settle elsewhere, who cut ties with their motherland, and shows how they negotiate their Somali identity and reunification elsewhere. On the other hand, Abdi portrays family members in refugee contexts and depicts how they struggle to return to their motherland to rebuild Somalia and its socio-cultural and political boundaries. It is through differences in the two authors’ approach that I divide this section into two sub-sections.

### **Drifting Away From Home Towards ‘Home’ in *Black Mamba Boy* (2010)**

Nadifa Mohamed was born in 1981 in Hargeisa, Somalia, to a father who was a sailor in the British merchant navy and a mother who was a landlady. Mohamed’s family migrated to London while she, Mohamed, was still too young to know that they were migrants in Europe. Mohamed was enrolled at Oxford University where she studied Politics and History. As a writer, Mohamed, apart from *Black Mamba Boy*, has written *The Orchard of Lost Souls*, which was published in 2013. *Black Mamba Boy* is about migration in a socio-politically

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<sup>100</sup> Schraeder offers a fruitful discussion on Farah’s novels and how they represent Somalia and Somalis. See also “The Sociopolitical Evolution of a Somali Writer” by Schraeder for more discussion on Farah’s novels.

unstable context. The story unfolds through Jama who, after the death of his parents, travels on foot, by lorry, and by boat from Aden through Egypt to Wales in the United Kingdom. He travels in search of a better life and to escape the hostile Somali environment. The central theme of this narrative is migration and family re-unification. Mohamed has used a simple linear and chronological plot that makes readers follow the journey of the protagonist across Somalia to other countries and continents. Nevertheless, Jama is greatly romanticized. Jama sometimes transcends the reality of a ‘normal’ human being and becomes a heroic character, thus placing the narrative between a novel and an epic. In other words, the character of Jama and his encounters in life makes the story adventurous and heroic.

*Black Mamba Boy* is a fictionalised account of the real-life Jama, Nadifa Mohamed’s father. In an interview, Mohamed testifies that she was inspired by her father’s unusual life and she wanted to write not only about his story but also about her father’s generation of Somalis.<sup>101</sup> Therefore Mohamed takes us back to Somalia in the 1930s to tell the incredible story of her father’s life and journey.<sup>102</sup> Mohamed, through this fictionalised story, tries to imagine Somalia and Somalis in relation to migration, and the negative consequences of colonialism which include the recruitment of child soldiers, dispossession of land, enforced labour, and segregation. Reading *Black Mamba Boy* in the context of Somali migrants, one encounters the depiction of what Paul Zeleza calls the “third wave of diasporas” (55) where the migration of people – in this context, the character – is engendered by economic, political, and social crises.<sup>103</sup> Thus, cross-generationally, I read Ambaro (Jama’s mother) and Guure (Jama’s father) as allegorical figures representing the Somali nation and Jama as a victim of the ‘failed’ state. Since this section is aimed at examining the interplay between the family-home and the nation, I explore how the familial blessings and nurture Jama gets from his mother help him construct the nation he desires to inhabit. In my discussion, I pay attention to the changes of family: from when Jama is with both his parents (Guure and Ambaro) and the new family he forges with his wife Bethlehem in Eritrea. I try to argue that Jama’s spirit and courage in constructing a nation of his own, away from his motherland, is shaped by his

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<sup>101</sup> See “In Conversation: Nadifa Mohamed” posted by Otas on <http://belindaotas.com/?p=2638> for more discussion on the life of Mohamed as a writer and what influenced her in her writing career.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Zeleza speaks of the contemporary migration of people and property, as opposed to the Black Atlantic migration. See also “Rewriting the African Diaspora: Beyond the Black Atlantic” by Zeleza for more discussion.

parents. My argument is influenced by the echoes of the spirits of Ambaro and Guure: “[y]ou cannot remain here while your fate awaits you in Egypt [...] [t]he world has been broken open for you [...] [b]ut from the stars I watch you, your mother watches you, we have been beside you during every trial” (205). I trace Jama’s trajectory in the world from the marriage between Guure and Ambaro up to his settlement in Eritrea and the political and socio-cultural implications of this journey.

The marriage between Guure and Ambaro is very significant in the light of the independence of Somali in 1960 and the re-unification among the former Somalia regions annexed by France, Ethiopia and Kenya. Mohamed alludes to this historical moment by depicting Guure and Ambaro in a triumphant mood, celebrating their marriage, but the mood which does not last long. The narrator says, Guure “had brought with him a cloth bundle. He kneeled down to open it and brought out a pomegranate, and a gold bangle stolen from his aunt [...] kissed her hands as she took them [...] they were married the next day” (19-20). This kind of scenario invokes the discourse of negritude with its praise of the motherland, extolling its beauty, loveliness, origin, sacrifice, togetherness, all of which, in this context, are manifested in Ambaro. The narrative makes us read Ambaro not only as a mother figure but also an embodiment of the Somali nation whose beauty, peace and tranquillity the Somalis can appreciate. Thus the joyous mood of Guure and his relatives communicates success in attaining independence and getting back their beloved country from their former colonial masters, the British and the Italians.

Such a joyous mood establishes what Mohamed would wish Somalia to be in terms of peace and pervasive love. However, we come to learn in the narrative that Ambaro’s decision to marry Guure is her own choice, despite her father’s and uncle’s rejection of Guure “in favour of another man” (19). This family drama becomes a symbolic representation of the former colonial masters’ unwillingness to grant independence to Somalia. This ‘forced’ independence later on results in wars and coups, which, according to Mbembe, “the colonial relationship, *par excellence*, involves” (“Notes” 3; italics in original). On the one hand, this marriage communicates opposition to gender oppression by means of women’s agency; on the other hand, it fictionalises the independence of Somalia in 1960 and the wish to reunify the three other Somali territories – French Somaliland, or what is today called the Republic of



Djibouti, the Ogaden and Haud regions annexed by Ethiopia, and the part of Somalia on the northern side that was taken over by Kenya.<sup>104</sup>

This kind of re-unification, symbolised by the short-lived marriage between Guure and Ambaro, fails: “Guure could not accept that his carefree youth was over; he still wanted to wander off with his friends while all Ambaro wanted was a family of her own” (20) and eventually he leaves for Sudan. Suggestively, in this context, the narrative speaks of the abortive attempts to reunify Somali states to form greater Somalia; instead what followed were ideological wars and subsequently the coming to power of the dictator Siyad Barre. Whereas Kenya and Ethiopia sought support from the West, Somalia sought military aid from the Soviet Union, the region thus becoming an arena for the dynamics of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union.<sup>105</sup> Against this background, the narrative makes the wedding between Guure and Ambaro a political symbol and familial bond that calls upon Somalis to come together and stay as one family – nation. However, as the story unfolds, the departure of Guure and the death of Jama’s mother Ambaro symbolise the disintegrated nation which, according to Jama, is a nation that does not “exist anymore” (3).

For Jama, Somalia as a nation becomes an ambivalent and poignant space that emotionally disturbs him. As a result, Jama travels across Somalia and eventually settles in Eritrea in order to escape from the horrors of the failed nation. Although this context speaks to Mohamed’s father, who decided to take his family to England in 1986 when the war broke out in Somalia, the narrative fictionalises the event by underscoring the importance of ‘home’ over nation. I am using the concept of ‘home’ in this context to mean a socio-political space that is calm and friendly. *Black Mamba Boy*, like *Offspring of Paradise* which I discuss below, engages readers to sympathise with its protagonist, Jama. For example, the last conversation between Ambaro and Jama on her death-bed speaks volumes about familial relationships and nationality as far as Jama’s life is concerned:

[Ambaro] turned her face to the window and took a smooth,  
deep breath [...] It’s another world above us, each of those stars

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<sup>104</sup> The partition of Somalia into these regions was arbitrarily engineered by colonialists to facilitate the colonisation of Somalia, but the Somalis believe that they are one despite being separated by the colonial borders because they can speak the same language (Somali). See also Mohamud and Kusow on their theories about the failure of the Somalia nation in their article “Why Somalia Continues to Remain a Failed State,” and on <http://www.historyworld.net/wrldhis/PlainTextHistories.asp?historyid=ad20#ixzz3RNZAb8io> for more discussion.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

has a power and a meaning in our lives [...] Those stars are our friends, they have watched over our ancestors, they have seen all kinds of suffering but the light in them never goes out, they will watch over you and will watch over your grandchildren [...] I am not leaving you. I will live in your heart, in your blood [...] Forgive me, my baby snake, don't live the life that I have lived, you deserve better. (44)

Ambaro thus tries to imagine another world for her son and her words are a blessing to him. The window in this context represents a way through or going beyond the confines of the geopolitical space and serves as a means through which Jama can realise his dream of being a successful man. Ambaro takes a “kitab amulet from around [her] neck” (45) and gives it to Jama as a symbol of protection and success. Related to the amulet is the incident with the mamba when Ambaro was pregnant with Jama. In her eighth month of pregnancy Ambaro sat under the ancient acacia on the savannah to rest when suddenly a huge mamba came and began caressing her back, moving towards her bellybutton and then disappeared into the sand (12). This incident makes Ambaro think about naming the unborn baby Goode, which means ‘Black Mamba’, the name that Ambaro keeps as “special” (13) for Jama and the one from which the title of the novel is taken. Related to these mysterious events is a suitcase Jama inherits from his father and which he gets when he reaches Sudan. These three incidents – the amulet, the black mamba and the suitcase – make Jama a mythical and heroic figure endowed with “the most beautiful luck, as if he had been born with the protection of all the saints and he would see the four corners of the world” (13).

In his travels, Jama's hope is to meet his elusive father who, however, dies before such a hope can be realised. Jama rejects other people he meets on his journey, despite their kindness and readiness to take him in as part of their families. For example, unlike Lema's *In the Belly of Dar es Salaam*, Jama refuses to forge familial relationships with the street children and gangsters, Abdi and Shidane, he meets in Aden though, later, he names his only child after Shidane to signify close friendship with him (Shidane). Along similar lines, Jama is well accepted by different people on his way to Wales, but he refuses to be part of their families despite their advice. Thus the narrative captures Jama's stand: “I can't wait, I have been waiting my whole life. I want my father now, what if I wait and he dies?” (95) to signify the importance of biological family. These family figures (the ones Jama meets on his journey to Wales) not only communicate the reality about the migrant nature of the Somalis –

all the abovementioned characters have a Somali origin – because of political instability in their home country, but also help one to read Jama’s rejection of affilial relationships over biological family.

In the course of searching for the luck promised by his mother, I read Jama (following Zeleza) as having to undergo a continuous process of making, unmaking, and remaking (41) of his identity to adjust and adapt to the different environments and circumstances he encounters on his travels. In other words, he becomes an immigrant and a diasporic subject who, apart from rejecting his motherland, “encode[s] practices of accommodation with, as well as resistance to, host countries and their norms” (Clifford 251). I find it useful here to stress Jama’s rejection of his motherland (Somalia) and to stress how the narrative constructs discourses that “represent experiences of displacement [and] constructing homes away from home” (Clifford 244) in order to interrogate the interplay between the two ‘home’ spaces, Somalia and Eritrea.

Jama travels a long and adventurous journey, supposedly destined to end in his meeting his father. Since he never meets his father, Jama thinks of constructing his home away from the collapsed Somali nation. Reading Jama in this context of travel, one is reminded of the character Telemachus in Homer’s *The Odyssey*<sup>106</sup> who travels to different places looking for his long absent father Odysseus. Unlike in *The Odyssey*, *Black Mamba Boy* appears to prevent the hero from coming back to his nation. Jama’s journey is similar to that of the Somalian Asad in Jonny Steinberg’s recent novel, *A Man of Good Hope* (2014). Asad drifts from Somalia to Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe to South Africa and eventually settles in the United States in the course of searching for ‘home.’ Thus Jama says: “wherever my family is that is where I belong” (274). And Jama, like Asad, has to live “in a universe” (127). In his analysis of the myths of homeland and return, Safran maintains that diasporic groups, apart from being expatriate minority communities that are dispersed from an original ‘centre’ to at least two ‘peripheral’ places, maintain memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland and see the ancestral home as a place of eventual return, when the time is right (quoted in Clifford 247). Reading Jama against the backdrop of migration and diaspora, one sees how the narrative challenges Safran’s theory of diasporic subjects by disrupting the dominant discourse of the displacement-nostalgia relationship in a migratory

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<sup>106</sup> Telemachus is a son of the heroic character Odysseus in the epic *The Odyssey* whose father leaves for the Trojan War when his son is still very young. When Telemachus reaches twenty years of age and there is no information on the whereabouts of his father, he decides to travel in search of him until finally he finds his father and ceremoniously comes back home to Ithaka.

context. Jama, instead, is detached from his ancestral home and the narrative does not give him room to remember and recall his homeland. Since Jama's mother and father were raised by their aunts in Aden, one would expect to read of the nostalgic feelings Jama has for his ancestral home and his relatives on his mother and father's side, but the narrative suppresses it by rendering Aden a hostile city because it made his mother so angry (6).

Such an environment, which Jama navigates despite challenges – compared to his colleagues – until he reaches the destination he desires, signifies the importance of familial advice, which is a reflection of reconstructing a fragmented nation. The narrative imagines a space for the security of its protagonist. In this case, Eritrea becomes a 'promised land' for Jama and an alternative socio-cultural and political space to settle displaced souls. It is a place where he can construct a home away from home. Here Mohamed's narrative, in the words of Davies, problematises home as "the site of calm, security and comfort" (113) where drifting individuals seek refuge. The narrative seems to find an echo in *A Man of Good Hope* where Asad, after having suffered almost the same way as Jama, defines 'home' as "where the social security is, [...] where the social workers knock on the door because they do not want you to kill your baby by mistake" (318).

It is here in Eritrea in a region called Focka that the narrative invites readers to interrogate the intersection of various images that symbolise nation and home away from home. For example, Jama – on his way to Wales via Egypt – spends a couple of years engaging in farming in this region because it is endowed with fertile soils. At the same time, he manages to marry Bethlehem, but after few days he leaves her and goes to Egypt where he thinks his dream for success will be realised, and then he eventually sets sail for Wales. While in Wales, he gets information from Jibreel (a former friend of Jama's father who also migrates from Sudan to England) that Bethlehem has given birth to a baby boy. The narrative suggests that although Jama's departure seems reminiscent of his father's, unlike his father, Jama desires to hold on to the ties that connect him to his family. My reading of Jama is that he is a contemporary migrant.

Zezeza points to the difference between what he calls old and contemporary diasporas<sup>107</sup> in relation to the continent, Africa, where contemporary diasporic individuals "are able to retain

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<sup>107</sup> I use the concept of 'diaspora' in the context of Jama to mean an individual who settles in a distant land (outside Africa), suppresses the nostalgic feelings about the homeland because of their being, in the words of Safran, often traumatic, but retaining ties of affection with the newly formulated home in a different

ties to Africa in ways that were not possible to earlier generations of the African diasporas” (56). Jama cannot let his family suffer alone. As a lesson learned from his own abandonment by his father, Jama promises himself never to abandon a child of his: “[h]ow could I do that to Bethlehem and my son?” (271). We also read similar sentiments in *A Man of Good Hope* when Asad says: “[a] person who forgets his family has emptied himself of his worth” (274), justifying the centrality of family reunification among contemporary migrants. This longing for family reconnection, which we also experience in Adeniran’s *Imagine This*, becomes a recurring motif in *Black Mamba Boy*. Jama is ready to terminate his contract with the British navy to return to Eritrea and ceremoniously rejoin his family. Thus for Jama, Bethlehem becomes not only the embodiment of a new nation that he has to acquire but also a family figure who occupies a space left by Jama’s mother and father: “you are all I have in this world” (208). Thus, if one views Bethlehem as a new nation figure, then the newborn baby, whom Jama names Shidane after his former friend, becomes a link between Jama and the new nation and commemorates his former proto-friendship with Shidane.

The name Bethlehem in the narrative alludes to the Biblical analogy that communicates holiness but not peace. Since Eritrea is also not stable, the narrative does not let the hero enter into another trouble zone; Jama digs “out his Welsh soil from his pocket and showed it to Jibreel. I’ll plant this in Eritrea” (272). Metaphorically, this event can be interpreted as reconstructing a new nation that is free from insecurity. Like the character Rose in Atta’s *Swallow* who prefers colonialism over Black rule in Africa in her attempt to inculcate model responsibility and accountability in leadership, Jama demonstrates Eurocentric thoughts by bringing Welsh soil into Eritrea, perhaps to represent the hopes for achievement of peace, fertility and stability in Africa.

Thus *Black Mamba Boy*, as a cross-generational narrative (Guure and Ambaro, Jama and Bethlehem, and Shidane the baby) questions the meaning of ‘home’ to the contemporary generation of Somalis born in exile. If one takes the example of the character Shidane, where can he call home? As represented in the narrative, Jama has been cut off from his ancestral home. Whereas the narrative perhaps alludes to Mohamed’s family settling in London, it also interrogates the national identity of the majority of Somalis living all over the world as refugees or as displaced migrants. The narrative seems to suggest that peace and security determine home. By this argument, home can be anywhere where there is peace and security.

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geopolitical nation. See Safran’s ideas as quoted in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* by Clifford for more discussion about diaspora.

Similarly, one's nationality is not confined by colonially defined borders. On the other hand, Abdi's narrative (as I discuss below) engages readers to think about how to construct 'home' within the limits of geographical boundaries by suggesting forgiveness and erasing past grudges that manifest sentiments of enmity.

### **Writing the Refugee Camp: *Offspring of Paradise* (2003)**

*Offspring of Paradise* is a novel by the Somali author Safi Abdi, who currently lives in Dubai. Her first publication is *A Mighty Collision of Two Worlds* that explores mixed marriage (race and religion) and its perils. *Offspring of Paradise*, Abdi's second novel, is about refugeeism in the civil war context. It is mostly narrated by or from the viewpoint of the protagonist, Hana, who (at the opening of the novel), together with her family members – her pregnant mother, Asha, uncle, Adeer, and grandmother, Ayeyo – are moving in an 'exhausted' vehicle to a refugee camp during the civil war because the regime of the military junta that had ruled Somalia with an iron fist since October 21, 1969 was collapsing amidst violent mayhem. The main theme of this novel is political instability and family disintegration. One of the notable and strongest formal features Abdi presents in her novel (in articulating her ideas) is the crafting of characters that embody historical, national and familial traces. However, her complicated plot – too fragmented – can lead to readers struggling to follow the events as they unfold.

I begin my analysis of *Offspring of Paradise* by looking at the narrative structure Abdi has employed in examining the failure of family in the face of civil war. The narrative begins with the journey of the six-year-old Hana with her family members (mother, paternal uncle and grandmother) who are moving "away [by means of the 'exhausted' vehicle] from the madness of the fallen city" (1) to an unknown place. Ayeyo "wav[es] goodbye once and for all to the dead of Hamar" (3) because, as we later realise, she dies in a refugee camp and will not see her homeland again. This kind of beginning in novels, in the words of John Mullan in his theorising on the architecture of a novel, establishes the contract between the writer and reader by making the formal structure of the narrative (symbols and metaphors to communicate the fragmentation of the nation and disintegration of the family) accessible (9) and showing how they embody history. It foreshadows the signs of instability, havoc and the grim prospective future of the nation, which, as the narrative unfolds, become central themes.

Through this beginning, which suggests instability and displacement, readers are being prepared to interrogate the historical and sociological aspects Abdi depicts in her writing of Somalia and Somalis: the source of migration, routes of refugeeism and hope for the future. As Annie Gagliano says in her review, this novel is a “combination of historical novel, sociological study and thriller” (1), a combination which enables readers to interrogate the various socio-cultural and political impacts of the civil war in Somalia. Besides, this beginning of the narrative introduces the reader to the two key symbolic figures: an ‘exhausted’ vehicle and Hana’s grandmother, Ayeyo who, as I discuss below, represents the Somali nation, familial space and historical memory.

Derrida in *Dissemination* as translated by Barbara Johnson, reminds us of the significance of paying attention to words, meanings and what they signify in the text. In his discussion of the concept of ‘deconstruction,’ Derrida points out that the critique of a literary work “does not ask what does this statement *mean*? but where is it being made from? [and] what does it presuppose?” (xv). Such questions by Derrida imply an understanding of the context in which the word occurs and its symbolic representation. Arguing against the backdrop of Derridean interpretation of the text, one is persuaded to read the description of the vehicle in which Hana and her family are travelling – in their attempt to escape to the refugee camp – as a symbol that represents a social and a public space in Somalia at this time. This image of a vehicle has variously been used as a symbol of the state of the nation and to represent actual nation. It harks back to the narratives of the older generation of African male writers such as Ayi Kwei Armah’s *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born* and Ngũgĩ’s *Devil on the Cross* and their depiction of a bus and a car, respectively to symbolise the condition of the nation.

While Armah and Ngũgĩ use the image of a bus and a car as modes of modern forms of road transportation to symbolise corruption and moral decay in the post-colonial nations of Ghana and Kenya respectively,<sup>108</sup> Abdi uses the vehicle to represent the Somali nation, its horrors, violence and all forms of insecurity caused by political instability. Unlike the older generation, Abdi makes the image appear scarring in order to capture the dictatorial regime of Siyad Barre and the clan-based war to overthrow Barre in the 1980s-1991. Thus the vehicle is “like a weary reptile [and] exhausted [...] [with a] rusty [steering] wheel” (1). Atta’s *Swallow*, as I have discussed in Chapter Five, uses the same image of a run-down bus to

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<sup>108</sup> Armah uses the image of a bus to represent corruption and ‘poor’ leadership in post-colonial Ghana and Ngũgĩ uses the image of the Matatu (Matata Matamu) model vehicle to represent moral decay and disillusionment in post-colonial Kenya.



represent the post-colonial state of Nigeria. Such an image brings to the fore the themes of overpopulation, incapacity, irresponsibility, and economic, cultural as well as political danger that African post-colonial states are subjected to. By so doing, Abdi and Atta, as contemporary writers, demonstrate how emerging African female writers reiterate a critique of the post-colonial nation on matters such as national and international politics, cultural contexts and the forces of social change. Thus, using the image of an ‘exhausted’ vehicle, *Offspring of Paradise* in this context portrays Somalia negatively as a fragmented nation. In so doing, the narrative does not only echo Hitchcock’s view that Somalia is a ‘failed’ nation but also prepares readers for questions about how to reconstruct it.

The figure of Ayeyo is related to the vehicle as a social and public space to communicate the instability of the Somalia nation. She is a family figure and an embodiment of the history of her family and Somalia. The context of migration and refugeeism has forced her to take the place of Hana’s mother and father (because Hana’s father was killed by the militants and her mother disappeared in the forest). Ayeyo has to assume the role of a parent towards her and, therefore, she nurtures Hana towards understanding the history of her family, which metaphorically means knowing her nation. If the narrative fictionally documents the sociological and historical aspects of Somalia, as Gagliano argues, then it is plausible to accept that Hana represents Abdi and her efforts to document the history of Somalia through fiction.

Hana needs Ayeyo as her ‘historical archive’ that helps her document not only the history of her family, but also the Somali nation. “Ayeyo is her only source, whose knowledge she hoped would help her one day find her mother” (82) and “put [the story of her mother] on paper” (83). And, through the memory of Ayeyo, Hana comes up with three separate stories: “Abti Khalifa’s story, Adeer Ahmed’s sudden demise in *that* dark night [and] the *untold* story of her father’s destruction” (87; italics in original) but all these stories are “merged, never to be separated again” (87-88). Suggestively, the narrative imagines the historical events that took place between 1969 and the 1990s in Somalia. These include the assassination of the elected civilian President of Somalia, Sharmake, in 1969 and his post being usurped by Siyad Barre<sup>109</sup> and the consequences of Barre’s regime, which include executions and the violent civil war between 1988 and the 1990s that not only claimed the lives of people but also caused family disruption. Abdi uses Hana as her mouthpiece through which readers get to

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<sup>109</sup> See Ssereo’s “Clanpolitics, Clan-democracy and Conflict Regulation in Africa: The Experience of Somalia” on how he theorises the history of Somalia in terms of civil war and military coups.

know that history and fiction are negotiated in the narrative by engaging readers to explore the historical truism about the civil war in Somalia from a literary perspective.

Hana spends “two years on the run” (10) with her grandmother, moving from one hut to another until they reach what they call their ‘new home’, ‘the wall’, or the refugee camp where Mulki welcomes them: “[w]elcome to the *wall*, my little lady” (10; italics in original). Here the narrative draws our attention to the idea of refugeeism, its roles of family and national reconstruction and their implications. It introduces the refugee camp in a welcoming tone to create a basis of sympathy for the victims of war. Later, readers get to know the contradictory and intersecting roles manifested in the camp. It is in the refugee camp where, first, characters such as Ayeyo and Hana recall traumatically what happened in Hamar before they leave for the refugee camp. As Ayeyo describes it:

[i]t was a long time ago...? But that was *before*, [...] For *before* the blabbermouth, there was the *huge blast*. And before the huge blast, *the breakdown of the collective Somalia psyche*; and before the degrading breakage, the *evil* regime of Siyad Barre [...] [T]hese weren't the only *befores*. There were others as well – all rife with the different phases journeyed thus far. And you could blend, mix, and merge all the chaotic elements in the huge furnace that was Somalia. (12; italics in original)

Ayeyo's knowledge of Somalia's crises makes her a carrier of history and she is ready to share this with the contemporary generation – Hana. Thus the narrative goes beyond the Barre regime to trace the history behind Somalia's instability. As Hassan Mohamed in revisiting the causes of civil war in Somalia points out, “to understand fully the causes of the crisis, it is necessary to go beyond the traditional scholarship which tends to reduce the causes to a single factor, namely, Somalia's segmentary clanism” (quoted from Samatar 1992 and Keynan 1992). Thus, Ayeyo's ‘befores’ in the excerpt above, as Hassan Mohamed would argue, are suggestive. It not only points to the longevity of various crises in Somalia, but also alludes to the interplay of socio-economic, cultural and ecological factors that led to the downfall of the Somali nation. Thus Ayeyo becomes an ‘archive’ from which to record, keep and disseminate to the youngsters the memory of the fragmented nation. As Hassan Mohamed notes, these include the impact of the colonial legacy, the legacy of the Cold War,

the imposition of alien centralised structures, systems of governance, culture and education and the failure of the mentally colonised ruling elite to develop viable alternatives to Western values and systems of governance, instead resorting to the manipulation and exploitation of the segmentary nature of the Somali social system to stay in power (6-7).<sup>110</sup>

Thus the refugee camp, for Ayeyo, becomes a safer place not only for recalling what happened in Hamar but also for discussing politics and the history of her nation, because in Somalia, as Ssereo explains, Barre considered any public discussion related to politics in and all forms of association illegal. People were to live like prisoners in their own country and kept in a constant state of fear (Florence Ssereo, 33). Being a familial figure, Ayeyo becomes a teacher, mentor and nurturer to her granddaughter so that she can know “*her heritage [...] every Somali child’s heritage*” (88; italics in original): the tragedies concerning her family, which metaphorically means the woes and horrors the nation is going through and how to bring hope to the victims. Ayeyo’s efforts in her familial emblematic role materialise when, at the end of the narrative (as discussed below), Hana manages to meet her mother, which symbolically indicates the possibility of a prosperous reunification among Somalis.

The second role manifested in the refugee camp is the “wretched images of Somali women and children televised worldwide [which] entertained an incredulous world population” (*Paradise* 11). These images, apart from conveying the horrific scene in the camp, “immortalize the idiocy of the nation” (11). They re-define a Somali woman as hungry, sad, tired, with no-one to run to, no place to hide, and nowhere to go (11). Such images suggest a hatred of the “male humankind of the wilderness” (32) that has caused all these troubles because of a yearning for power. As Gagiano points out, through these images, the narrative condemns the dominant type of Somali manhood and the phallocratic nature of the society that is responsible for the bloody anarchy and violation of humane social values that brought about the destruction of the country as a ‘liveable location’ for the majority of its former citizens (*Evils* 279). It is through these images that the narrative engages Hana and Ayeyo to

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<sup>110</sup> As Hassan Mohamed expounds on the Somalia crisis, during colonialism Somalia was partitioned into five separate parts: British Somaliland in the north; North Frontier District, which Britain later ceded to Kenya; Italian Somaliland in the south; French Somaliland, now Djibouti, and a large region known as Ogaden, which was given to Emperor Menelik of Ethiopia, thus disrupting the traditional unity of the Somalis. During the Cold War, the influence of the United States and the former Soviet Union, driven by geo-political and ideological motives, turned the Horn of Africa into one of the most bitterly contested battlefields of the war because they needed control of the Suez Canal and the oil-rich Middle East. This resulted in the dumping of massive amounts of deadly weapons into the region. See also “Refugee Exodus from Somalia: Revisiting the Causes” by Mohamed; “Why Somalia Continues to Remain a Failed State” by Mohamud and Kusow for more discussion on the sociocultural, political and economic forces of crisis in Somalia.

see what is currently happening to the Somalis, especially the ones unable to escape from the hostile environment of Somalia. As Hana leaves Somalia aged only six and spends two years travelling, this creates conditions for her to begin to forget what was happening in Somalia. As the narrator says, “Hana’s memory of her family back in Hamar” (10) has been obliterated. Thus the televised images remind her and make her mentally conscious and critical to the extent of asking Ayeyo why there is so much suffering among Somalis and what should be done to redress the situation (13).

Hana’s questions, although posed in the novel’s second chapter where she asks Ayeyo after having seen the horrific images on the television, become a turning-point which interrogates the measures for peace negotiation with the aim of re-building the Somali nation. Horrified by images of torture and suffering among the Somalis, Hana wants Ayeyo to provide an alternative solution to solve the problem. Thus Ayeyo says: “[b]ut we are Muslims, and those of us who are hurt, we have to be patient [...] and pray for it to be lifted” (13). The solution Ayeyo provides is too idealistic to appeal to Hana: “[b]ut we pray, and nothing happens. Why?” (13). Hana’s inquisition can be read as a step forward towards self-actualisation and familial orientation on how to fight for the nation. As Ayeyo attests: “for a prayer of this magnitude to become effective, you need a lot of people praying together, with *one* single voice, and with *one* single heart – facing *one* single direction” (13; italics in original).

In the same vein, the narrative suggests spiritual appeal, survival and subordination to God as viable solutions to peace-building in Somalia, unity of purpose and dedication. For example, we read about the character Zahra being left in the forest by Mulki and Mulki’s brother Abdullah when escaping from Hamar and going to unknown places through Kenya “with a torch, a blanket, a bottle of water, a kitchen knife for protection, and a pocket size copy of the Qur’an she carried under her wrap” (31). In this context, the Qur’an becomes a discourse of spiritual appeal and subordination to God, which perhaps helps Zahra escape from being killed by the Somali militias. By appealing to spiritual beings, *Offspring of Paradise* in its Muslim morality is reminiscent of the writing of Severine Ndunguru, a Tanzanian novelist whose novels *A Wreath for Fr. Mayer of Masasi* (1997) and *Divine Providence* (1999) underscore the Christian faith as a feasible solution to problems.<sup>111</sup> However, apart from their

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<sup>111</sup> In *A Wreath for Fr. Mayer of Masasi* the narrative depicts how prayers help to net the culprit who steals the medicine for treating cholera during an epidemic at Mkongo village; *Divine Providence* demonstrates how the same prayers re-unify long divorced and estranged couples (Richard and Grace). See “The Influence of Christianity in Ndunguru’s *A Wreath for Fr. Mayer of Masasi* and *Divine Providence*” by Yunusy Ng’umbi for more discussion about the roles of Christianity in family re-unification.

differences in setting and time (between Ndunguru and Abdi) the kinds of problems and their intensities are also different. Whereas Abdi's *Offspring of Paradise* is speaking of a nation-wide problem, Ndunguru's speak of specific regions (provinces) within the nation. Muslim and Christian spiritualism, in these novels, therefore, is depicted as a viable contributor to the negotiation of peace.

The knowledge and historical memory which Ayeyo imparts to Hana – as I have explained above – is the moral judgement manifested in remembrance. Duvenage in exploring the concepts of memory and forgetting aptly asserts that remembering “helps us recollect the phenomena on which we will pass (principled) judgements” (22). In his view, memory precedes moral principles and knowing who we are is the precondition for the exercise of moral judgement (22). However, *Offspring of Paradise* seems to question the kind of knowledge that can help in peace-building. It offers a critique of historical memory and how, if not sorted out carefully, it can hinder the whole process of peace-building. The narrative (in this context) resonates with Gabriel Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1978) whose characters (the gypsies) celebrate and recite praises for discovering, – among other things, – “the apparatus to make a person forget his bad memories” (21). For example, Ayeyo records on tape – while on her death bed in the refugee camp – the horrors Hana's family went through and gives the tape to Mulki (the one entrusted to stay with Hana after Ayeyo's death) so that Hana can listen and learn more about her family. Thus Mulki says, “Your grandmother gave it to me before she passed away” (111). Hana is reluctant to accept it: “[i]f Ayeyo wanted me to have that tape she would have given to me herself [...] surely she would've given it to me then, if it was that important” (111). However, later on she agrees to accept it because she assumes one of the reasons for Ayeyo leaving a tape with Mulki is to justify Mulki's “trustworthiness” (112) in working hand-in-hand with her fellow contemporary generation in keeping historical documents about their country.

It is from this tape that we hear part of the story about Hana's family through Ayeyo's voice:

You and your mother, [...] and Abti Khalif's daughter, if she's still alive, would be the only surviving members of our family. About your aunt and her family, you already know. No remnants were ever recovered from their boat. About your uncles' and cousin's story you already know [...] Allah does not change the condition of people until they change that which is in

themselves. As we are all now beginning to understand, the malfunction of our society did not come by chance. There's a whole history behind that demise. And as you truly get acquainted with it, I trust you'll one day find it in your heart to write it off as one of those things, for there is always a *before*, before a before... (113-114)

Ayeyo is thus narrating what Hana already knows about her family: “[n]othing that I’m not already aware of! I know everything already” (112). Nevertheless, Mulki has deleted part of it “on Ayeyo’s orders” (114). The erased part of the tape symbolises erasing memory as a prerequisite for peace-building in Somalia. This counter-argues Duvenage’s assertion on peace-building through memory and rather suggests “wiping clean of past grudges” (Michael Walls 382)<sup>112</sup> that remind them of tragedies and horrific moments they have been going through in Somalia.

To make the memory and forgetting trope more central in peace-building, readers witness – towards the end of the novel – the echoes of Ayeyo through Abdirahman and Khadra, a character who is in the refugee camp with Hana and Ayeyo who has only one child, a daughter. These echoes call for forgetting bad memories. Abdirahman tells Hana: “[w]e need to forgive each other Hana [...] when you are a Somali, you’re either oppressed or you are the oppressor ...I guess the time has come for us to break that circle” (237). By the same token, Khadra shouts to her daughter: “why are we so stingy with our love? Why can’t we forgive one another? [...] And the insects on the ground are a community” (222). In this context, the narrative – through Ayeyo and Khadra as familial figures and Abdirahman as a spiritual figure – celebrates the erasure of the “memory of perceived injustices” (Walls 382) and forgetfulness among the contemporary generation in Somalia as a way of re-building their nation.

To justify the power of family in the whole process of nation-building, the narrative introduces Helen as a foil to Hana. We read from the narrative that Helen is not properly taken care of by her parents. As Gabriela Pounds observes in the context of parent-child relationship, “it is the responsibility of the parent to inform and nurture the child so that

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<sup>112</sup> Walls discusses the measures Somalis have to undertake to restore peace in their country. One of the means of peace building is forgetting the bad memory of their encounters during civil war and natural disasters such as drought and famine. See “The Emergence of a Somali State: Building Peace from Civil War in Somaliland” by Walls for more discussion on the topic.



she/he is in a position to make his/her own decisions and rely on him/herself” (144). Thus for Pounds, “the child’s unsafe behaviour is seen in terms of disobedience to the parental rules, for which she/he is to blame” (144). While acknowledging Pounds’s theory of the parent-child relationship, I argue that the narrative underscores the parents’ poor nurturing of children that results in a nation of hooligans and ill-mannered citizens. The life of Helen bears testimony to my argument. This is due to the fact that the child-parent relationship (in the case of Helen and her parents) as depicted in the narrative is so detached – to the extent of making Helen create her own space that does not necessarily guarantee the morals of the community she stays with. Helen says, “[M]y parents attended many a course on how to raise their dogs, though they never got to learn how to raise a child” (130) to communicate hatred of poor parenting style that results in producing an unstable family and nation.

This kind of parenting style defines the future of a child. For example, Helen’s killing of Jason’s ex-wife to end their relationship and then marrying him can be interpreted as one of the results of poor parenting. At the same time, she is suspected of plotting to kill Hana because of her reluctance to join Christianity and be part of her (Helen’s) project of Christianising the Muslims. Whereas an accusatory finger is pointed at Helen’s parents for poor parenting, metaphorically the event communicates the atrocities people commit in Somalia, which Abdi, like Farah, blames on the family institution for failing to mentor and nurture their youngsters according to the norms of Somali society and of the way Islamic culture is practised by Somalis. As a result, Helen ends up dying a “horrible death” (346) by overdose, where her death signifies the need to respect other’s faith as a means to create a harmonious and dignified society.

Another family-like gathering of church-goers (Helen, Jason and Rune) provides readers with an opportunity to read the irony manifested in their pretence of helping the Somali refugees. This group of pretenders sympathise with the victims of war, while their actual mission is to Christianise them. Thus Rune says: “[w]e all want the light of Jesus in these wretched people’s lives” (181). They need “the light of Jesus” (176). Here the novel teases out the colonial project and civilising mission as depicted in texts such as Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885) and Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899). As a colonial project, Helen’s group commonly known as ‘Carriers of the Cross’, is funded by government dignitaries, big business people, university professors and some Jewish infiltrators (132). By reading these two groups (gathering of women and Helen’s) alongside each other, readers encounter what I regard as ‘true’ nationalistic struggle and colonial imposition. Whereas the



gathered women at the ‘tea party’ and the ones connected to the church aim at re-building the Somali nation, Helen’s group members seek to benefit from the outcome individually.

Amina is introduced into the narrative as a family figure with nationalistic sentiments. She is married to Anees and has an adopted daughter, Kenzi. She, together with her family, represents the Somalis who left Hamar because of massive killings. She is bitterly traumatised by the war because “her house lay in the middle of the combat field and it is in the middle of this blitz that Amina went into labour” (167) and delivered a dead baby. The narrative takes us to the bush where Amina is walking like a mad woman. Like Nnu Ego in Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood*, Amina considers herself as a ‘failed’ woman in her aspiration to the role of motherhood. Whereas Emecheta’s character Nnu Ego attempts to kill herself, Abdi’s character does not suffer to the extent of considering suicide; rather she is given another child whom she gets from “a tin basin” (170) in the bush: “[n]ever for a moment does she think of the baby’s natural parents, or of her tribe [...] Amina was sure of one thing [...] the baby she held in her arms was born of a woman [...] who has suffered the idiocy of her nation” (170). Since she had given birth the day before, “she still has milk in her breast” (170) to feed the baby. Here the novel teases out the “clan-based civil war in Somalia between 1989 and 2000 [...] and the negative consequences of clanpolitics” (Ssereo 27) using a feminist gesture. The narrative shows the extent to which women and children were affected by the war. Thus, in this case, Amina becomes an embodiment of a figure of family and nation devoted to resolving “the divisive politics of clan [and tribal] ideology” (Mohamud and Kusow 16) in Somalia that was among the causes of civil war.

However, the narrative does not say much about what happens to Amina when in the forest with the ‘new baby’ and how she comes to meet her husband. The novel draws our attention to national unification by going beyond her familial boundaries (Amina and her husband). Amina insists on her rescuing Asha (who is not of the same clan) because she is humane and compassionate. In this sense, Amina’s significance is not limited to family in her struggle and rather moves into the discourse of nationalism by suppressing clan differences. Amina and her family (husband and the newly-adopted daughter, Kenzi) rescue Asha – the woman they know nothing about – when they are coming back “to their homes, or whatever was left of them [after] camping out in the countryside for several months” (62), they meet Asha (Hana’s mother) in the forest “search[ing] for life outside the shack area” (60) where she shares the shelter with a goat.

The goat is the only creature that accompanies Asha in the forest before she is rescued by Amina. For Asha, a goat becomes a counterpart to fill the gap left by her family, and a sign of peace: “[i]t is safer to stay [in the forest with animals] [because] the unkindest of all species [is] the male humankind of the wilderness” (32). It is in this meeting between Amina and Asha that readers come to learn what a poor and dirty state Asha is in, which metaphorically communicates the rottenness of the Somali nation because of the atrocities committed by political and clan leaders and their followers. Thus, to enter the ‘new home’ Asha has to be cleaned first: “[y]ou need to wash a little and change from those clothes. We need to do something with your face, too” (62). After washing her face and changing her clothes, she has to join them (Amina and her family) in Hamar because peace has begun to be restored. In this context, the narrative, on the one hand, implies cleansing, purification and unification among Somalis and on the other hand, communicates a maternal caring that the women demonstrate, which in turn points to the potential of women being the brokers of peace and nation-building.

Indeed, the campaign for peace and nation-building is central to *Offspring of Paradise*. The narrative foresees a muted hope for Somalia. For example, it prophesies a stable city of Hamar where residents are returning to resettle. According to the narrative, returning residents of Hamar should abide by conditions which will make them live a decent life. Through the character of Asha, one can read that the changing of clothes, and washing of her face with water and soap (61-62) metaphorically communicates purification by expunging past grudges. By the same token, as I have hinted above, Abdi ends her narrative in a celebratory mood: Hana manages to meet her mother at Dubai airport where the majority of Somalis have gathered to receive their fellow Somalis who are elsewhere in refugee camps. Hana has “every reason to be grateful” (342). Such an event symbolically communicates not only the re-unification of family and re-establishment of this family bond, but also hints at the possibility of reforming a united Somali nation.

In conclusion, *Black Mamba Boy* and *Offspring of Paradise* offer different dimensions on how to reconstruct the Somali nation by using the family institution. They portray family as a central unit that determines changes in the geo-political nation. While describing the civil war in Somalia and its impact on the Somalis, Mohamed and Abdi’s narratives suggest ways of making Somalis forget the horrific moments encountered during the war. They have to look forward and reconstruct their new lives in the diaspora or other spaces they now call home. Whereas Mohamed’s narrative suggests migration and constructing a new home and identity

away from the ancestral home, with the aim of disconnecting the characters from the traumatic memory of the past, Abdi's novel prefers reconstructing the Somali nation using the institution of family, regardless of where they are located. At the same time, Mohamed's narrative suggests the creation of a new nation as a way of incorporating the Somalis born in exile. Generally, the two narratives underscore the family-nation trajectory by interrogating how the family influences and constructs the nation, but Mengiste's *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, as I discuss in the section below, focuses on the nation-family path by portraying how violence in Ethiopia shapes the institution of family to adopt different ways of rescuing the nation from danger.

### **Imagining Ethiopia, Imagining Violence: A Reading of *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* (2010)**

Before I provide the background of Mengiste, a summary of the novel and eventually provide its analysis, I would like to justify the inclusion of Ethiopia in this chapter as a post-colonial nation despite, historically, being one of the nations that never experienced colonialism. Unlike other narratives I discuss in this project, it is only *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* that speaks of the non-colonised African nations and their experiences. However, the kind of leadership Ethiopians experience during the reign of Haile Selassie and that of the *Derg* (the military council ruling the country after the 1974 revolution) resembles that of the former colonised nations.<sup>113</sup> In addition, Ethiopia, apart from not being officially colonised, is in fact post-colonial in character for, as Ania Loomba argues, the impact of colonialism and the "descendants of the once-colonised peoples live everywhere [therefore] the whole world is postcolonial" (1103).<sup>114</sup>

I now turn to the background of Mengiste and a summary of her narrative to give an understanding of the context in which the novel was written and to explore the author's fictional interrogation of Ethiopian history. Maaza Mengiste was born in 1971 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Because of the revolution that overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie in Ethiopia in 1974, Mengiste's family migrated to the United States where she eventually attained her Master of Fine Arts (MFA) at New York University (NYU). As a writer, Mengiste, apart

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<sup>113</sup> See also "Narrative Enablement: Constructions of Disability in Contemporary African Imaginaries" by Lipenga where he gives the reasons for discussing *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* as a postcolonial text.

<sup>114</sup> Loomba is theorising about post-colonialism and how the impact of colonialism is traceable all over the world. See "Situating Colonial and Postcolonial Studies" by Loomba for more discussion on post-coloniality in the world.

from her debut novel *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, is currently working on a manuscript called *The Shadow King*.

*Beneath the Lion's Gaze* is about political instability in Ethiopia. The novel chronicles the story of Hailu's family, his wife Selam, and sons Yonas and Dawit and their struggle – at different times and in different ways – to challenge the oppressive regimes of Haile Selassie and later the 'Red Terror' in the 1970s. Their struggle is triggered by the failure of Emperor Haile Selassie to resolve the drought and famine in Ethiopia and subsequently the oppressive regime of Major Guddu during the 'Red Terror' regime. While Dawit believes that the monarch needs to be overthrown and actively joins the movement by taking a gun to confront the regimes, Hailu, who at the beginning of the narrative was still adhering on to the monarch's regime, later reacts mercifully by killing a badly injured girl to prevent the 'Red Terror' regime from getting some security information he believes they expected to extract from the girl. Meanwhile, Yonas and his wife Sara help Dawit in collecting the bodies of Ethiopians killed by the 'Red Terror' regime. Amongst other themes, the narrative deals with issues of political instability and national reconstruction. The narrative conveys the intended message of political instability through historical characters and medical professionals who enable readers not only to grasp the internal and external dynamics of the bloody revolution but also familial reaction to the event. However, the use of characters such as Emperor Haile Selassie, a historical figure, and allusion to historical facts makes this narrative a largely historical novel that could make readers mistake it for an historical text.

As Haftu Kahsay documents (in her analysis of *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*) the narrative is divided into two parts: part one contains book one, while part two is made up of books two, three and four. The first book concentrates on the period of the fall of Emperor Haile Selassie with his socio-political, economic and ideological policies that were not acceptable to the people. Politically, the power of the emperor was not questioned since he believed that he was chosen by God, as sovereign, through his Solomonic line of kingship to reign undisputed over his subjects. Economically, peasants from various rural areas in Ethiopia were suffering from exploitation imposed on them by the parochial leaders and, in terms of farming and tenancy, the traditional method of ploughing coupled with drought impoverished people and occasioned their deaths by famine. In response to these catastrophes, students mobilised the city people by creating the famous slogan, 'Land to the Tiller' and protested against the

emperor. Finally the emperor was overthrown by the military and Major Guddu came to power without the consent of the students or the people.<sup>115</sup>

The remaining three books focus on the Derg regime – its promises and failures that resulted in the terrorising, torturing and killing of people. The first phase of political leadership is marked by the coming of the Derg regime with promises of the massacre of high ranking officials and the disillusionment of young intellectuals. The second phase features the rise and attack by the guerrillas, and the Derg’s response – the Red Terror. The third phase is characterised by the frustration of the Derg and the fighters such as “Mekonnen killer of soldiers, and Solomon the wise” (Mengiste 291).<sup>116</sup>

Although the narrative uses an omniscient narrator, at different times it is vocalised through different members of the Hailu family. Read from the Hailu family’s perspective, *Beneath the Lion’s Gaze* portrays the history of Ethiopia by focusing on the collapse of Haile Selassie’s regime and on the rise and reign of the Derg regime. It represents the subsequent torture, mass killings and other acts of violence suffered by Ethiopians during the Derg regime and how, in turn, those horrific images of torture and turmoil become sources of political consciousness. At this juncture, *Beneath the Lion’s Gaze* can best be understood by deploying Frantz Fanon’s idea of violence in relation to Mengiste’s attempt to re-imagine the Ethiopian nation torn by drought, famine, coup d’état and mass killings. In *Concerning Violence* Fanon points out that national liberation and the restoration of nationhood to the people is always a violent phenomenon (1). As Fanon argues, the whole process of colonial intrusion and its operation was wrought by violent means. Therefore, the whole process of colonisation and decolonisation, as Martin Staniland expounds in theorising Fanon’s ideas on political class, “can best be understood as manifestation of violence” (Staniland 19).<sup>117</sup>

Although Fanon is speaking of the colonialism-decolonisation context, in my discussion I disregard the colonial context and pay attention to the physical and emotional violence

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<sup>115</sup> See Kahsay in “The Ideological Plane in Selected Ethiopian Diasporic Prose Narratives in English: A Comparative Study of Political Philosophy” for her theory concerning *Beneath the Lion’s Gaze* in relation to the History of Ethiopia. See also “The Impact of Violence: The Ethiopian ‘Red Terror’ as a Social Phenomenon” by Jon Abbink for more discussion on Selassie’s political, economic, and agricultural policies that led to his dethronement.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> See *The Wretched of the Earth* by Fanon for more discussion on violence, particularly the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter of this text.

portrayed in the narrative, as well as the exploitation Ethiopians experienced under Emperor Haile Selassie and the Derg regime. I examine how “violence is [portrayed] as a contested activity to forcefully intimidate, dominate, and inflict disabling physical [and psychological] harm on others, with possible fatal results” (Abbink 129).<sup>118</sup> The violence and torture Ethiopians experienced during and after the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie as depicted in the novel are comparable to that of the colonial situation. As such, Mengiste’s narrative appears to concur with Fanon’s concerning the use of violence to counterattack violent acts.

For Fanon, “the proof of success [in outwitting the oppressive regime] lies in a whole social structure being changed from the bottom up” (*Violence* 1). Whereas Fanon by implication speaks of the smallest institution that makes the nation, in this context, I consider the family to be the basic institution that determines the welfare of the nation. Mengiste’s narrative subscribes to the family-nation discourse by showing how – unlike Abdi and Mohamed’s novels which I have discussed above – the nation can influence and shape the family institution.

*Beneath the Lion’s Gaze* shows how the revolution to overthrow Emperor Haile Selassie and the changes to the social and political structure in Ethiopia were associated with violence. In this sense, Mengiste joins other Ethiopian diasporic writers such as Nega Mezlekia, Mawi Asgedom, and Rebecca Hailu, whose narratives *Notes from the Hyena’s Belly* (2000), *Of Beetles and Angels: A True Story of an American Dream* (2001) and *Held at a Distance: My Rediscovery of Ethiopia* (2008), respectively, depict the horror and the social, economic and political unrest in Ethiopia from the writers’ experience as victims of the revolution. As *Beneath the Lion’s Gaze* suggests, violence was unavoidable to make Ethiopians have a brighter future. According to Abbink, “violent interaction between social and ethnic groups in Ethiopia has shaped the contours of contemporary society” (129) and therefore ferocity is a response intended to end violence and build the Ethiopian nation.

The narrative begins by describing the events that took place during the last few days of Selassie’s reign. Mengiste creates a horrific image of a boy shot in the back by the Emperor’s police for challenging his power. As one wonders why the God-elected leader intensifies and solidifies his power through bloodshed and intimidation of his subjects, the novel seems to respond by showing that this is Ethiopia in transformation, entering modernity with

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<sup>118</sup> See Jon Abbink in “The Impact of Violence: The Ethiopian ‘Red Terror’ as a Social Phenomenon” where he discusses how the ‘Red Terror’ regime used violence in Ethiopia during and after the reign of Emperor Haile Selassie.

intellectuals who are critical of the system. Thus Selassie has to deploy other means of protecting and extending his hold on power. And the bullet becomes the only tool for control and intimidation; creating fear in the exploited and oppressed majority of Ethiopians.

Hailu, a medical doctor, becomes one of the first characters to be intimidated by the bullet through the pain the boy is going through: “[h]e (Hailu) feared for Dawit, his youngest son, who also wanted to enter the fray” (7). But we learn later that Hailu himself is subjected to torture during the Derg regime. As the readers ponder over the grief felt by the mother of the injured boy, the narrative presents another image, that of Hailu’s sick wife, Selam, on her death-bed and suffering from “congestive heart failure” (13). The juxtaposition of these two images – both of them involving Hailu – is very significant as far as an understanding of the fall of the Ethiopian nation and its accompanying violence as depicted in the narrative are concerned.

These two parallel images justify the narrative’s use of Hailu, the medical doctor, as a vocaliser in Mengiste’s narrative. Unlike other professionals, Hailu can diagnose patients externally (or physically) and internally. Metaphorically, he is the very person who can convey to the readers the whole picture of Ethiopia. This is why Mengiste says in her interview with Imma that “I thought a doctor would be dealing with the material and direct impact of the [revolution]” (4). If we accept the negritude discourse of the mother-nation metaphor, or what Boehmer calls “mother symbols [that] cement national feelings,” (26)<sup>119</sup> then it is plausible to equate the sickness of Selam with the diminishing power of the Ethiopian nation, caused by the autocratic regime of the fictionally represented leader, Emperor Haile Selassie; and the blood of the injured boy then, like the blood of Waiyaki in Ngũgĩ’s *A Grain of Wheat* becomes a symbol of the struggle to rescue the nation from havoc.

Thus the injured boy embodies the violence in Ethiopia. However, the narrative ends by anticipating that the boy may be paralysed without showing whether the prophecy is fulfilled, he recovers or dies of severe bleeding. Rather, the narrative leaves the death scene and takes us to the days of Hailu’s youth and wedding with Selam, which symbolically alludes to the heyday when Ethiopians enjoyed the resources of their nation. It alludes to the time “during the reigns of emperors Tewodros, Yohannis IV and Minilik II [where] whoever tried to appropriate violence and force for his own ends undermined his own legitimacy and was

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<sup>119</sup> See *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation* by Boehmer where she theorises the concept of ‘nation’ and its implications in the post-colonial context.



going to be called to account or would predictably face rebellion” (Abbink 131). Fictionalising this halcyon time, the narrator says: “[they] gathered inside his grandfather’s *tukul* and drank honey wine in celebration of the new couple’s impending first child” (11). The narrative makes such an event nostalgic for Hailu but also invites readers to cast a critical eye over Selassie’s regime in relation to former regimes. One inevitably reaches the conclusion that the Selassie regime initiated and catalysed the ensuing violence. The regime was a threat to the Ethiopians and stirred them to take harsh measures to get rid of the despotic system. As such, in this section I read the nation as a source of violent behaviour or what Abbink calls the “culture of violence” (129) in the family.

Dawit, later nicknamed Mekonnen killer of soldiers, is a product of the tyrannical regime of Emperor Haile Selassie. He represents a group of intellectual middle-class citizens who are critical of the ruling system and the ones who would like Ethiopia to be a land of peace. While Farah, as I have argued above, suggests moulding and nurturing the family morally for the well-being of the nation, Mengiste’s narrative introduces a different trajectory by questioning the role of the family in the monarchical context. Through Dawit, the narrative discloses the anger provoked, firstly by the failure to resolve the famine problem that seriously affected the fictional area of Wello and, secondly, by the terror of the Derg’s regime. In this context, the novel suggests no compromise for whoever challenges the use of violence for peace negotiation.

Unlike Hana and Jama, Dawit rejects the familial teachings and advice of his father, for the sake of the nation. He only listens to his mother. To justify this parental advice, the narrator says: “These days, Dawit was forced to stay in the confines of his father’s house each night. It was Hailu’s attempt to stop him from attending meetings where students planned their demonstrations against the palace” (10-11) to which later Dawit reacts:

[y]ou don’t understand. You don’t even know the right questions to ask. You want to control me and try to pretend there’s nothing happening in this country [...] we’re different from your generation. Just because someone has authority doesn’t mean they should be respected [...] My father doesn’t know what he can’t see; he can’t see what he can’t understand. I’m a son to him only in name. (172)

Here Mengiste seems to be referring to the 1974 crisis in Ethiopia, where the famine confirmed the inadequacy of the royal government in taking care of its people and as a result there was an eruption of “public protests and demonstrations [...] among many sections of the population – not only the students, but also teachers, taxi-drivers, workers, etc” (Abbink 134). According to Abbink, this riot was a conduit for significant political and social change. Still – as the excerpts above reveal – Hailu tries to prevent Dawit from playing an active role in liberating his nation, under the guise of familial advice and nurturing. As the narrative suggests, this verifies Hailu’s fear of the Selassie regime and he cannot see that things are changing for the betterment of Ethiopians. However, at the end of the narrative, joins hands with Dawit against the Derg regime. In this context, through Dawit, the narrative conveys to readers that a “family is a good institution where [one] can build [a] personal identity” (Mulugeta 54).<sup>120</sup> In other words, it is a domestic space and platform where, in the words of Fanon, Dawit “begin[s] to sharpen [...] weapons to secure [the] victory [of his nation]” (*The Wretched* 8).

One should not underrate the contribution of women in the making of the Ethiopian nation. Apart from being victims of the revolution, the narrative endows them with the power to be agents for change alongside their male counterparts. While Sara, Sofia and Emama Seble (the neighbours of Hailu and an old woman) work hand-in-hand with Dawit to collect the bodies of people killed by the ‘Red Terror’ regime, Selam, when on her death bed, encourages her son to be a fighter. Through Selam, readers are made to think of the contribution of women in the liberation struggle. She is likened to the character Ramatoulaye in Sembène’s *God’s Bits of Wood* who is not ready to let the Senegalese continue being exploited by the French in the construction of the railway. As a result, she works alongside other strikers by supplying the women and children of rioters with food and water to encourage them to continue fighting. The same spirit is evidenced in Selam. For example, when Dawit comes back home with blood on his clothes after beating a young rich boy (Fisseha) he finds raping an older woman (Mulu), his mother appreciates his heroic deed: “she’d hugged him” (23). Such a response (hugging) contrasts with what he gets from his father, Hailu, who shouts and asks him accusatory questions (23). In this context, the narrative conveys to us that Hailu is either fearful or naïve at the beginning of the narrative regarding what is going on in Ethiopia.

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<sup>120</sup> Dereje Mulugeta theorises family in the course of discussing themes in *Beneath the Lion’s Gaze* and *Held at a Distance: My Rediscovery of Ethiopia*. See “A Thematic Analysis of *Beneath the Lion’s Gaze* and *Held at a Distance: My Rediscovery of Ethiopia*” by Mulugeta

Selam is to be the only parental and familial figure that inspires and nurtures a revolutionary spirit in Dawit.

Nevertheless, the narrative suggests violence that does not harm innocent people but is geared towards fulfilling their needs. One wonders why Major Guddu, who promised a bloodless revolution, turns a gun on Selassie and his officials. The novel suggests sympathy with the death of Emperor Haile Selassie and his officials because killing them was not part of the plan; therefore Ethiopians become disillusioned with the idea that bloodshed will bring about the desired peace. At the same time, the killing indicates that the coming regime is blood-stained and will operate through violence. In this regard, Abbink expounds on the Red Terror period: “violence was publicly staged and performed – without hypocrisy so to speak” (137). The narrative captures these images of violence through bodies, severely injured and maimed people, mass graves, torture and rape. In addition, Mengiste in her narrative does not hesitate to imitate the speech of Mengistu, the leader of the Red Terror, during the public rally on April 13, 1977, where he brought six bottles filled with blood, and in the course of his speech crushed them on the ground to denote that the new regime was full of violence (Jon Abbink 137). The narrative alludes to this historical event, not only to communicate the violent interaction among Ethiopians, but also to signify the use of violence in reconstructing the nation among the contemporary generation of Ethiopians, triggered by ferocious leaders.

Mickey, a friend of Dawit, epitomises this violence, which according to Dawit, is illegal and contrary to the promises made: “We will bring to trial all those who misused their power. There can be justice without bloodshed” (41). The death of Selassie and his officials at Mickey’s hand shifts the readers’ attention from seeing Mickey as a ‘true’ revolutionist to recognising in him a puppet of the new regime. As a result, he alienates himself from Hailu’s family to follow Major Guddu. By alienating Mickey from Hailu’s family, Mengiste makes readers pay attention to Dawit, not only as a ‘true’ revolutionary determined to change the situation in Ethiopia, but also to make the fight more familial.

The familial nature of the struggle becomes evident when Hailu is imprisoned for failing to treat a girl brought by soldiers while “wrapped in a clear plastic bag” (119), with the stipulation that the girl “needs to get better as quickly as possible” (120). According to Claire Messud in her review of “Death in the Family” this event is the most torturous one in the narrative. In Hailu’s eye the soldiers have “killed her already” (155) and she cannot withstand “another round of interrogation” (154). As a result, Hailu gets cyanide from the pharmacy and

poisons the girl. Through this mercy killing, Hailu identifies himself as being against the Derg regime, because he wants her not to “go back to jail [because] she was helping [‘anarchists’] pass out pamphlets at school” (276). At the same time, Hailu rescues the girl from the severe pain and trauma she was likely to experience if she recovered. She “had been raped, violently. She’d be so ashamed she’d never marry. Her days would be spent trying to prepare for the nightmares that would awaken when the sun died” (154). This incident (the death of the girl) makes Hailu occupy the space of the girl in the narrative, because he becomes a victim of torture.

The death of this young girl who is part of the revolutionary movement and whose father (the Colonel who interrogates and tortures Hailu in the cell) is in a way responsible for her death, communicates the disintegration of the family and the nation. The narrative captures this family disintegration by showing how soldiers failed to treat the girl according to the instructions of the Colonel, the girl’s father, which results in him committing suicide when Hailu reveals the truth about the condition the girl was in when brought to hospital. Thus the Colonel asks: “[a]re you telling me they disobeyed my orders and took her to that butcher? Are you expecting me to believe you were merciful in killing her?” (252). This family drama ironically turns against him, and since he cannot withstand the shame for bearing a hand in the killing of his daughter, he releases Hailu from the cell, then he kills himself (275). This incident accentuates the disintegration of the family, which is a reflection of the fragmentation of the nation.

Indeed, the narrative’s suggestion of violence is obvious. The novel documents the series of miseries that have a direct impact on the family, to engage readers in interrogating the role of families in a revolution. In other words, the novel appears to advocate revenge in circumstances where one has been robbed of one’s loved one. For example, Robel, the son of Sofia and Daniel, whose father Daniel is killed by Major Guddu for being hesitant to shoot the leaders in the government of Emperor Haile Selassie, is doubly traumatised: first, by the loss of his father and, second, by the brutal death of his only younger brother, Berhane, the innocent paperboy who witnesses a political assassination and is accused of having taken part in the killing. The narrator says: “Berhane’s face was swollen and cruelly bruised, nearly unrecognisable were it not for his large front teeth and equally large eyes” (262). Robel wants to take revenge on the system and thus joins the group of revolutionists nicknamed ‘The Holy Trinity’ – “Mekonnen, killer of soldiers, Solomon the wise, and Anbesa the lion” (291) – for that revenge mission although he is given a minor, ‘safe’ role as eavesdropper on military

customers' conversation. Robel also has to change his name to Seyoum to conceal his true identity. Robel can be likened to Mickey whose father fell down and died when he was working (40), thus leaving Mickey with his mother. Whereas in his struggle Mickey, like Robel and Dawit, identifies himself as a fighter who is protecting the family, the narrative sidelines him by rendering him a cowardly hypocrite, driven by selfish needs. In the eyes of revolutionary such as Dawit, Robel, Anbesa and Solomon, Mickey becomes a figure of betrayal and an obstacle to nation-building, who needs to be eliminated in order to restore peace and reconstruct the Ethiopian nation.

The narrative celebrates the power of family in fighting against the tyrannical regime. It uses Berhane's death as a means to show how other characters feel the pain of miserable death, and join the struggle for eventual liberation. For example, the fanatical and intellectual character, Yonas, who depends on prayers as the only way to solve problems in the nation, becomes the first witness to Berhane's death. As a result, he is shaken out of his passivity and joins in the struggle against the Derg regime. For Dawit, the event radicalises him more than ever before. The narrative ends with Hailu's family together at home with a gun and a pistol to guard Mekonnen against being taken by police who are looking for him. The sentence, "[o]nly the family remained" (301) on the final pages of the narrative communicates the writer's desire to build an Ethiopian nation that is well-protected from internal or external invasion that is likely to cause instability. This ending also exemplifies the solidification of the family institution in defending the geo-political nation and in this context, the family of Hailu becomes a hopeful metaphor for the Ethiopian nation.

Mengiste wants her readers to imagine the success of her project in showing the achievement of the desired goals. Here I turn my focus to the images depicted in the narrative that justify the building a new Ethiopian nation through violent means. The images of bloodshed, abandoned corpses, mass killings and political assassinations portrayed in this narrative echo Armando Guebuza's poem *Your Pain*, which considers those elements as canals to irrigate victory. The novel draws our attention to the image of the sun described thus: "[i]n the centre of the sky, surrounding the burning sun, were halos of vivid colors – red, yellow, orange, blue – with dark, nearly burnt edges" (280). Such an image lends itself to a number of interpretations: "[i]t's a curse [...] Satan's setting heaven on fire [...] It's a blessing [...] Things will change" (281). Moreover, "[i]t's a sign of forgiveness [...] It's a sign of redemption for the people we've become" (282). In fact, the novel does not provide an answer

to what the sun and its colours imply, and this open-endedness allows readers to digest and suggest plausible meanings and engage in debate.

Nevertheless, the predominance of similar images in the narrative allows one to interpret them as a sign of redemption and victory as a product of violence while recognising its terrible cost. This also applies to the reappearance of the spirit of Selam when Hailu is in jail: “[s]he is as young as when they married, when it was just the two of them discovering each other” (256) and the release of Hailu from jail: “He was close to naked, his trousers cut and torn, holes revealing parts of him indecently” (270). By this presentation, the narrative suggests the rebirth of the new nation of Ethiopia emerging from war and traumatic experience. Therefore, the narrative foresees a brighter future for Ethiopia.

## **Conclusion**

The East African writers, Abdi, Mohamed and Mengiste, introduce the ‘new’ trope on how to rebuild nations victimised by drought, famine, wars and military coups. Suggestively, their narratives appear to be sympathetic to the institution of family and, as a result, they give power to this institution to either take part in peace negotiation, reconstruct a new space in which to settle or wage a war against the oppressor. The alternative spaces their characters inhabit rescue them from horrors and miseries. The institution of the family is highly regarded in these narratives and is the one that gives direction on how to read characters. As such, one can pose the questions: ‘What is the role of the family in reading a prose fiction?’ and ‘how the genealogical family traces of the character in fiction help to understand the text?’ These questions give direction to the next chapter that concludes this project and points the way forward.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION

### Writing Family Spaces

This study has examined the portrayal of the family structure in selected narratives of female writers from East and West Africa. Through the exploration of narratives published between 1966 and 2011, it has attempted to interrogate the various ways in which the family trope is revisited across generations, regions, nations and in local and transnational frameworks by looking at the parallels between state and familial politics. This study has identified colonialism as one of the sources that disrupted the family, as well as changes in gender politics: changes in the understanding of gender roles and responsibilities, and the ‘failure’ of the post-colonial state that resulted in political and socio-economic instabilities such as emigration, refugeeism and diasporic movements. As I have argued in this study, these selected narratives foreground various disruptive and destabilising forces and attempt to create an alternative society that is harmonious, tranquil, and peaceful by re-imagining the institution of the family. In the words of Pollard elsewhere as quoted by Haney and Pollard, these novels seem to suggest that, if the families that make the nation are well-cared for, nurtured and refined, then so too will the nation be all those things (23).

As scholars such as Adesanmi and Dunton, Nwakanma, Bryce, Eze and Ouma in different contexts have argued, these contemporary writers largely represent a new corpus of African women writers whose narratives are fuelled by their childhood experience as victims of the post-colonial state, gender violence and patriarchal control. Thus their protagonists assert agency in the whole process of negotiating power amidst patriarchal and sometimes matriarchal hegemony. Most of the authors make use of child narrators and /or protagonists so as to communicate the flexibility of children who comment on the ‘state’ of the nation because of their ability to access both domestic and public spaces.

While exposing the painful experience of patriarchal hegemony, military coups, civil wars, migration and diasporic identities, these narratives express bitterness about circumstances that render characters victims who are marginalised and separated from their biological families. Unlike their literary ‘grandmothers’ and ‘mothers,’ in the words of Eze, these writers imaginatively embrace feminism without apologies by telling of bodies in pain (“Big ‘F’” 89). In other words, as Hernandez, Dongala, Jolaosha and Serafin opine, they look unblinkingly at the challenges they confront while creating visions of a more promising



future by using writing as their witness to oppression (3). It is in this ‘new’ version of feminism that these writers embrace – what Eze calls ‘third wave global feminism’<sup>121</sup> – which this study considers to be a challenge and modification of Ogunyemi’s black womanism in the post-colonial twenty-first century context. More significantly, their narratives have revisited the motherhood trope, which Ogunyemi identifies as an important departure from Alice Walker’s ‘Womanism’ and Western feminism, by either discouraging it or detaching it from wifehood. For example, Lema’s Sara in *In the Belly of Dar es Salaam* rejects wifehood and the institution of motherhood, but embraces the experience of mothering, and Adeniran’s Lola in *Imagine This* rejects both wifehood and the institution of motherhood. Baingana’s Christine in *Tropical Fish* also rejects wifehood and motherhood and Atta’s Tolani in *Swallow* rejects wifehood but is ready to accept motherhood. Along the same lines, Forna’s characters in *Ancestor Stones*, Asana and Serah, divorce and take care of their own children. In so doing, they disrupt the ‘conventional’ family structure as the father figure is no longer head of the family: rather, unlike Ogunyemi’s idea of compromise in the relationship between men and women, women alone head the institution of family. The father figures, for example, Adeniran’s Samuel in *Imagine This* and Shoneyin’s Baba Segi in *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives* are pushed to the periphery by rendering them irresponsible and impotent respectively.

As victims and agents of the post-colonial state, these narratives, as Eze asserts, ask pertinent ethical questions in the course of freeing the African female body from pain and annihilation (“Big ‘F’” 89, 90). They advocate disruption of moral traditional codes or what Ogunyemi would call ‘genuine’ African cultural and ethical values in circumstances where those traditional moral codes constitute an infringement of their rights to live a decent life like their male counterparts. The suspension of entrenched moral codes ranges from suppression of parental advice in the domestic space to the denunciation of the corrupt state. Whereas Christine, Asana and Tolani in *Tropical Fish*, *Ancestor Stones* and *Swallow*, respectively, suppress the teaching and advice of their mothers in their attempt to create a space for the contemporary generation, Rose in *Swallow* slaps her boss, Salako; Lola in *Imagine This* dismisses everything her grandmother and relatives advise in Idogun, and Sisi, Ama, Efe and Joyce in *On Black Sisters’ Street* resort to prostitution. Dawit and Robel in *Beneath the Lion’s Gaze* represent the highest stage of rebellion and disruption of ‘expected’ moral codes

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<sup>121</sup> Eze reads these contemporary African female writers as third generation. This is why he regards the kind of feminism they invoke in their narratives as ‘third-wave global feminism.’

by staging a fight against the state. Thus, this generation of African female narratives does not only theorise how to create a peaceful and harmonious society, but also seeks to confront the oppressor. Besides, where chance allows, as Forna and Shoneyin's narratives suggest, there should be power negotiation between conflicting parties (men and women, citizen and state, parents and children and husbands and wives) by creating a ground for compromise or what Nnaemeka calls 'Nego-feminism' to sort out controversial issues such as marriage, polygyny, bride price and divorce.

My study in Chapter Two has discussed how the older generation of African female writers – Ogot and Emecheta – configure the family structure and space in traditional and modern settings. In their novels, these writers represent how the roles of the institution of family change over time. Whereas Ogot's novel is ethnographic, in the sense that her female characters subscribe to tradition, Emecheta's attempts to set the stage for change. One of the forces for change in the family is colonialism – and the Second World War. As exemplified by Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, colonialism and WWII made women realise their potential to take care of children even in the absence of fathers. This study reveals that the family space in *The Promised Land* and *The Joys of Motherhood* emerges as a two-edged sword. It is used as a powerful tool for oppressing women through the institution of wifhood and motherhood, and it acts as a space for resistance to such oppression and for the formulation of liberating ideas.

The study, further, in Chapter Three, discusses how contemporary female writers, while leaning on the shoulders of their older generation counterparts in their articulation of feminist ideas, revisit the family space and structure. It deploys Nnaemeka's idea of 'nego-feminism' to explore the extent to which the selected narratives suggest negotiation between women and their patriarchal counterparts in an attempt to create an equal and equitable society. Focusing on Forna's *Ancestor Stones* and Shoneyin's *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*, the study revealed that the changes in family structure and arrangements necessitate gender role negotiation.

The use of child narrator and /or protagonist is another angle on which I have premised my study, and in Chapter Four, I discuss the theme of parental abandonment and children's creation of the third space, the in-between, where they stand to negotiate between the two conflicting sides. In the words of Eagleton in *How to Read Literature*, these child narrators and/ or protagonists provide us with a 'vision of reality' about the development of the post-

colonial nation. Reading Baingana's *Tropical Fish*, Evan's *26a* and Adeniran's *Imagine This* in a migration context and family abandonment contexts, the study reveals that children, being the first victims of family disintegration, play a pro-active role in re-unifying 'different' families. In the words of Turner, these children exist 'betwixt and between' family spaces that are simultaneously familiar and strange, but they also attempt to reconnect the fragmented family bonds or forge new ones.

Further, the study in Chapter Five has examined the representation of the precariousness of the urban spaces that give rise to marginalised voices occurring on the fringes of society, and assessed how they begin to forge affilial relationships that are not based on biological ties, as a way of creating an environment that is hospitable to children, women and men. The depiction of the marginalised group in Lema's *In the Belly of Dar es Salaam*, Atta's *Swallow* and Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, seems to suggest that 'street children,' drug traffickers and prostitutes can be read as a sign of failure of the post-colonial state. This study reveals that the precariousness of the urban spaces provides an opportunity to explore the dynamics of marginalised groups and these voices from the fringes, and the ways in which they negotiate affilial relationships amongst themselves as relegated or displaced characters.

In Chapter Six my study focused on narratives from the war-torn nations of Somalia and Ethiopia in order to explore the interplay between family and nation. The chapter focuses on Mohamed's *Black Mamba Boy*, Abdi's *Offspring of Paradise* and Mengiste's *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*, in relation to how their characters are represented as using the family institution to negotiate peace and reconstruct nations torn by civil wars, drought and military coups. This study reveals that in this context of 'failed' nation or socio-political instability the institution of the family plays a significant role in reforming nations wracked by wars.

My study has suggested more research on the representation of the family in fiction. Since this study focuses on East and West African regions, there is a need to conduct a similar study on other regions such as South Africa, Central Africa or North Africa, to explore the various ways – across the continent – in which the family institution is reconfigured in fictions. More importantly, a comparative study between male and female writers across generations, regions and nations in their depiction of family is suggested. Furthermore, the writers discussed appear to have relied greatly on the institution of family in depicting their themes. Writers craft their narratives in such a way that readers feel touched and identify with the suffering and pain family members in the narratives undergo, for example, the brutal death of Sisi and

of Hana's father in Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and Abdi's *Offspring of Paradise* respectively, and the death of Berhane in Mengiste's *Beneath the Lion's Gaze*. In such circumstances, further research is indicated to explore how these narratives suggest a family-based approach to analysing fictions. They appear to invite readers and critics to read narratives by interrogating characters about their understanding of upbringing and familial orientation, and to investigate the impact of such adaptations on the wider community, the nation.

Since this contemporary generation of African women writers mainly underscores the dynamics of the post-colonial nation, with the aim of reconstructing it to be a better place for both men and women, this study recommends further research on what will be the main agenda of the next generation of writers. As Adesanmi and Dunton have argued elsewhere, this inter-generational study will ensure a systematic understanding of literary trends and currents.

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