

The social affirmation of "woman" in selected texts

by Buchi Emecheta and Alice Walker

by

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Dissertation submitted for the degree Magister Artium in English of the  
Potchefstroomse Universiteit vir Christelike Hoër Onderwys

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May 2001

## Acknowledgements

- I would like to thank my supervisor, Prof. AL Combrink, for helping me with this dissertation from beginning to end. I have no doubt she will be a role model for many young men and women who come after me. She is a mother, motivator, educator and an easy to approach person. I thank her wholeheartedly. The same is also applicable to my assistant supervisor, Dr. Marita Wenzel.
- I would also like to thank Mrs. Moodie, the secretary of the School of Languages and Arts, for her patience when I constantly interrupted her work to make arrangements for me.
- May I also thank Mrs. Thandi McLean. She contributed a lot to my growing interest in this study.
- I would also like to thank Mr. Stoffel Mahlabe. You may wonder why I want to thank you at this level, but suffice it to say that I will always be grateful to you.
- I would like to thank Mrs. Martie van der Merwe for cheerfully typing my work at such short notice every time.
- I would like to thank Mr. Justice Mecwi for his understanding, and for doing typing for me in his spare time.
- I thank my wife and daughter. I am sure that they do not always realize how great an inspiration they are for me.
- And finally I would like to thank my father, brothers and sisters and their families for their support in various ways.

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this dissertation to my late mother, Mrs. Thee Lydia MmaMpho Semenya, who with her own hands literally built a house for her children, and raised them in the manner she did.

Since the morning of 2 January 1998 when I walked into the hospital ward and came to your bedside and you were not there, I have been struggling to accept that you are gone. It is a fact that will take me a very long time to accept – if that should ever happen.

I still thank God for giving you to us as our mother. You are still our mother and will always be. Your memories infuse us and linger with us.

May your soul rest in peace.

## SUMMARY

The study focuses essentially on the social affirmation of “woman” in selected texts by Buchi Emecheta and Alice Walker.

It is pointed out how in traditional African patriarchal societies the relationships between male and female have always been determined by social mores put in place by men.

By the same token, there has been a strong tradition in African literature that has only recently been really challenged that writing of both fiction and non-fiction is a male preserve. Inevitably then, in the writing of male authors, patriarchal assumptions about the role of men and women in society are immutably embedded.

However, some women authors had, in the latter part of the twentieth century begun to challenge this male bastion. Their literature signals a shift to a new reality in African literature and a new emphasis – the emphasis on women presenting “woman” in literature dealing with women of Africa and women of African descent.

Emecheta and Walker share a strong view that the portrayal of women should be rethought and foregrounded. Their literature can therefore be interpreted on one level as a plea for the more accurate and focused portrayal of women as having a rightful place in society. The problems experienced by women are portrayed by both of them with clarity, in accurate detail and with considerable empathy. Apart from dealing with the problems of women in traditional society, they highlight the way in which women’s problems are exacerbated to a serious extent by their being tied to traditional bonds within the context of a Westernized or westernizing society.

To a large extent women in the literature produced by these authors metamorphose into self-sufficient and more independent human beings who refuse to be simple social appendages of men and children. They explore with courage and clarity the extent to which men are stumbling blocks in the development of women. One could therefore

conclude that, in the writing of these black women authors, the status of woman is shifted from being mere object (triplely subjugated) to being independent, self-assertive subject. The female voice is thus privileged and given moral authority (even if at times the price is high).

“RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY!” [the banner] says in huge block letters.

There is a roar as if the world cracked open and I flew inside. I am no more. And satisfied.”

(Tashi Evelyn Johnson Soul, in *Possessing the secret of joy*, by Alice Walker.)

## OPSOMMING

Hierdie studie handel in wese oor die wyse waarop vroue hulleself kan laat geld binne sosiale strukture soos uitgebeeld in sekere werke deur Buchi Emecheta en Alice Walker.

Daar word aangetoon dat in tradisionele patriargale Afrika-samelewings die verhoudinge tussen mans en vroue nog altyd bepaal is deur die sosiale sedes en gewoontes wat deur mans daargestel is.

Terselfdertyd is daar nog altyd 'n sterk tradisie in Afrikaliteratuur wat maar eers onlangs onder die loep gekom het, naamlik die aanname dat die skryf van fiksie en nonfiksie eintlik 'n manlike aangeleentheid is. Dit is dus onafwendbaar dat, in die skryfwerk van manlike skrywers, patriargale aannames oor die rolle van mans en vroue sal hoogty vier.

Dit is egter so dat sommige vroueskrywers in die laaste helfte van die twintigste eeu begin het om hierdie manlike bastion aan te val. Hulle werke dui op 'n skuif na 'n nuwe realiteit in Afrikaliteratuur en daar is 'n nuwe klem op vroue wat "die vrou" weergee in letterkundige werke wat handel oor Afrikavroue en vroue wat afstam van Afrika.

Emecheta en Walker is albei sterk oortuig daarvan dat die uitbeelding van vroue moet herdink word en op die voorgrond geplaas word. Hulle werke kan dus op een vlak geïnterpreteer word as 'n pleidooi vir meer akkurate en gefokusde uitbeeldinge van vroue en hulle regmatige plek in die samelewing. Die probleme wat vroue ervaar word deur albei uitgebeeld met duidelikheid en detail en met groot deernis en empatie. Afgesien daarvan dat hulle die probleem van vroue in tradisionele samelewings in die kalklig plaas, gee hulle ook aandag aan die wyses waarop vroue se probleme vererger word deurdat hulle gebonde bly aan tradisionele maniere van doen selfs binne die raamwerk van verwesterse omstandighede.

Tot 'n groot mate ondergaan die vroue wat deur hierdie skrywers uitgebeeld word 'n metamorfose, en verander in sterker en meer onafhanklike mense wat weier om slegs aanhangsels van mans en kinders te wees. Hulle is dapper en uitgesproke oor die mate waartoe hulle aandui dat hulle mans beskou as hindernisse in die ontwikkeling van vroue se potensiaal. Mens kan daarom tot die gevolgtrekking kom dat, in die werke van hierdie skrywers, die status van die vroue verskuif van blote objek-wees (driedubbel onderdruk) tot die status van onafhanklike, sterk en assertiewe subjek-wees. Die vrou se stem word dus bevoordeel en verkry morele krag (selfs al is die prys soms baie hoog).

“RESISTANCE IS THE SECRET OF JOY!” [the banner] says in huge block letters.

There is a roar as if the world cracked open and I flew inside. I am no more. And satisfied.”

(Tashi Evelyn Johnson Soul, in *Possessing the secret of joy*, by Alice Walker.)

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## **PREFACE**

### **1 CONTEXTUALISATION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT**

It has long been a tradition in African literature that writing both fiction and non-fiction is a male preserve. Inevitably therefore this has bred a phenomenon whereby male writers are mainly writing and espousing, consciously or unconsciously, the cause of patriarchy. As Stratton (1994:129) states:

Male writers have for long championed the stereotype of the docile traditional African woman who passively surrenders to the dictates of her man. In the nuclear family, male domination is enacted either by the actual presence of a man, husband or father, or in a larger sense, by the notion of male sexual and economic domination which defines all women as ultimately dependent.

And Morris (1993:19) takes it even further by claiming that:

The misrepresentation of women by men is one of the traditional means by which men have justified their subordination of women. A negative identity, as "what men are not" allows men to read any quality into the feminine. They project onto the image of "woman" their dreams and fears.

In a rebuttal of this view, Eagleton (1986:1) states that for many feminist critics, there was the desire to rediscover the lost work of women writers while also providing a context that would be supportive of contemporary women writers. Aware that critical attention concentrated mostly on male writers, these critics demanded recognition for women authors. The main aim, however, has not been simply to fit women into the male-dominated tradition; they also wanted to write the history of a tradition among women themselves.

It has to be conceded, however, that some male writers, like Ngugi, have begun to champion the rights of women. This has been unusual, but is significant enough to warrant exploration. In his examination of two male-authored texts, his own novel

*Devil on the cross* and Achebe's *Anthills of the savannah*, Ngugi states that in each novel an attempt is made to transform the status of women from that of object to that of subject. He points out that the novels signal an important new departure in contemporary African literature: male writers' engagement with female writers in a dialogue on gender. (This issue is explored in detail in the 1996 study by MJ Cloete on women and transformation: *Women in selected novels by Bessie Head and Ngugi wa Thiong'o*).

Substantial championing of the rights of women within the ambit of fiction, however, has increasingly been taken over by women writers themselves. Their avowed aim is to present the position of "woman" from a woman's perspective. This will emerge below.

Stratton (1994:66) indicates that in their fiction, female writers privilege the female voice and give it moral authority. At the same time they indicate how this voice had been suppressed by patriarchal conventions governing relations between men and women. She further states that in their works, the normative male subject is significantly displaced and replaced by the female subject.

Mc Dowell (1995:36), agrees as he states:

Imaging the black woman as a "whole" character or "self" has been a consistent preoccupation of black female novelists throughout much of their literary history.

Two of the most eloquent of these female writers casting off the shackles have been Buchi Emecheta and Alice Walker. The fact that these two women writers have appeared on either side of the Atlantic - Emecheta, a British immigrant from Nigeria; and Walker, an African American - does tend to give this study more universal application, as it suggests that the problem has not only been confined to the African continent but has been prevalent in a wider context. It will emerge that, as in the case of most Black women writers, their literature derives from their keen awareness of the iniquities of male chauvinism as it emerges from representations of women in literature

created by males, and the literature that they have produced is informed very strongly by a desire to challenge and balance these inequalities.

Women's literature is increasingly aimed at challenging the conventional images of women. In their works, women writers show the deficiencies in male literature with regard to the position of women in society. Their literature embodies the liberating ideal of potentiality and a better future for women.

In shifting towards the representation of a strong female protagonist, Emecheta and Walker gather up the cause of generations of brutalised women, demanding that the readers reconstruct history.

What women's fiction reveals is a world future where men betray women and where women have no material power to fight back. However strong their moral power, they are nonetheless subject to male control in the physical world. When women become invalids in domestic fiction, it is most often not from natural weakness but the result of men's behaviour and a system that leaves no other practical alternatives (Herndl, 1993:46).

What has been seen as distinguishing both Emecheta and Walker in their roles as apologists for black women, is their representation of the evolutionary treatment of black women; that is, their perception of the experiences of black women as a series of movements from women totally victimised by society and by the men in their lives to the development of women whose consciousness allows them to have more control over their lives (Gates & Appiah, 1993:39).

Both women's fiction gives an account of physically and psychologically abused women and women torn by contrary instincts, culminating in the new black women who re-create themselves out of the sturdy and indomitable legacy of their maternal ancestors. The exploration of the "process of personal and social growth out of horror and waste is a motif that characterises Walker's works" (Christian, 1980:50).

Emecheta and Walker give their female characters what women have been denied in literature written by and from the male perspective - a strong sense of victory over the forces that oppress them. Their female characters grow as they progress from positions of vulnerability to positions of relative strength (Day, 1993:IX).

A persistent characteristic found in both Emecheta and Walker is their use of a black woman as the protagonist and that character's insistence on challenging convention, on being herself. Inherent in the fiction of both is a black feminine bent, variously manifested in their depiction of dilemmas caused by conflicting ideologies about women; in their prescription of a course of action for women that is antithetical to accepted masculine views (Howard, 1993:69).

From this introductory reflection arise the following questions:

- ◆ How is patriarchy, with its concomitantly compromised portrayal of women, challenged by specific female authors?
- ◆ How do female characters metamorphose and evolve in the novels under discussion?
- ◆ How do they counterbalance the male characters represented in these novels?

## **2 THE AIMS OF THE STUDY**

The aims of the study would be, following a reading of the novels of the two women writers and the critical material based on them, to attempt to:

- ◆ show how the female characters in the selected novels challenge the construction of womanhood, marriage, prostitution, lesbianism and genital mutilation in a patriarchal context;
- ◆ trace the metamorphosis of women from being passive victims to self-assertive and (more) complete human beings in the novels under discussion;

- ◆ trace the way in which male characters, as complementary fictional characters, evolve in the novels under discussion.

### **3 CENTRAL THEORETICAL STATEMENT**

The theoretical approach in this study is, within a post-colonial context, a feminist-oriented reading of the oppressive practices of patriarchy and "Otherness". In many societies, women, like colonised subjects, have been relegated to the position of the "Other", colonised by various forms of the patriarchal domination. They thus share with colonised races and cultures an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression. It is not surprising therefore that the history and concerns of feminist theory have paralleled developments in post-colonial theory. Feminist theory and post-colonial discourses both seek to reinstate the marginalized in the face of the dominant, and early feminist theory, like early nationalist post-colonial criticism, was concerned with inverting the structures of domination (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1995:1). This is succinctly expressed in the following terms:

Difference between the First World (centre/self) and the Third (Other) is absolutised as an Otherness (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, 1995:80).

This shows the power relations between the centre and the periphery; the coloniser and the colonised. This is the same as the patriarchal view of male as the centre, self, or subject, and female as the periphery, the Other, the Subaltern, the subhuman.

### **4 METHODS**

The main methodological thrust of the study will be a critical survey of both the primary and secondary sources, based on the notions of patriarchy, feminism, motherhood, with analysis, interpretation, comparison and evaluation in terms of the ways in which Emecheta and Walker deal with these issues.

## 5 CHAPTER OUTLINE

Preface and introduction: Background and contextualization.

### **CHAPTER 1: THE AFRICAN SOCIAL AND LITERARY CONTEXT**

- Patriarchy, society and women
- Patriarchy and literature
- Patriarchy and colonial discourse
- Patriarchy and male African literature
- Male writers bending to the feminist cause

### 2 **BUCHI EMECHETA AND ALICE WALKER: BACKGROUND AND CONTEXTUALIZATION**

- Buchi Emecheta: background
- An overview of Emecheta's novels
- Alice Walker: background
- An overview of Walker's novels

### 3 **WOMEN AND PATRIARCHY**

- Subscribing to the stereotype
- Challenging the stereotype
- Post-colonial literature
- **Feminism**
- Post-colonial and feminist discourse

### 4 **“WOMAN” IN WOMEN’S NOVELS: SUBJECTIFYING THE “OTHER”**

- “Woman”: A victim
- “Woman”: Assertive and complete human being

### 5 **THE EVOLUTION OF MAN IN WOMEN’S NOVELS**

- Man: The oppressor
- The Reconstructed/reborn man

**6 A CONCLUDING SYNTHESIS OF THE VIEWS OF EMECHETA AND WALKER ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY; RECOMMENDATIONS.**

**6 LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE MANUSCRIPT**

SCC:	Second class citizen
PSJ:	Possessing the secret of joy
TJM:	The joys of motherhood
TSG:	The slave girl
TRS:	The rape of Shavi
K:	Kehinde
DB:	Destination Biafra
TBP:	The bride price
TTLGC:	The third life of Grange Copeland
TCP:	The color purple

## 1.1 Patriarchy, society and women

Morris (1993:155) states that the word *patriarchy* is used to refer to the actual power structure built around men's domination of women.

It is a commonplace in writing about African literature that in a traditional patriarchal society relationships between male and female have always been determined by men. And since societal stereotypes have always allowed men to assume without question the superior position, women have always been and are still oppressed and subjugated. Female rights amount to the right of the woman to have children, raise them and make herself available to her husband in whatever context this should be necessary. Patriarchal societies perceive a woman as a man's possession (and this often literal enslavement finds an echo in the more recently expressed view of woman's triple subjugation<sup>1</sup> within society as described in the post-colonial context). The idea that a woman who does not find total fulfilment in submitting herself utterly to the will of a husband and the demands of child-bearing is somehow going against the natural order of things is still the dominant view and perception in such societies.

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<sup>1</sup> Gayatri Spivak, in speaking of the double subjugation of woman within this context, has even made the somewhat contentious statement that "there is no space from where the subaltern (sexed) subject can speak" (1985:122). This is echoed in the classical expression by Ashcroft *et al.* (1995:249) to the effect that "in many societies, women, like colonized subjects, have been relegated to the position of 'Other', 'colonized' by various forms of patriarchal domination. They thus share with colonized races and cultures an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression".

Figs (1970:17) shows the unfairness of patriarchal perception of woman, particularly the fact that the image of woman is formulated not by women themselves but by men:

- The image of woman in patriarchy is presented to women in the mirror by men, and women were taught to dance to this image. What strikes one about this image is that it was created by men, not by men and women jointly for common ends, not by women for themselves, but by men, and this can be seen to be the real difficulty; the fact that the mirror, hence the image, is distorted. Men's vision is not objective, but an easy combination of what he *wishes* her to be, and what he *fears* her to be. And it is with this mirror image that women have had to comply.

This is further strengthened by the view of Jones (1989:6) to the effect that:

There is the figure of the 'sweet mother', the all-accepting creature of fecundity and self-sacrifice. This figure is often conflated with Mother Africa, with eternal and abstract Beauty and with inspiration, artistic or otherwise.

The expectations of traditional societies such as these have thus been pretty overpowering for a woman to be an all-accepting mother. The African woman's place was believed to be at home, in preparation for the stereotyped role she has had to play in society. The role pertains mostly to marriage and child-bearing, but this marginalisation of women by society is prevalent in all spheres of life, and would seem to be still the guiding factor in African societies.

African stories, both written and oral, still draw parallels between the roles of women and of men. While the boys' stories stress courage, the specific ones related by women to girls emphasise obedience and respect. Traditional education assumed that a woman's place was in the home, girls were thus prepared for domestic work.

It is still a practice nowadays, as had been the case long ago, that African tradition does not allow a girl to choose a husband. A husband is traditionally chosen for the

girl by her relatives in collaboration with the relatives of her prospective husband in a deal that resembles trading in livestock. The girl is not allowed to decline<sup>2</sup>. Under marriage she must be docile, submissive and subordinate. She must also be fertile, as her main role is perceived to be the bearing of children to ensure the continuity of her husband's lineage, hence the immense importance placed on male children.

Religion is one of the areas in patriarchal societies where women are marginalised.

As Figes puts it:

Religion is not only a way in which the male projects a vision of the world as he wish to be and expresses his attitude with regard to himself in relation to others and the universe at large, a voice he uses in order to lay down a moral law. Religion is itself a male cult, and like initiation ceremonies, is specifically designed to exclude women and give the male a compensatory activity for the female one of child-bearing (1970:50).

Perceptions about the origin of sin have to a larger extent helped embed the patriarchal course in the collective memory of especially members of traditional societies. Within the Judaic tradition, and hence also variations of the Christian tradition, Eve was made responsible for man's mortality and fall from grace. This interpretation of the origin of undesirable things was to prove very useful for a long time to come, and it served a double purpose. Firstly, it allowed man to assert his domination much more forcibly and could go on punishing woman for what she was supposed to have done, thus justifying his domination, and secondly, it allowed him to

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<sup>2</sup> " ... [when] *Aku-nna* in *The bride price* [by Emecheta] dies in childbirth having defied her family in marrying Chike, the *osu* (descended from slaves) man of her choice, she is quite unaware that her death will be understood by her community as reinforcing the 'superstition' she had 'unknowingly set out to eradicate': the belief that unless a girl accepts the husband her family choose; and unless the bride price is paid, she will not live to enjoy children" (Daymond, 1988:64).

externalise all flaws and weaknesses in himself and make woman the embodiment of them, leaving himself strong and intact and morally superior (Figes, 1970:42).

In his book on patriarchal attitudes towards women, Figes (1970:63) quotes Springer in a somewhat ironic fashion to the effect that there is no lack of causes to explain the link between woman and powers of darkness:

She is feebler in mind and body and naturally more impressionable, and more ready to receive the influence of a disembodied spirit. Women are also more liable to waver from true religion, have weak memories, and it is a natural vice in them not to be disciplined, but to follow own impulses without any sense of what is due. The female of the species is also a liar by nature, vindictive, malicious, quick to seek revenge when scorned or abandoned by a male, and is incapable of keeping a secret, once she has found it out by evil arts. In short, without the wickedness of women ... the world would still remain proof against innumerable dangers. Unfortunately for males not on their guard, the creature has the sweet voice of the siren, luring men to their doom, and all her thoughts are turned to the art of pleasing men (1970:63).

This invidious view is, while wholly one-sided and completely dependent on stereotyping, a dangerously easy one to espouse, and often and easily embraced as an inescapable "truth" constructing the societal fabric. It is a clear indication of how men and patriarchal societies perceive women to be. Springer goes on to say that:

The core of women's natural viciousness lies in her insatiable lust, and it is her dreadful and perpetual appetite that allows her to copulate with the Devil. The natural reason is that she is more carnal than man, as is clear from her many carnal abominations (1970:63).

Against this kind of background, the education of a girl in patriarchal societies has always amounted to acquiring only that which is needed to serve the man. Figes captures this quite tellingly:

A woman's education must therefore be planned in relation to men. To be pleasing in his sight, to win his respect and love, to train him in childhood, to tend him in manhood, to counsel and console, to make his life pleasant and happy, these are the duties of woman of all time, and this is what she should be taught while she is young (1970:31).

The views expressed above might seem to be somewhat extreme, perhaps, but they do encapsulate much of the thinking underlying views of women in especially traditional African societies (as will emerge from the analysis of some of the works by Emecheta and Walker in the course of the study).

In a more moderate but no less scathing way, Mason (1993:138-9) maintains that the old patriarchal culture's hegemony is maintained by enshrouding women's experience in silence so that it becomes both unrepresented and unrepresentable within sanctioned cultural fictions. Victory is uneasy and demands external vigilance unless peace with the enemy is made. Mason further says that because man has refused to abandon an inch of ground more than strictly necessary (having, of course, so much to lose of what has been accepted unquestioningly as a male preserve), he has been afraid of the dormant power he has subdued, and recognised woman as profoundly dangerous.<sup>3</sup> Woman as a source of danger, as a repository of externalised evil, is an image that runs through patriarchal history. Daymond also traces the way in which silence is imposed on women within these societies, and in an analysis of Emecheta's novels demonstrates that while silence is imposed, woman can choose to make of silence a mode of resistance – with reference to the changes that gradually occurred

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<sup>3</sup> There is an irony attached to the old view of woman as being dangerous, in the sense that the danger, while intuitively felt, has been inappropriately interpreted - in this context the poem by Roy Campbell, "The Zulu Girl", strikes a chord. The lines, which have traditionally been read as an indictment of colonial oppression and a warning to the oppressor to beware could equally, in the framework of postcolonial feminist theory, be interpreted far more generally.

from *The bride price* through *The slave girl* to *The joys of motherhood*, she maintains that:

Thus the sequence culminates in the creation of a woman with the capacity to respond to a new world, to reconceptualise herself in it and to express her judgment on it. This means that the silence with which all three novels end changes from being that of uncomprehending defeat to that of chosen refusal (1988:65).

In these societies, of necessity man's ideas on femininity all spring from the staunchly held tenet that woman is inferior to man, and her role in life is to stay at home, be passive in relation to man, bear and raise children. Since the dominant group in a society generally has its values adopted by the majority, masculine values have become the society's most rewarded values, and it is easy for both men and women to assume that masculine values- and therefore men - are superior to traditionally feminine values - and therefore women (Mason, 1993:139).

The process of learning to use language takes place so early in our social development and is indeed the basis for social development, that the values seem to us to be "naturally" inherent in the things we name. To be a woman can seem "naturally" to involve being gentle and nurturing, in other words, being "feminine". To be a man normally involves some sense of being strong and active, of being "masculine" (Morris, 1993:8). From the summary to Daymond's article (1988:64) one deduces that

As women must speak or write from within in andocentric language, the possibilities for loosening the hold of concepts imposed by and expressed in that language are important to feminists.<sup>4</sup> Emecheta's novels show that the

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<sup>4</sup> Emecheta's views are important here: In an interview with Itala Vivan, quoted by Daymond (1988:72-73), she maintains that "In a society where there is no social security, and where

dominance of language may be subverted by the shared laughter of women or by their chosen silence.

Virginia Woolf, in *A room of one's own*, has commented on the contradictory position of women in history – a role in which woman is simultaneously charged with symbolic significance and materially deprived:

Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips: in real life she could hardly read, could hardly spell and was the property of her husband (Penguin ed.:37-38).

Something of this contradictory role emerges from depiction by Walker and Emecheta of the female characters still firmly caught within the traditional societies – in most instances, as will be demonstrated more fully later, these women characters quietly assume a role and a function that will provide them with means and some independence, for example in the way in which they are responsible for raising income by trading (see especially *The joys of motherhood*).

## 1.2 Patriarchy and male African literature

Writers mirror society – they are, as Hamlet pointed out in the play by the same name, “the abstract and brief chronicles of the time” (Act II, Scene ii). Their literature reflects the goings-on of society, and at one level (seen from the angle of the view that literature does have an “educative” function) it either entrenches invidious societal

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every boy or girl must belong to someone or something, there is no place for feminism, for individualism or for independence. Therefore I say that those of us in Africa, if we are feminist, must be ultrafeminist, because our job is so much harder”.

practices or stands against such practices. The literature written by authors subscribing to the mores of patriarchal societies advocates traditional stereotypes of the power relations between men and women. This is literature that uncritically glorifies man and puts him on a pedestal, while woman has a subjugated existence and no real or essential voice. Metcalf (1989:16) gives poignant voice to this fact:

In *The joys of motherhood* Buchi Emecheta demonstrates that in the traditional Nigerian society even the most fortunate little girl has no role and no future as herself. She can gain status only as an appendage of some man and as a means of increasing the community's stock of males.

Parker and Starkey (1995:21) are even more uncompromising about this when they maintain that

Whereas postcolonial writers have seen their principal targets as being paternalistic colonial discourses and have created dialogic narratives to subvert monologic imperialism, there has been a tendency among male writers to ignore the continued enslavement of women within indigenous, essentially patriarchal cultures, as Ngugi's fiction demonstrates.

Kenyon (1994:336), by way of carefully-nuanced extenuation, states that black male writers represent the predicament of men with compassionate complexity. Despite cultural diversity, they portray mothers as long-suffering victims, devoted to religion and family. He further says that such images have prevented black men from seeing the individuality of their womenfolk, till women themselves began writing, publicly challenging stereotypes in order to re-envision their lives, their potential, their language. This is captured very well in the words of Jones (1989:46):

Today, women writers are increasingly aware of their sisters' inequality in society and have started to write about it. Emecheta straightforwardly reveals her views of womanhood and traditional society, which are much less idyllic than in the works of many male writers before her; *The joys of motherhood*

leaves no doubt about that. She is one of the best-known anglophone writers in Africa.

The African novel was for a long time remarkable for the absence of the female point of view. The presentation of woman in the African novel was left almost entirely to male voices, and their interest in African womanhood has had to take second place to various other concerns. These male writers have presented African womanhood within the traditional context. They generally communicated a picture of a male-dominated and male-oriented society. The interests and the satisfaction of women in their texts have almost always been cursory, taken for granted and firmly embedded in current social practice.

### **1.3 Patriarchy and colonial discourse**

Patriarchal and colonial discourses are similar in the sense that they are about the marginalisation of people: patriarchal discourse puts man as the “centre”, the “self”, whereas woman is the “periphery”, the “object”, the “other”, that which man is not; colonial discourse puts the colonialist as the centre, the subject, the self whereas, the colonised is the “periphery”, the “object”, the “other”.

This view is extended interestingly with reference to responses to *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad. Andersen et al. (1999:116) make the cogent remark that

A central debate amongst critics of *Heart of Darkness* concerns the ways in which Africa and Africans are represented in the novella. This debate is rooted in the understanding that representations affect the world. The ways in which writers choose to represent peoples and places have a direct impact on how those peoples and places are perceived and such perceptions give rise to actions, often in complex and indirect ways. In order to make itself acceptable, colonialism has to conceive of the colonized people ... and the

colonizers in particular ways. Through these representations, the practices of colonization were (and are) made tolerable and their life prolonged.

In the framework of this remark, it is interesting to explore one particular relationship between patriarchy and colonial discourse by looking at some of the provocative and often contested ideas of the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe. Achebe (1978:1) says that it is quite simply a desire of Western psychology to set Africa up as a foil to Europe, as a place of negations at once remote and vaguely familiar, in comparison with which Europe's own state of spiritual grace will be manifest. It is similarly simply the desire on the part of males in patriarchal societies to regard or set women up as a foil to man.

Achebe is further discomfited by the rate at which some works that glorify Europe and demonise Africa are appreciated in Europe. He expresses a particular reservation about the fact that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is read and taught and constantly evaluated by serious academics. This is a novel that presents the image of Africa as "the other world", the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilisation, a place where "man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally marked by triumphant bestiality" (1978:2). Conrad says of Africa and the Africans whom he encountered in his travels in Africa:

We were wanderers on prehistoric earth, on an earth that had the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and excessive toil. But suddenly, as we struggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage. The steamer toiled along slowly on the edge of the bleak and incomprehensible frenzy. The prehistoric man was cursing and praying to us, welcoming us – who could tell? We were cut off from the comprehension of our surroundings; we glided past like phantoms, wondering and secretly

appalled, as some men would be before an enthusiastic outbreak in a madhouse (Conrad, 1973:68).

A rather obvious similarity is drawn between the way Africa and the savages are seen in the eyes of Conrad and the way women are seen in the eyes of men within a patriarchal society – women are simply, by natural law, as it were, sub-human and submissive to men, and in no way can equality be attributed to them concerning any but the most basic aspects of human life.

In both patriarchal and colonial discourses there are times when the hard attitude is somehow related, but only as far as it can benefit the superior class or group. Towards the end of the story, Conrad lavishes a whole page quite unexpectedly on an African who has been some kind of mistress to Mr. Kurtz:

She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent. She stood looking at us without a stir, and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over and inscrutable purpose (1973:101).

Achebe maintains that this woman is drawn in considerable detail not because she is important to Conrad as a person, but for two reasons: in the first place, she is in her place and so can win Conrad's special brand of approval; and secondly, she fulfils a structural requirement of the story: a savage counterpart of the refined European woman who will step forth at the end of the story. The most significant difference is the one implied in the author's bestowal of human expression on the one and the withholding it from the other (1988:5-6).

In patriarchal societies there is an element of acceptance of femininity, hence women, for as long as it does not affect a man's "standing" in society, and as long as it does not "spoil" a woman. A woman is good and beautiful provided she is happy in her

womanliness. In this way, she can always be seen as weaker than a man, thus fulfilling a structural requirement of societal norms.

Within the discursive framework and paradigm of colonisation, the colonised had no language and hence no power. It is clearly not part of Conrad's purposes, for example, to confer language on the "rudimentary souls" of Africa. Instead of speech they resort to a "... violent babble of uncouth sounds". There are two occasions, however, when Conrad departs to some extent from his practice and does confer speech, even English speech, on the savages. The first occurs when the practice of cannibalism suddenly comes to the fore:

"Catch 'im – catch 'im, give 'im to us. Eat 'im!"

Thus the only time that Conrad gives speech to savages it happens to drive home his fairly invidious point, which is to "prove" that savages can only catch and eat people (1978:6). To this Achebe has his most untempered response:

The point of my observations should be quite clear by now, namely that Conrad was a bloody racist.<sup>5</sup> That this simple truth is glossed over in criticisms of his work is due to the fact that white racism against Africa is such a normal way of thinking that its manifestations go completely undetected (1978:7).

The same attitude of embedded condescension occurs when male (African) writers deal with the writings of women. Women are only supposed to be able to write if they confine themselves to womanly issues, especially centring on the home. One

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<sup>5</sup> The debate on Conrad as a racist is explored in careful detail in an article by Paul Armstrong (1996:21-41). In this article he balances the views of Achebe and Clifford, an apologist for Conrad by stating that: "Chinua Achebe's well-known, controversial claim that the depiction

tends to find the same sense of the subjugator and the subjugated (as has been outlined in terms of Europe and Africa) when dealing with the relationship between men and women in the African context. Achebe states that a British governor of Rhodesia in the 1950s defined the partnership between blacks and whites in his territory, apparently without any sense of irony, as the partnership between a horse and its rider!<sup>6</sup>

According to Achebe (1978:15), in confronting the black man, the white man had a choice – a simple one: either to accept the black man’s humanity and the equality that would flow from it, or to reject it and see him as a beast of burden. No middle course is considered to exist. He also states that for centuries Europe had chosen the bestial alternative that automatically ruled out the possibility of a dialogue – a situation somewhat like somebody talking to his horse but not waiting for or indeed ever expecting a reply.<sup>7</sup>

Because of the myths created by the white man to dehumanise the negro by “keeping him in his place”, myths which have imparted psychological and indeed economic comfort to Europe, the white man has been talking and talking and not listening

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of the peoples of the Congo in *Heart of Darkness* is racist and xenophobic stands in striking contrast to James Clifford’s praise of Conrad as an exemplary anthropologist” (1996:21).

<sup>6</sup> This is a view that is in line with the statement by Achebe about Albert Schweitzer: “In a comment which I have often quoted but must quote one last time, Schweitzer says: ‘The African is indeed my brother but my junior brother’. And so he proceeded to build a hospital appropriate to the needs of junior brothers with standards of hygiene reminiscent of medical practice in the days before the germ theory of disease came into being”.

<sup>7</sup> Zhuwarara (1994:26) makes the rather scathing remark that “what seems to have interested and fascinated Conrad, however, is not so much the fate of the non-white as a victim of imperialism but rather, what became of the character and fate of the so-called superior race the moment it left the shores of a supposedly civilized western world and came up face to face with the dark people of an alien culture and environment”.

because of the perceived situation of talking to a dumb beast. Patriarchy can be seen as having chosen a concomitant approach when it comes to the relationship between man and woman – there is also the sense of an unequal partnership, similar to the one between man and beast, based on the unequal power relations obtaining between the sexes. This has effectively ruled out the chance of a meaningful and constructive dialogue developing and being sustained. Stuck in their comfort zone, men have been talking and talking and never listening because of the embedded perception that women are dumb and incapable of constructive discursive engagement.

Frank (1982:476) states that

for the most part, the world of African fiction has been a masculine domain in which women are conspicuous mainly by their absence.

The main feature noticeable in the African male literary tradition has been located in the strategies of containment to which men writers have resorted in their attempt to legitimise patriarchal ideology. These include the embodiment of Africa in the figure of a woman, one of the most enabling tropes of post-colonial male domination as well as colonialism the portrayal of woman as passive and voiceless, images that serve to rationalise and therefore to perpetuate inequality between the sexes; and the romanticisation and idealisation of motherhood, a means of masking women's subordination in society.

Gender is a submerged category in colonial discourse, a status it has maintained until recently in African men's literature. While African male writers challenge the racial codes of colonial discourse and attempt to subvert them, they adopt certain aspects of

the gender coding of their supposed adversaries in their presentation of African women (Stratton, 1994:171).

The common struggle against racism unites men and women writers. The writers of both sexes attempt to transcend the racial allegory. But even here there are differences in representational strategies. For the colonised woman is doubly oppressed, enmeshed in the structures of an indigenous patriarchy and of a foreign masculinist colonialism. Thus women writers interrogate the sexual as well as the racial colonial discourse (Stratton, 1994:173).

The African anti-colonial struggle has always assigned different roles to men and women - the allocation to men of the task of mending the breach in the historical continuum and to the woman of embodying African cultural values; the objectification of women; their identification with tradition and with biological roles; the representation of female sexuality as dangerous and destructive. These strategies of containment, the unconscious from the perspective of gender of the male literary tradition, are as characteristic a feature of that tradition as are strategies of intervention or subversive manoeuvres that mainly define its relation to colonial discourse.

#### **1.4 Male writers bending to the feminist course**

Some male writers have attempted to transcend the sexual allegory and hence to resolve the problems of gender. Bruner comments in the following terms about these male writers:

Some African male writers, certainly, have described women in their fiction with understanding and empathy. These insights have made an important and an accessible contribution to Western understanding of contemporary African life. Women writers in Africa have been fewer in number, have published later, and generally have received less critical attention and acclaim than their male counterparts (1983:viii).

But despite their evident concern for gender reform, these male writers still tend to find it difficult to depict women as being equal to men, and in no way as a subordinate in some way or the other. Patriarchal thought patterns, it seems, are deeply, perhaps ineradicably, entrenched. It appears, upon closer scrutiny, that from the perspective of gender there is considerable continuity between these more recent novels and Ngugi and Achebe's earlier work, and, more generally, within the whole of the male (African) tradition of novel-writing.

In his novel *Petals of blood*, Ngugi presents Wanja, a female character who epitomises Ngugi's departure from the male writer's initial biases against women. The novel allows for a transformation and transcendence in its optimistic ending. Going back to Ilmorog and reuniting with her grandmother, Wanja is in search of a new beginning. As she works in the fields with her grandmother, Nyakingua, the indomitable woman whom the community hails as the mother of men, Wanja becomes an embodiment of the nation's African heritage, an emblem not only of communalism but also of active resistance to exploitation and oppression. Again, through her union with the one-limbed Abdullah, the latter regains his manhood. This is made possible by a woman and the mere fact of this achievement by a woman is in stark contrast to the negative image imposed on women by certain dominant strains of literature written in the post-colonial male context.

Ngugi's portrayal of Wariinga, in both her original and her transformed character, can be seen to operate in the interest of preserving patriarchal values and relations, the very relations that confirm Wanja's status as sexual object, "a mere flower in the lives of men" (Stratton, 1994:160).

Ngugi also casts a new light on prostitution. The circumstances that force Wanja to resort to prostitution are such that it becomes understandable why sometimes some women end up resorting to such a practice; also, she becomes prosperous, living in a mansion, and becomes independent until men, insanely jealous of her, burn her house.

Both Ngugi and Achebe have made statements of authorial intention with regard to the role of their central female characters, statements that indicate a commitment to gender reform. Ngugi opens *Detained*, his prison diary, by hailing Wariinga as his inspiration:

Wariinga, heroine of toil ... there she walks haughtily carrying her freedom in her hands (p. 3).

Later, he tells of two decisions he made regarding her characterisation:

Because the women are the most exploited and oppressed section of the entire working class, I would create a picture of a strong determined woman with a will to resist and to struggle against the conditions of her present being (p. 10).

In an interview he gave shortly after the publication of *Anthills of the savannah*, Achebe also takes up the theme of women's oppression. His heroine, Beatrice, he suggests, provides a model of womanhood in the role she performs as the harbinger of a new social order:

We have created all kinds of myths to support the suppression of the woman, and what the group around Beatrice is saying is that the time has now come to put an end to that ... The position of Beatrice as sensitive leader of that group is indicative of what I see as necessary in the translation to the kind of society which I think we should be aiming to create (Rutherford, quoted in Stratton, 1994:158-159).

*Devil on the cross* and *Anthills of the savannah* both hark back to earlier novels by their respective authors, the intertextuality in each case indicating a desire to correct or revise earlier images of women. Wariinga's life runs parallel to Wanja's – up to a point. Both hail from Ilmorog. Both go to Nairobi as schoolgirls and suffer blows to their dreams of academic success. Like Wanja, Wariinga is seduced by a wealthy businessman, a friend of the family who denies responsibility for the inevitable ensuing pregnancy. Both have difficulty finding work and both are tempted to resort to prostitution. The similarities end there, however, for while Wanja succumbs to the temptation, Wariinga does not. Eventually she becomes a revolutionary leader. *Devil on the cross* is a female Bildungsroman, in this case one written by a male author, representing a significant forward move. It tells the story of Wariinga's development as she passes from girlhood to adulthood and recognises her true identity and role in the world (Stratton, 1994:159).

In this way Ngugi elevates Wariinga's position and that of other women as a matter of course. As a result of her enlightenment, Wariinga undergoes a dramatic transformation:

Today's Wariinga has decided that she'll never again allow herself to be a mere flower, whose purpose is to decorate the doors and windows and tables of other people's lives, waiting to be thrown on a rubbish heap the moment the splendour of her body withers. The Wariinga of today has decided to be self-reliant all the time, to plunge into the middle of the arena of life's struggles in order to discover her real strength and to realise her true humanity (Ngugi, 1982:216).

Ngugi has thus effected a fairly dramatic shift, and clearly does not any longer want women to be mere decorative objects to be cast away when the flush of beauty fades away. He clearly now sees women as more complete human beings – the elevation of Wariinga is thus a triumphant elevation of all African women within the confines of the novel.

It has been indicated in this chapter that some African male writers have tentatively and diffidently begun to make inroads into the championing of female causes and the rights of women. However, championing the rights of women has increasingly been claimed by and become the secure domain of women writers themselves. Their clear and avowed aim is to present the position of “woman” from a woman’s perspective and from that position and perspective to agitate for change and acceptance.

The main aim of the present chapter has been to create a context for the consideration of precisely this championing of the rights and the rightful place of women within oppressive social and political contexts. In order to do this, the works of two prominent female authors from either side of the Atlantic will be examined and the main aim of the following chapter is therefore to look at the background and works of two such champions of women’s causes, Alice Walker and Buchi Emecheta, to indicate what the main thrust of their work is within the framework of the notion of social affirmation when faced with the invidious and well-entrenched values to the contrary as still clearly emanate from their works and from supporting source material.

## CHAPTER 2: BUCHI EMECHETA AND ALICE WALKER: BACKGROUND AND BRIEF THEMATIC OVERVIEW OF THEIR WORKS

In this chapter a brief biographical overview will be provided of each of the authors chosen for study. The intention with this is to locate them securely within their own societal frameworks in order, ultimately, to provide a background for the comparison of the two authors and their works.

### 2.1 Buchi Emecheta: Background

Buchi Emecheta is an Ibo from Nigeria and her novels reflect aspects of Ibo culture. She was born in 1944. She married at sixteen and immediately produced babies. Her husband soon sailed to England to further his studies there. She persuaded her in-laws to let her join him as she had a librarian's qualification, a passport to a steady job. She joined him at the age of nineteen. England was not very welcoming to them. Her response to the grayness, poverty and racism that they underwent is vividly depicted in *Second class citizen* (1974).

She is one of the most prolific novelists of the Black immigrant community in Britain. She was alienated from her mother tongue by colonialism, and cut off from many other Ibo women by Britain's class-ridden society. Her childhood experience of injustice and life in racist societies in formative adolescent years considerably

affected her works. In addition to these shaping experiences there are her impressions of and meditations on living in exile.

## **2.2 A brief thematic overview of Emecheta's novels**

Women writers record and interpret the changes they and their world are undergoing in contemporary Africa. The profound upheaval effected in women's lives by these changes is the peculiar territory of the gifted and prolific African woman novelist Buchi Emecheta. A brief overview of her important novels will be provided here.

In *Second class citizen* (1974) Emecheta presents to the readers a woman outsider who comes to England only to find that life there is not as glorious as she had thought. Despite a violent husband and poverty, she manages to bring up five children without losing sight of her dreams. She battles on, driven by pride, ambition and the determination to maintain her independence.

Emecheta's protagonist-self Adah is thrown out by Nigerian landlords. She encounters naked racism when trying to find accommodation as no one is prepared to accommodate people of colour. The novel centres on Emecheta's unquestioning acceptance that caring for her children is the essential part of her life, even while working and studying to improve her prospects. *Second class citizen* is largely an autobiographical account of her life: from orphaned childhood to success in school, followed by an unhappy marriage, five pregnancies and a cold and bleak existence in a London tenement. Through the struggle of her central character Adah we see how Emecheta began writing in a flat in North London, battling to find time to write within

the framework of her hectic life as a University student, British Museum Librarian and single parent of five small children.

The novel delineates the second-class citizenship of Adah in two parts: first as a black person in a predominantly white world, then as a woman in a male-controlled world (Ogunyemi, 1983:65).

*The bride price* (1976) explores the enslavement of women by traditional society and its rules and taboos. It provides a striking contrast to the celebration of traditional life among male African writers. In the novel women are portrayed solely as marketable commodities. When her father dies, Akunna's mother is inherited by her brother-in-law and so they move from Lagos to Ibuza to live with him. When women are not inherited or sold, they become stolen goods. This is Nkunna's fate when she is kidnapped by Okoboshi. It is against this forcible possession and exploitation of women that the poignant but doomed love story of Akunna and Chike unfolds.

*The slave girl* (1977) is a study of the oppression of women by men. The slave masters, the tyrannical oppressors in the novel, are all men, and it is this vision of male oppression along with the literal condition of slavery in the novel which makes it the most overtly critical of Emecheta's books and in many respects the best one to provide the angle by which to approach her other works. In the novel, Ogbanje Opebeta enjoys the special care and love of an only daughter. Then, on the death of her parents, her greedy brother sells her to a rich relative and she must learn to live the life of a slave. Ojebeta clings to her sense of identity, determined to be free one day.

In *The joys of motherhood* (1979) Emecheta strives to sensitise readers to the exploitation of mothers. With increased mastery of structure and irony she describes the humiliations and small joys of a poor, unappreciated Ibo mother. Emecheta analyses the state of mind of women valued for their biology rather than their individuality. She chooses a ballad-type story, fusing African and European forms.

In Lagos Nnu Ego, the chief character, must adapt to contemporary values and at the same time carry out the traditional custom of producing many offspring. Despite their suffering due to the poverty that results from the husband being unemployed, the virtue attached to a woman is linked to the ability to conceive, which would also ironically provide her with the only real comfort she can expect - the comfort that the sons will support her in her old age. It is motherhood, not sexual intercourse as expression of marital love, that constitutes the foundation for marriage.

The bitter irony of her situation is very poignantly emphasised in the ending. After working herself into the ground and giving her all to her children she dies alone on the side of the road with no one to hold her hand - the successful children only return to give her a magnificent funeral – both to soothe their own consciences and to make a statement to the world about their own material success.

*Destination Biafra* (1982) takes on board the appalling suffering of her Ibo people in the late 1960s. Her heroine, Debbie, is what Emecheta hopes the new African woman will be. She is the symbol of the new Nigerian woman. Emecheta realises the importance of creating and persuasively presenting a new image to which they, and their menfolk, may adapt. Debbie is bright and well-educated. Although partially

symbolic, the character of Debbie is well-drawn and skilfully used to impart the suffering of the Ibo women and children.

As can be seen from the above, Emecheta's preoccupation is very strongly with the suffering of women. She expresses a very keen awareness of the iniquities associated with the female experience, and does so with vividness and compassion. Her own personal experience underlies what she is writing about, providing a strong autobiographical quality to the writing.

### **2.3 Alice Walker: Background**

Alice Walker was born in Eatonton, Georgia, in 1944, the last of eight daughters of Willie Lee and Minnie Lou Grant (Gates & Appiah, 1993:ix). Though her father cared a great deal about her, for a long time she felt so shut off from him that they were unable to speak to each other. It is to her mother that she pays particular tribute in her works, particularly in *The color purple*. Her parents were sharecroppers, with everybody being roped in to pick cotton during the harvesting season. The uncertainties of this kind of life added the tension of always living on the edge to the other tensions inherent in her life (Gates & Appiah, 1993:349-350).

Alice was her mother's child. She saw her mother as an example of how one could create art out of pain. Minnie Lou's art manifested itself not only in quilting and in the flower garden she planted, but in the stories that she and Alice's aunts told and in their indomitable sense of self and the determined independence and assurance with which they approached life.

She started school at four when her mother could no longer take her to the fields. Blinded in one eye at the age of eight by a careless shot from a brother's gun, Walker felt her pretty, vivacious childhood self withdraw and disappear behind a scar that loomed larger in her imagination than it did in actuality. Feeling ugly and outcast, the isolated girl became the suicidal young woman who searched unsuccessfully for literary models that would link her words to those of women who had preceded her. She felt for a time estranged, but this estrangement had the effect of catapulting her into the role of observer, giving her the ability to see better and deeper.

Graduating from high school in 1961, a valedictorian of her class and the recipient of a rehabilitation scholarship from the State of Georgia, Alice entered Spellman College in Atlanta and two years later, Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York.

Pushed to the brink of suicide during her senior year at a white women's college by an unwanted pregnancy, she chose survival. She acknowledges that her earliest published novels were her means of celebrating her survival in the world.

Alice Walker became one of the younger path-breaking Black women novelists to come to prominence in the 1980s.

Despite her negative experience of racist domination through sharecropping or by wage labour, she also gives voice to neighbourly kindness and sustaining love through her work. Sustaining care came from her mother who had married for love, running away from home to marry at seventeen. By the time she was twenty she had two children and was pregnant with a third.

Much of Walker's own pain ended at age twenty-seven when she rediscovered, with the help of her young daughter, the beautiful young free self she thought she had lost forever. This her daughter Rebecca did when she saw in her mother's scar not an ugly mark to be ashamed of but instead saw a "world". This taught Walker to realise how much life is a matter of perspective.

Walker's works represent her celebration of black women who had the wherewithal to discover inside themselves from which to draw strength, and thus survived whole, as Walker herself has done. Her overwhelming concern is with the survival of this kind and magnitude of a people. Her women achieve psychological wholeness when they are able to fight oppression, whether its source is white racism, their own black men, or their own self-righteous anger.

Survival whole means in part choosing which self to celebrate. Part of the celebration of the self in Walker's work is her characters' acknowledgement that there is something of the divine in everyone and everything in the universe.

#### **2.4 A thematic overview of Walker's works**

##### ***Possessing the secret of joy***

This novel is about the "telling" of suffering and the breaking of taboo. Its subject is ritual clitoridectomy and the subsequent genital mutilation of young women. Tashi, a black African woman who spent most of her adult life in the United States, had made peripheral appearances in Walker's previous novels *The color purple* and *The temple of my familiar*, but she occupies centre stage in this one. She has indeed survived

suffering and humiliation. The novel returns to African material and characters and addresses the issue of female circumcision boldly and with great compassion and understanding of the cultural predicament a “liberated” woman finds herself in when living in Africa.

Because her mother was influenced by black American missionaries, Tashi herself is not circumcised at puberty. As a young girl, however, she does hear the scream of her older sister, Dura, who dies bloodily in a botched initiation in the tribal village. When she comes to fully realise that Dura bled to death because of her circumcision, Tashi begins to formulate a goal centring on her own escape from her living hell.

Adam, the African-American missionary’s son, appears not to harbour the Puritan layers of guilt typical of missionaries then. Their marriage is therefore destined to become a union of their complementary spirit and yearnings for togetherness. But then Tashi wavers. As Adam’s future wife, in America she attempts to retain as much of her African culture as possible. She now realises that she wants to be circumcised, an operation which, she feels, will join her to her sisters - sisters whom she now envisions as strong, complete women and completely African.

The title of the novel derives from Mirellia Ricciardi, identified by Walker as a “white colonial author”, whose book, *Africa saga*, was published in 1992. Mirellia Ricciardi proclaims that “Black people possess the secret of joy”, and further that this is why they could survive the suffering and circumstances inflicted upon them. Walker uses these words ironically in this novel. Towards the end of the novel Tashi, Walker’s protagonist, demands to know what this secret of joy is that Mirellia talks about (*New York Times Book Review*, 1992, June 28).

What Walker believes is that the situation for African women, particularly with reference to genital mutilation, should not be hopeless. Like Tashi, Walker maintains that if women wait for men to act, they may have to wait forever. The novel ends with Tashi's final costly liberation and her discovery that "resistance is the secret of joy". So Walker shifts Merillia's "secret of joy" towards a joyful acceptance of this resistance to suffering and humiliation inflicted upon African women.

Walker counters Ricciardi's colonial view of Africa and Africans that is founded on false assumptions, viz. that Africans are all-accepting, timid and inferior (hence their endurance of the suffering inflicted on them) by avowing that the secret of joy of Black people is not endurance but precisely the capacity to resist, and it is in the growing desire and ability to resist that the strength of women, Walker intimates, ultimately resides.

### *The color purple*

In this novel, an analysis is made of the emotions of women to give them meaning, fulfilling a social along with a personal need. In an interview (Wilson, 1993:324) Walker once stated how the story of Celie is the story of her step-grandmother and other women like her.

I wanted to memorialize women like my step-grandmother, Rachel, I wanted to liberate that person. She was so battered down that her real personality died with her. She had to call my grandfather "Mr.". She came to seven children, her own two babies already dead. She came to fields to dig, she came to smallpox, whooping cough, she came to death. And my grandfather merely called her Woman.

Walker shows courage in not avoiding the topic of male brutality. Celie's father repeatedly rapes her, impregnates her and takes her children away from her. Albert abuses Celie and later turns to Nettie, Celie's little sister. It is the suffering of these women that Walker is passionately concerned about. But perhaps more important it is their survival that she puts under the spotlight. The clubbing together of women in the novel represents the new sense of solidarity that gives women the support they so much need in overcoming the divisiveness created by male power.

### *The third life of Grange Copeland*

Walker's first novel represents the lives, loves and suffering of two generations of black women, downtrodden and humiliated by their husbands. It is only the third generation that begins to taste liberation and ironically only through the murder of an irredeemable father.

Herndl (1993:3) has this to say about *The third life of Grange Copeland*:

The depletion of love and the erosion of the sources of affection are the themes of Walker's novel, a powerful story about three generations of a black family in rural Georgia. This novel has heroes and villains. The villains are those who have a genius for hate, but no capacity for love. The heroes acquire the ability to care deeply for another human being.

This novel illustrates once again the brutality of male characters that is so characteristically present in the literature written by these and other female authors who are passionately involved in a crusade for change. The American social structure, built as it is on racism and immovable patriarchal convictions, turns the Copeland men into beasts. These black men, brutalised and humiliated in the reigning unequal power relation with the white landowner, import into their relationships with

women the same unequal power structure, thus maintaining an invidious social reality. They take their frustration out, not on the social system or the people who exercise its power, but on their black women who, as they do in the master-servant relation, remain loyal and submissive.

Margaret, Grange's wife, is one of those black women who are submissive and loyal because they have such limited control over their lives - dependent on their husbands, these women lose respect for themselves and their husbands.

Grange seeks solace to escape from his problems by drinking himself into a stupor, then leaves his wife during weekends to be with his lover, Josie the prostitute. Frustration drives Margaret into the hands of the white master, Shipley, with whom she bears a coloured child. As Walker puts it, "from its odd coloration its father might have been any one of its mother's many lovers" (*TTLGC*:19).

Grange finally takes off, unable to make his way through the maze he has created for himself. When Grange has been gone three weeks, Margaret knows he is really gone and unable to imagine a life without him, she poisons herself and her coloured baby.

Grange's wife, Margaret, finds her solution to despair in suicide. Ironically, perhaps, she kills herself because she loves Grange so much that she cannot live without him and cannot forgive herself the sin of infidelity. Grange's son, Brownfield, treats his wife, Mem, in the same way as his father treated his wife. Mem goes on living with Brownfield in what Walker terms "a harmony of despair" (*TTLGC*:59) until she strikes back.

Grange's ill treatment of his wife and his absence from home drive Margaret to suicide. On the other hand, Brownfield and Mem become transients, moving from one sharecropper's cabin to another until Brownfield is left feeling that he has no control over his own life and therefore must assume no responsibility. While Margaret is abused because she has no power, Mem is rather the target of Brownfield's abuse because of her power, not her lack of it. The source of her power is her education that Brownfield does not have. Hating Mem for being strong Brownfield shoots her in the face one day when she comes home from work (while she is the sole breadwinner of their family).

In the final chapter Grange shoots and kills Brownfield rather than let him have custody of Ruth. Grange, in turn, is shot for his crime.

In this chapter, it has emerged from the thematic overview of the novels of Walker and Emecheta selected for this study that their literature derives, in both instances, from their own lived experience. Raised in a hard-working family of sharecroppers, Walker grew up watching the hardships her family had to endure – more particularly the hardships visited upon her mother. It is for this reason that Walker dedicates her writing, especially *The color purple*, to women like her mother.

Emecheta's stories are strongly autobiographical. She gives an account of events as they unfolded in her own life: accounts of the Ibo society of Nigeria and her life as a foreigner in London, and then fictionalizes these accounts.

As a result of their experiences vis-à-vis the oppression of women in their communities, Walker and Emecheta mainly concern themselves with imagining ways

in which to correct the societal dysfunction that they perceive. There is an attempt to denounce the practices of patriarchal society and to create a larger space and a stronger voice for women with which to live and speak.

It is for this reason that Chapter 3 will contain a consideration of the position of women in patriarchal institutions, the extent to which women themselves subscribe to the practices prevalent in such institutions and also how they challenge such stereotypes.

## CHAPTER 3: WOMEN AND PATRIARCHY

Bruner (1993:viii) points out that women's fiction which is both emotionally compelling and artistically excellent does exist. Gradually today some African women are succeeding in finding publishers and an interested public. Thus they are succeeding, if they so choose, to become agents for social change through literature. Some do transmit, record and so perpetuate folk materials, but when they choose which tale to relate, what details to repeat, what proverbial sayings to embroider on, they are creative artists indeed. These women portray their own African backgrounds and their own female experiences in their fiction, and thus they show the life of African women in intimate and arresting detail. In so doing, these writers have had to stand out both as individuals and artists.

These women writers do not all necessarily desire change, as is evident in their literature and the way in which they subscribe to the reigning stereotypes (as will be seen in 3.1 below). But some women writers, like Walker and Emecheta, are very vocal in their challenging of the patriarchal conventions (as will be seen in 3.2 below).

### **3.1 Subscribing to the stereotype**

Male dominance can only work with the connivance of the women of a society, and taboos must have their psychological effect on everyone in order to work; but the fact that women themselves should perpetuate the cult of the womanly woman to this extent is surely proof, not only of the powerful influence of (men), but of the conformist tendencies which exist at an intellectual as well as a social level: reasoning is shaped by our attitudes, and not vice versa (Figs, 1970:150).

In *Invalid women*, Herndl points out that the figure of the invalid in women's literature reveals the contradictory attitudes that even those women writers hold toward the possibilities of women's power that they offer. They reveal the difficulties of maintaining an ideology of women's strength and importance in a culture that increasingly encouraged invalidism (1993:97).

Bruner says about women writers and their perpetuation of the patriarchal stereotypes:

They do not present one common view – quite the contrary. They do not unite under a feminist banner. They do not all necessarily desire change; some also defend traditional securities. Often they show their female protagonists as torn, confused, in a milieu of cross-cultural conflict (1993:viii)

This is very true of the work of the two novelists in question. With regard to Emecheta, it is well summarised by Taiwo (1984:102) who maintains that:

Miss Emecheta supports the feminist movement because of her belief in the individuality of everybody, man or woman. All citizens must be able to act in freedom and dignity. No sex should attempt to dominate the other. Women should be free to discuss every available topic under the sun – exploitation and oppression, sex, class and race. There should be no attempt to gag them just as they should not attempt to dominate menfolk. She does not consider marriage compulsory for women; it should be only one of the options open to them. Women writers should help to establish a female tradition, but should always avoid a narrow and short-sighted feminism.

Both Emecheta and Walker not only point out the injustice and the stereotyped treatment women get from men and their children, but they also show how women themselves help in perpetuating their own oppression. This is achingly represented in *The slave girl* by Emecheta, for when Ojebeta flees from slavery to return to her village, she finds that she must once again flee, this time to Lagos, in order to marry Jacob rather than the illiterate farmer Adim, who is favoured by her uncle. "Her story ends when Jacob repays the price which Ma Palagada had originally given for Ojebeta

when she was sold into slavery. Ojebeta kneels in simple gratitude to her husband, saying: “*Thank you, my new owner. Now I am free in your house. I could not wish for a better master*” (quoted in Daymond, 1988:64 – my italics).

In her appeal to God to create a woman who would be fulfilled in herself, a human being, Nnu Ego (in *The Joys of Motherhood*) states:

But who made the law that we should not invest hope in our daughter?  
We women subscribe to the law more than anyone. Until we change all  
this, it is still a man’s world, which women will always help to build (186-  
187).

Another example of women accepting and thus furthering their own oppression is seen in a court case that involves Nnaife. After attempting to murder the butcher, Nnaife is arrested. He blames it on Nnu Ego for bearing him girls, one of whom has been responsible for them taking him to jail. And when it is time for Nnu Ego to take the witness stand, she echoes what is typical of a woman who has not only assimilated the values of a man’s world, but who helps the process of her own effacement and humiliation, as she puts it in court:

Nnaife is the head of our family. He owns me, just like God in the sky  
owns us. So even though I pay the fees, yet he owns me. So in other  
words he pays (*TJM*:216-7).

Again, when her daughter questions the privileges boys enjoy over girls, particularly in relation to education, Nnu Ego has this to say to them:

But you girls! They are boys. You have to see to put them in a good  
position in life, so that they will be able to look after the family. When  
your husbands are nasty, they will defend you (*TJM*:176).

It is clear from the above statements that right from an early age, girls are prepared for nothing but to be owned by their husbands, while boys are groomed for a good life and to be owners of women.

Nnu Ego's first husband, Amatokwu, blames her for not falling pregnant and Nnu Ego takes the blame:

I am sure the fault is on my side. You do everything right. How can I face my father and tell him that I have failed? (*TJM*:31).

Soon he takes a second wife who becomes pregnant the first month. The husband makes this cruel statement:

I have no time to waste my precious seed on a woman who is infertile. I will do my duty by you. I will come to your hut when my wife starts nursing her child. But now, if you can't produce sons at least you can help harvest yams (*TJM*:33).

Nnu Ego's reaction to her pregnancy is:

He has made me into a real woman. All I want to be, a woman and a mother.

Even Adaku, the rebellious and stronger of Nnaife's two wives, upholds the preference of boys over girls. When she loses a baby boy she goes into a deep depression. As Mnu Ego's son, Oshia, tries to console her by saying that she still has her daughter Dumbi, Adaku snaps back:

You are worth more than ten Dumbis (*TJM*:128),

and, heartbroken, cries out to God:

Oh God, why did you not take one of the girls and leave me with my male child? (128)

M'Lissa, the village tsunga (in *Possessing the secret of joy*) - the woman who performs circumcision on other women - has this to say to Tashi when the latter asks her why women are expected to undergo clitoridectomy and genital mutilation:

The uncircumcised woman is loose like a shoe that all, no matter what their size, might wear. A proper woman must be cut and sewn to fit only her husband, whose pleasure depends on her opening. It might take months, even years, to enlarge. Men love to enjoy the struggle (1992:207-208).

What surprises Tashi more is that this is said and done by a woman who perpetrates these abominations on women. It is a woman advocating the importance of the pleasure the men enjoy and should get, and who does not say anything about the woman, about the pleasure she might have, or the suffering.

Howard (1993:79) emphasises that the act is made even more horrible because it is visited upon women by other women - their mothers, the collaborators, the midwife, the instrument - all in the name of preserving a culture that has already denied them meaningful and independent life.

In *The slave girl*, Ojebeta in her own way is content and does not want more in life; she is happy with her husband, happy to be submissive, even to accept an occasional beating, because that is what she has been brought up to believe a wife should expect. Just before she is killed she says, in a speech reminiscent of the slave woman's expression: "Thank you, my new owner. Now I am free in your house. I could not wish for a better master" (Stratton, 1996:105).

Ma Palagada is a wealthy market woman and Ojebeta's relative and new owner. She is an agent of patriarchy, a custodian of the values of her male-dominated society.

Having acquired great wealth by serving the patriarchal institutions of slavery and colonialism, she has become so influential that even her husband takes her name. But rather than use her power for liberate herself and others of her sex, she employs it to further entrench female enslavement (Stratton, 1996:104).

Adah, in *Second class citizen* is a girl who arrives when everyone has been expecting a boy, so since she is a disappointment to her parents, to her immediate family, to her tribe, nobody thinks of recording her birth, as she is simply too insignificant. Now, at the age of eight, she is sorry for her parents. But she thinks that it was their fault; they knew it and they should not have had her in the first place, which would have saved a lot of people a lot of pain and suffering.

When Adah's son Vicky is sick in hospital and the nurse asks her whether Vicky is her only child, Adah's answer is that she is only a girl. Again, after Tashi's birth, and after a long and painful ordeal, Adah has to come to her husband, Francis, bearing a girl. Everybody looks at her sarcastically for she has had the audacity to keep everybody waiting for nine months and four sleepless nights, only to tell them she has had nothing but a girl. It could simply be seen as a good nine months wasted.

At the end of the novel Adah has rid herself of many self-denigrating dominator attitudes, has began a promising career as a librarian, has become the mother of five children, and has achieved economic independence together with the promise of psychological self-sufficiency. Though she has supported the family from the beginning as a child of both Ibo and Western masculinity-driven systems, she has at least subconsciously clung to the notion that a complete woman is a married woman with children, even wishing at one point that she could just be a housewife.

The problematic situation of mothers in Africa is presented by Nettie, Celie's sister, in her letters from Africa. The village women press her to marry, yet they look worn down by unending hours of home and field labour. Their motherhood roles may be sanctioned by patriarchal words, yet it does not endow them with any real quality of life or even consideration from a husband (Massa & Stead, 1994:350-1).

### 3.2 Challenging the stereotype

Ezenwa-Ohaeto (1996:349) says that:

Survival as a fundamental issue in human interactions involves protest and affirmation. The individual's motivation to survive often protests against all forms of subjugation and oppression and in the process there is an affirmation for self-fulfilment and self-actualization. Although all individuals in one aspect of life or the other are confronted with the need to survive, it is often in the affairs of disadvantaged peoples – especially women in societies with numerous social restrictions – that survival becomes a primary objective.

In her paper "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak states that

the oppressed, if given the chance (the problem of representation cannot be bypassed here), and on the way to solidarity through alliance politics can speak and know their auditions" (quoted in Ashcroft *et al.* 1995:25).

This is similar to the situation of women. Having been doubly and at times triply oppressed (as foreign, as women, and as black) women are able to keep their heads above water, and if given a chance to write, like Buchi Emecheta and Alice Walker, they do speak through their literature to highlight the plight of women.

### 3.3 Notions of post-colonialism

According to Ashcroft *et al.* (1989:1) the term post-colonial is used to cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonisation to the present day. It is further contended that this is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression. It is also most appropriate as the term for the new cross-cultural criticism that has emerged in recent years and for the discourse through which it is constituted. In this sense, Ashcroft *et al.* argue (1989:22), post-colonial literature is concerned with the world as it exists during and after the period of European imperial domination and the effects of this on contemporary literatures. So the literatures of the African third world countries can properly be termed post-colonial literature if one considers them within the framework of their respective positions vis-à-vis the centre, that is, the metropolitan British literature.

According to Martin Gray (1992:227) post-colonial literature can be defined as:

The very varied literatures of the many countries whose political existence has been shaped by the experience of colonialism are seen by some critics to share basic characteristics, especially in relation to the language of the colonial power, and the cultural and literary associations attached to that language. According to scholars of post-coloniality, the literature of post-colonial nations commonly starts by developing distinctive variant forms of the language of the colonial power. In the case of English, clearly there are many distinct and vigorous versions of the language operating in different parts of the world, some critics mark the English as used in English from the englishes used elsewhere by the use of the lower case initial letter.

Ashcroft *et al.* further maintain, with regard to the notion of post-colonial literature:

“Post-colonial” seems to be the choice which both embraces the historical reality and the focuses on that relationship which has provided the most important creative and psychological impetus in writing. Although it does not

specify that the discourse is limited to work in English, it does indicate the rationale of the grouping in a common past and hints at the vision of a more liberated and positive future. In practical terms, the description we adopt – “post-colonial” – is less restrictive than “Commonwealth”, it shares with “new literatures in English” the ability to include, for example, the English literature of the Philippines or of the United States as well as that of the “pakeha” (white) or Maori writing in New Zealand, or that of both Blacks and Whites in South Africa. However, the term “post-colonial literatures” is finally to be preferred over the others because it points the way forward towards a possible study of the effects of colonialism in and between writing in English and writing in indigenous languages in such contexts as Africa and India, as well as writing in other language diasporas (French, Spanish, Portuguese) (1989:23-4).

It can be argued that the study of English and the growth of English proceeded from a single ideological climate and that development of the one is intrinsically bound up with the development of the other, both at the level of simple utility (as propaganda, for instance) and at the unconscious level, where it leads to the neutralising of constructed values (e.g. civilisation, humanity, etc.) which conversely established “savagery”, “native”, “primitive” as their antithesis and as the object of a reforming zeal (either through the missionary enterprise or the more blatantly economic and materialist enterprise disguised as trading). A “privileging norm” was enthroned at the heart of the formation of English studies as a template for the denial of the value of the “peripheral”, the “marginal”, the “uncanonised”. Literature was made as central to the cultural enterprise of the Empire as the monarchy was to its political formation. So when the elements of the periphery and margin threatened the exclusive claims of the centre they were rapidly incorporated. This was a process, in Edward Said’s terms, of conscious affiliation proceeding under the guise of filiation (Said, 1984:12), that is, a mimicry of the centre proceeding from a desire not only to be accepted but to be adopted and absorbed. It caused those from the periphery to

immerse themselves in the imported culture, denying their origins in an attempt to become “more English than the English” (Ashcroft *et al.*, 1989:3-4).

Post-colonial literatures developed through several stages that can be seen to correspond to stages both of national and regional consciousness and of the project of asserting difference from the imperial centre. During the imperial period writing in the language of the imperial centre is inevitably produced by a literate elite whose primary identification is with the colonising power. Such texts can never form the basis for an indigenous culture, nor can they be integrated in any way with the culture that already exists in the countries invaded. Despite their detailed reportage of landscape, custom and language, they inevitably privilege the centre. Their claim to objectivity simply serves to hide the imperial discourse within which they are created.

The second stage of production within the evolving discourse of the post-colonial is the literature produced “under imperial licence” by natives. The producers signify by the very fact of writing in the language of the dominant culture that they have temporarily or permanently entered a specific and privileged class endowed with the language, education and leisure necessary to produce such works. It is characteristic of those early post-colonial texts that the potential for subversion in their themes cannot be fully realised. Although they deal with such powerful material as the brutality of the current system, the historical potency of the supplanted and denigrated native cultures, they are prevented from fully exploring their anti-imperial potential. Both the available discourse and the material conditions of the production of literature in these early post-colonial societies restrain this possibility.

The institution of “literature” in the colony is under the direct control of the imperial ruling class who alone can licence the acceptable form and permit the publication and distribution of the resulting work. So, texts of this kind came into being within the constraints of a discourse and the institutional practice of a patronage system that limits and undercuts their assertion of a different perspective. The development of a independent literatures depended upon the abrogation of this constraining power and the appropriation of language and writing for new and distinctive usages. Such an appropriation is clearly the most significant feature in the emergence of modern post-colonial literatures (1989:4-6).

Ashcroft *et al.* (1989:6) pose a further interesting question: why should post-colonial societies continue to engage with the imperial experience? Since all the post-colonial societies have achieved political independence, why is the issue of coloniality still relevant at all? This question, as to why the empire needs to write back to the centre once the imperial structure has been dismantled in political terms is an important one.

One of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language. The imperial education installs a “standard” version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalises all variants as impurities. Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated and the medium through which conceptions of “truth”, “order” and “reality” become established. Such power is rejected in the emergence of an effective post-colonial voice. For this reason, the discussion of post-colonial writing is largely a discussion of the process by which the language, with its power, and the writing, with its signification of authority, has been wrested from the dominant European culture (1989:7).

In practice the history of the chasm between English and english has been the history of the rival claims of a powerful “centre” and multitude of intersecting usages designated as “peripheries”. The language of these “peripheries” was shaped through the insistent effect of an oppressive discourse of power.

Ashcroft *et al.* (1989:12) have this to say about the imperial expansion and imperial oppression:

Imperial expansion was underpinned in complex ways by the examination of the outward and dominating thrust of Europeans into the world beyond Europe. This produced practices of cultural subservience. Paradoxically, however, imperial expansion has had a radically destabilising effect on its own pre-occupations and power. In pushing the colonial world to the margins of experience the “centre” pushed consciousness beyond the point at which monocentrism in all spheres of thought could be accepted without question. In other words, the alienating process which initially served to relegate the post-colonial world to the “margins” turned upon itself and acted to push that world through a kind of mental barrier into a position from which all experience could be viewed as uncentred, pluralistic, and multifarious. Marginality thus became an unprecedented source of creative energy.

The development of national literatures and criticism is fundamental to the whole enterprise of post-colonial studies. Without such developments at the national level, and without the comparative studies between national traditions to which these lead, no discourse of the post-colonial could have emerged. The study of national traditions is the first and most vital stage of the process of rejecting the claims of the centre to exclusivity.

Ashcroft *et al.* provide the following perspective on post-colonial discourse and dominated literatures:

A characteristic of dominated literatures is an inevitable tendency towards subversion, and a study of the subversive strategies employed by post-colonial

writers would reveal both the configurations of domination and the imaginative and creative responses to this condition. Directly or indirectly, in Salman Rushdie's phrase, the "Empire writes back" to the "imperial centre", not only through nationalist assertions, proclaiming itself central and self-determining, but even more radically by questioning the bases of European and British metaphysics, challenging the world-view that can polarize centre and periphery in the first place. In this way, concepts of polarity, of "governor and governed", ruler and ruled, are challenged as an essential way of ordering reality. Writers such as Chinua Achebe [and] VS Naipaul have all rewritten particular works from the English "canon" with a view to restructuring European "realities" in post-colonial terms, not simply by reversing the hierarchical order, but by interrogating the philosophical assumptions on which that order was based (1989:33).

The conditions of the post-colonial experience encouraged the dismantling of notions of essence and authenticity somewhat earlier than the recent expressions of the same perceptions in contemporary European post-structuralist theory. This privileging of the "margins" in post-colonial writing produces a particular practical orientation to questions of theory. In the literature of the periphery the task seems to be to establish that the texts can be shown to constitute a literature separate from the metropolitan centre.

### **3.4 Post-colonial and feminist discourses**

Both post-colonial and feminist discourses are similar in the sense that they are concerned with the marginalisation of people. Spivak states:

Women in many societies have been relegated to the position of "other", marginalized and, in a metaphorical sense, "colonized", forced to pursue guerrilla warfare against imperial diminution from positions deeply imperial. They share with colonised races and peoples an intimate experience of the politics of oppression and repression, and like them they have been forced to articulate their experiences in the language of their oppressions. Women, like post-colonial people, have constructed a language of their own when their only available "tools" are those of the "colonizer" (1987:174-5).

Ashcroft *et al.* (1995:249) further say this about the similarities between post-colonialist and feminist discourses:

In many different societies women, like colonized subjects, have been relegated to the position of “Other”, by various forms of patriarchal domination. They thus share with colonized races and cultures an intimate experience of the politics of oppression. It is not surprising therefore that the history and concerns of feminist theory have paralleled developments in post-colonial theory. Feminist and post-colonial discourses seek to reinstate the marginalized in the face of the dominant

....

Apart from the largeness in scope, Emecheta’s account of African womanhood is an unapologetically feminist one. She exposes and repudiates the feminine stereotypes of male writers, and reveals the dark underside of their fictional celebration of the African woman. She explores the psychological and physical toll on women of such things as arranged marriages, polygamy and childbirth, and widowhood. The female figures hovering in the wings and background or burdened with symbolic cargo in male-authored African fiction are brought centre-stage by Emecheta. Bazin (1985:99-100) makes an interesting observation about what might be called Emecheta’s “hand-on” approach” in comparing her to Bessie Head in this regard:

Whereas Buchi Emecheta’s focus is upon *personal experiences* and social customs in a patriarchal African culture, Bessie Head’s concern is with the spiritual or philosophical significance of patriarchal behaviour (my emphasis).

Kenyon (1994:64) says that both Emecheta and Walker rethink stereotypes about mothers, but in intriguingly different ways. These differences stem partly from their upbringing: Walker was born in Georgia to devoted sharecroppers; Emecheta, an Ibo, was orphaned young, brought up by relatives, virtually a servant in their house because she was merely a girl. Her marriage relegated her to poverty and ostracism, experiences that shaped her early writing. Walker admired her mother, adopting her

“*parole*” (idiolectal speech patterns) for Celie in *The color purple*, while Emecheta seldom includes parental speech rhythms, except for using them in her autobiography, *Head above water* (1986) (cf. also Kenyon, 1994:64). Equally politicised, both pay tribute to their cultures, particularly the creativity of the hard-working, story-telling women.

Emecheta does not only explore the negative impact of traditional culture and the imposition of colonialism on women, but she also shows how women have reacted to and fought oppression, sometimes succeeding, and sometimes failing. What is most important to Emecheta is that women be given the prominent position they deserve in African fiction and that women’s experience in the society be given a realistic portrayal. By doing this herself, Emecheta has brought out strongly the woman’s perspective as never before in the history of the African novel (Eziegbo, 1996:22-23).

Kehinde’s decision to educate herself, to reaffirm her sexuality, and to keep the house also permit her to escape the confining image of the long-suffering wife. She does not want to be a victim, but rather a rebellious survivor (Berrian, 1996:180).

### **3.5 Feminism**

Feminism as a central approach in western literary criticism is a phenomenon of the sixties and onwards of the previous century and can be directly related to the Women’s Liberation Movement. Some of the pioneers in this regard were Kate Millett (*Sexual/Textual politics*, 1970), Germaine Greer (*The female eunuch*, 1971)

and Elaine Showalter (*A literature of their own: British women novelists from Brontë to Lessing*, 1991). Showalter has been one of the most influential writers of the women's movement, and she provides an interesting insight into the various developmental phases of this movement in stating that the work of women authors could be broadly divided into three phases, viz. the "feminine", "feminist" and "female":

During the feminine phase dating from about 1840 to 1880, women wrote in an effort to equal the intellectual achievements of the male culture, and internalised its assumptions and female nature. The distinguishing sign of this period is the male pseudonym, introduced in England in the 1840s and a national characteristic of English writers. The feminist content or feminine art is typically oblique, displaced, ironic and subversive. In the feminist phase, from about 1880-1920, or the winning of the vote, women were historically enabled to reject the accommodating posture of femininity and to use literature to dramatise the ordeals of wronged womanhood (1991:270).

She now advocates what she calls "gynocriticism", in which the concerns of the woman as writer are central. She expressed the reservation in 1991 that

The Women's Liberation Movement has not yet had the impact on English women writers that it has had in the United States and in France. Strongly socialist, the English movement has rejected the idea of hierarchy, and therefore there have been no charismatic feminist leaders, as there were for the suffragettes (1991:313).

The USA is considered to have had strong, zealous and intellectual women writers like Erica Jong, Susan Sonntag and Marge Piercy, to name just a few, and they would seem to have more success in flying the flag for women writers. Showalter further highlights the issue when she states that

In trying to deal with recognition of an ongoing struggle for personal and artistic autonomy, contemporary women writers have reasserted their continuity with the women of the past, through essays and criticism as well as through fiction. They use all the resources of the modern novel (1991:302).

Pam Morris' definition of feminism goes along with this way of thinking, as she maintains that it is a political perception based on two fundamental premises: first that gender difference is the foundation of a structural inequality between women and men, by which women suffer systematic social injustice, and secondly, that the inequality between the sexes is not the result of biological necessity but is produced by the cultural construction of gender differences. This perception provides feminism with its double agenda; firstly to understand the social and psychic mechanisms that construct and perpetuate gender inequality and then to change them. Further, feminist understanding starts from a clear definition of the terms "female" and "male" to denote biological categories of sex. Women have suffered a long tradition of what is generally called "biological essentialism", that is, the belief that a woman's "nature" is an inevitable consequence of her reproductive role. What is natural or essential cannot be changed in the way that social attributes of character can, hence if biology were actually to render women more submissive and less adventurous than men, there would be little that anyone could do about it. This kind of essentialist or deterministic argument, according to Morris, has been used throughout history and across societies to justify woman's subordination (1993:213).

Frank (1982:476) has this to say:

For the most part the world of African fiction has been a masculine domain in which women are conspicuous mainly by their absence. But despite this tradition and its basis in the fact that until recently the overwhelming majority of African literary works in all genres have been produced by men, there is a growing body of African literature written by women - an alternative tradition with its own peculiar vision of contemporary African experience.

Frank further states that as their educational opportunities have improved over the past several decades and as they have begun to penetrate the social and political spheres that constitute the male arena of African fiction, women writers have begun to record and interpret the changes they and their world are undergoing in contemporary Africa.

In the preface to her *Unwinding threads: Writing by women in Africa*, Bruner says that women are writers who gained recognition against all odds, and adds that more and more women are writing in Africa. More countries are heard from, and writers are gradually finding expression in more languages. Furthermore, the number of those interested in hearing what they have to say has increased dramatically.

The African woman writer has a duty to correct misconceptions about women just as the post-colonial African male writer did to correct misconceptions about Africa.

As Kenyon (1994:339) argues, many Black women writers protest skilfully in fiction against the customs of their traditional societies in this relegation of women to mere subsistence and silence. Ogun-dipe-Leslie believes that female writers have two major issues to concentrate on in their writings, as feminists have posited that the woman writer has these two major responsibilities: first to tell about being a woman, secondly to describe reality from a woman's view, a woman's perspective (quoted in Jones, 1989:5). Katrak sums up the role of especially Emecheta neatly in this regard:

The novels of Buchi Emecheta, an Ibo woman writer, explore the varying definitions of womanhood and motherhood as experienced by her women protagonists in Nigerian society. A fundamental purpose of womanhood, viz. to flower into motherhood, is rooted in the paradoxical relationships of both the traditional structures or patriarchy and the modern structures of urbanization. Emecheta is concerned equally with the dual issues of 1) the

biological control of woman whereby sexuality and the ability to bear children are the sole criteria which define womanhood, and 2) the economic control of women within the colonially imposed capitalist system, whereby women are placed at a disadvantage graver than that they had faced in the pre-colonial economic structure (1987:159).

Levitov (1983:18) also adds another perspective:

She [Emecheta] writes primarily about women; her spokeswomen both uphold and reject traditional values; they are vulnerable, weak, self-sacrificing, naïve, and they are also tough ... [she] employs her women characters for symbolic purposes which transcend the merely literal situation. The woman is mother and conscious or unconscious demythologizer ...

Women's writing can therefore, as can be deduced quite tellingly from the opinions quoted above, be said to be mainly a response to patriarchy. Patriarchy had for long before women's writing mushroomed, been manifested in male literature. According to Stratton (1994:60) patriarchy in the writings of men is evident in two ways: the biased way in which male critics review women's writings; and the way male writers depict women in their works. She further states that the supercilious if not condescending way that some men adopt in their review of women's writing is typical of male critics attitude towards women writers.

Eagleton (1986:45) points out that women had for a long time had difficulty in gaining access to literary production as writers, but as characters, images, myths or symbols in writings they are richly present. Further, he states that the difference is between "women" as active, productive, historical beings and "woman" as a sign, a construct created in culture. Woman as a sign is central in the writings of men. Most male literature explores the construction of "woman" as a vicious influence; a literary Eve who leads astray, and a Delilah who destroys. What is emphasised here, states

Eagleton, is one of the basic dichotomies in the patriarchal understanding of “woman”: she is both virgin and/or whore (1986:46).

It is on this premise that women’s writing follows the opposite course from that of men. Women’s narration does not conform to conventional male modes of narrative.

Stratton states that

The main ideological function of women’s fiction is to undermine patriarchal ideology by means of a reversal of the initial terms of the sexual allegory. This inversion, female and male, good and evil, subject and object, does not resolve the problem of gender, but it is, nonetheless, a subversive manoeuvre; for it exposes the sexist bias of the male literary tradition and creates space for the female subject. Inversions are the strategy that women writers have employed in their attempt to combat patriarchal manicheism (1994:62).

Women writers privilege female voices in their stories and give it a distinct kind of moral authority. At the same time, they indicate how this voice had been suppressed by the patriarchal conventions governing relations between men and women. In this way, women writers discredit the male subject. By discrediting the male subject the women writers create narrative space for the representation of women. By portraying women as subjects of national aspiration, women writers construct an alternative form of subjectivity. Men fall apart in their plots, to make room for women.

Ashcroft *et al.* (1995:249) argue that

It is not surprising therefore that the history and concerns of feminist theory have paralleled developments in post-colonial theory. Feminist and post-colonial seek to reinstate the marginalized in the face of the dominant.

A common point with both post-colonialist and feminist discourse is that they all try to address the problem of the marginalisation of people due to their race, culture and gender.

While African men writers challenge the racial codes of colonial discourse and attempt to subvert them, they adopt certain aspects of the gender coding of their supposed adversaries in their representation of African women. Thus, what is called the voicelessness of black women is a trope with a long history, one which can be traced through colonial encounter such as Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to African representations of the colonial encounter such as Achebe's *Things fall apart*. The genders of the Mother Africa trope, a trope that pervades the African male literary tradition can also be seen as colonial literature (Achebe, 1978:2).

Achebe goes on to state that Conrad's *Heart of darkness* projects the image of Africa as "the other world", the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilisation, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality. This analogy illustrates the way in which colonial and African male literary discourses sometimes interlink. What is revealed by such instances is the patriarchal nature of both European imperialism and African nationalism, a continuance of interests and complexity between two groups of men who share a will to power (1978:2).

Post-colonial literature by indigenous people had as part of its intention to correct the impression created by colonial writers like Conrad in his *Heart of darkness*. The African writers took it upon themselves to correct the impression created about their continent. In their literature, African writers are heroes, not savages (or noble savages as they are often depicted in colonial literature) (Shipalana, 1997:45). He also states that

Women's literature was to change the stereotype of literature, and change the female image as projected by male literature. Women writers use literature to correct misconceptions about the traditional beliefs of womanhood stereotype (1997:45).

Literature written by the coloniser traditionally made the European a hero. The coloniser has always been the master narrative of the history of "the Other" for cultural control. The use of the coloniser's language became the instrument of control. Post-colonial literature challenges this western "master narrative" history of control.

This trope emanates from a situation that is conventionally patriarchal. The speaker is invariably male, a western-educated intellectual. The addressee is always a woman. She is pure physicality, always beautiful and often naked. He is constituted as a writing subject, a producer of art and of socio-political vision; her status is that of a sexual object. She takes the form either of a girl, nubile and erotic, or of a fecund nurturing mother. The poetry celebrates his intellect at the same time as it pays tribute to her body that is frequently associated with the African landscape that is his to explore and discover.

This chapter had as its objective an overview of how women writers are intent on affirming the space, position and status of women in the literature they write. However, it is also true, and was demonstrated, that women often themselves perpetuate the cruel practices of the system that oppresses and dehumanises them.

Emecheta points out quite succinctly how women connive with patriarchal practice through Nnu Ego, the heroine of *The joys of motherhood*:

We women subscribe to the law more than anyone. Until we change all this, it is still a man's world, which women will always help to build (*TJM*:186-7).

This is strengthened in the words of Kehinde in the novel of the same name:

... half of the problem rests with the women. They are busy bitching about one another, the men say the women are acting just as expected (*K*:36).

However, women writers are slowly, to a greater extent (and this is especially true of writers such as Emecheta and Walker) refusing to accept the myths that tend to enshrine gender inequalities in their societies. It used to be unquestioningly so that man, the divine representation of the social order, shall lead, and woman, the voiceless, functional, subordinate, shall follow – but this is being changed to a significant degree. While tradition still demands silent submission from women, Emecheta and Walker step out of the shadows of repressive tradition and create female characters who are vocal, sensitive and realistic. They then put them in meaningful interactive relationships simultaneously with the self and with others of the same persuasion. The hopes, fears and aspirations of women are articulated by women whose discourse communities are now shared by empathetic and like-minded participants (Spencer-Walters, 1996:130).

In their literature (as in their lives) these women writers affirm and elevate women, firstly by showing how oppressed or victimised they are and secondly by shifting the woman from being an object to being a legitimate subject. This is the issue that will be explored in more detail in chapter 4.

## CHAPTER 4: "WOMAN" IN WOMEN'S LITERATURE :

### SUBJECTIFYING "THE OTHER"

#### 4.1 "Woman": A victim

This chapter attempts to look into the stereotypical way in which societies look at and portray women. In this chapter an attempt is made to look at woman as a victim of societal stereotype, for it is only after this that a discussion on the emerging privileging of the female voice can be entertained. Both Emecheta and Walker represent incidents in their works that show in graphic and insistent detail how women are victimised, and this will now be explored by way of providing substance to the arguments provided so far.

Typical of an African woman in an African Society, Nnu Ego, in *The Joys of Motherhood*, experiences a double tragedy: at the beginning there is the tragedy of not being able to perform the essential womanly function of bearing children, and later, the tragedy of being driven to breaking point by the men in her life, her husband and her sons.

Stratton (1994:114) points out that, being too timid to flout patriarchal authority, Nnu Ego accepts without question until her later years that there is no greater honour for a woman than to be a mother. But because her society is changing, she receives none of

the reward conventionally conferred on a fertile woman and eventually she becomes alienated from society.

When as a result of her failure to produce children her first marriage breaks down, Nnu Ego moves to Lagos in order to marry Nnaife in the hope that he will remove the stigma of barrenness and make her into a real woman. But her children, rather than bringing her the anticipated joys, become her chain of slavery, binding her to Nnaife and to the back-breaking drudgery of abject poverty.

As a result of her experience, she arrives at an understanding not only of race relations of power but also of those of gender. The impassioned plea that she makes in desperation to her god constitutes the novel's strongest feminist statement. She finds herself in Lagos with an ugly, fat husband whom neither she nor her father has met. She feels that she must accept the situation because the chief concern of her family back home is that she should get pregnant, but in her growing liberalisation and ability to articulate her despair, she calls upon God:

God, when will you create a woman who will be fulfilled in herself, a full human being, not anybody's appendage? ... What have I gained from all this? Yes, I have many children, but what do I have to feed them on? In my life I have to work myself to the bone to look after them, I have to give them my all. The men make it look as if we must aspire for children or die. That's why when I lost my first son I wanted to die, because I failed to live up to the standard expected of me by the males in my life, my father and my husband and now I have to include my sons. But who made the law that we should not hope in our daughters? We women subscribe to the law more than anyone. Until we change all this, it is still a man's world, which women will always help to build (*TJM*:186-187).

Despite her hard-won insight, however, Nnu Ego continues to conduct her life according to the patterns laid down for her by Ibo patriarchy, taking comfort in all her troubles in the fact the one day her boys will be men, and with a mind-wrenching

irony, conspiring through her child-rearing practices to consign her daughters to the same miserable existence she so desperately needs to escape from herself.

Her adherence to Ibuza values leads to the event that marks her complete social alienation; her lonely death by the roadside. Her devotion to her children has left her with no time for friends. And her boys, now university educated men, repudiate the values she has sacrificed herself for, in favour of the Western-style individualism they have imbibed in Lagos. Blamed by her husband, Nnaife, for the children's defection, she returns for the second time in disgrace to Ibuza where, when she receives no word from her sons, she suffers a mental breakdown and dies unattended.

In raising her children in the belief that the sons must be educated in the Western fashion if they are to succeed in the new global urban world, Nnu Ego does not see that the education that she struggles so superhumanly to provide for her sons will in fact alienate her sons from her. So, in late middle age, she is left alone, longing for a word of recognition from her sons. Finally she dies, defeated by their neglect. It takes her death to earn her sons' attention – they return to give her a big, expensive funeral (*TJM:224*).

As the illiterate heroine of *The joys of motherhood*, Nnu Ego is the most oppressed and powerless of all Emecheta's women characters, largely because she is denied the education the other main female characters in other novels do manage to obtain. Foremost among the traditional practices and values that govern Nnu Ego's life are polygamy and the stigma of barrenness. Both derive from the traditional vision of womanhood that perceives women only in relation to their husbands and children.

The traditional woman's primary function is to bear male children who will perpetuate her husband's name.

Nnu Ego does not develop the frame of mind to cope and she also does not create suitable strategies to overcome her predicament. Her tragedy lies in the fact that she is a victim of two worlds that are in conflict: the colonial and the traditional worlds. Her upbringing in traditional society binds her to the principles and ideals of that society. The failure of her first marriage compels her to migrate to the urban environment where traditional values are untenable (Eziegbo, 1996:18).

Thus, in *The joys of motherhood*, Emecheta's focus is on the implications for women of patrilineage in the context of which a woman without a child for her husband is a failed woman, her primary role in life being to render her husband immortal by producing and nurturing a number of sons. The central irony arises from the anticipation of the novel's heroine, Nnu Ego, that if she executes this function, the "joys of motherhood" – fulfilment in the reflected glory and the assurance of security in her old age – will be hers (Stratton, 1996:106).

Walker starts *The color purple* with a paternal injunction of silence

"You better not never tell nobody but God" (TCP:1).

Celie's story is told within the context of this threat. She is an invisible woman, a character traditionally silenced and effaced in fiction, and by centring on her, Walker replots the heroine's text. Forcefully raped by her stepfather at an early age and

mothering two kids at the age of fourteen, and having her two children taken away from her, Celie is portrayed by Walker as a battered woman.

To further show how Celie is the victim of the male world, Abbandonato (1993:302) points out:

When Celie marries Mr., this man with no name becomes part of the system of male oppression, joining God the Patriarch and Pa in an unholy trinity of power that displaces her identity. The marriage negotiations take place entirely between the stepfather and the husband. Celie is handed over like a beast of burden, identified with the cow that accompanies her. Physically and psychologically abused by stepfather and husband alike, Celie is denied a status as a subject. Her sexuality and reproductive organs are controlled by men, her children are taken away from her, and her submission is enforced through violence. In her terrified acquiescence to such blatant male brutality, Celie symbolically mirrors Everywoman.

In one of her letters to Celie, Nettie tells her sister of the Olinka tribe, particularly the story of one girl Tashi, as a kind of feminist fable:

The Olinka do not believe girls should be educated. When I asked a mother what she thought of this she said. A girl is nothing to herself, only to her husband can she become something.  
What can she become? I asked.  
Why, she said, the mother of his children.  
But I am not the mother of anybody's children, I said, and I am something  
*TCP:132*).

In *Possessing the secret of joy*, a multi-voiced story of the ancient African Olinka tradition of female circumcision, Walker addresses the unjust system of female circumcision. The novel has as its subject the ritual clitoridectomy and the genital mutilation of young women. Clitoridectomy is the surgical removal, with very crude and unsanitary tools, of all or part of the clitoris of little African girls followed by a tight sewing up of the wound. This practice was thought to make females more feminine, since the clitoris was thought to be like the male penis. All of this was done

without anaesthesia or sterilisation and ultimately aimed at the crude pleasure of African men many of whom enjoyed splitting open their brides on their wedding night. It is for this reason that Walker dedicated this novel to “the innocent vulva” (Howard, 1993:144).

Walker and many others rationally believe that the cultural intent of such mutilation is absolutely clear: the denial of pleasure for women from all sexual activity. Like Tashi, Walker believes that if women wait for men to act in dealing with these invidious practices, they may well wait forever. It is a matter of getting the taboo to the consciousness of those who are unaware of the practice. As Tashi states, “it is only the cruelty of truth, speaking it, shouting it, that will save us now”. It is about the telling of the suffering and the breaking of taboos. Tashi has survived the suffering and humiliation, though narrowly, and she cannot speak of them, because they have made the telling of the suffering itself taboo. As Walker points out at the end of the story, this novel is written with a mission in mind, that because of it, one little girl won't be mutilated.

When Tashi's analysis leads her to realise that Dura, her favourite sister, bled to death because of her circumcision, she begins to formulate a goal of her own to escape from her living hell. How is it possible, she asks herself, that the person who administered her circumcision or mutilation and Dura's death could be a woman?

In the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* of 5 July 1992, Ansa points out that:

She [Tashi] not only has a scar between her legs, but one as deep on her psyche as well. The circumcision has not only cut her clitoris and the possibility of lovemaking that is not painful and humiliating. It has also eradicated her sense of self and her ability to feel.

As Tashi herself puts it bluntly:

What my mother started, the witchdoctor finished. He showed no mercy. In fright and unbearable pain my body bucked under the razor-sharp stone he was cutting me with ... I could never again see myself, for the child that finally rose from the mat three months later, and dragged herself out of the initiation hut and finally home, was not the child who had been taken there. I was never to see that child again (*PSJ*:200).

Walker's construction of woman is of a suspended, exploited and humiliated woman. Three women from her first novel, *The third life of Grange Copeland* and seven of the thirteen women from her short story collection *In love and trouble* are women who are cruelly exploited, spirits and bodies mutilated, relegated to the narrowest and most confining lives, sometimes driven to madness and ultimately to suicide.

In her discussion of Emecheta's *Double yoke*, Umeh states that

The African woman more so than the African man is caught in a bind. In order to be liberated and fulfilled as a woman she must renounce her African identity because of the inherent sexism of many traditional societies. Or, if she wishes to cherish and affirm her "Africanness" she must renounce her claims to feminine independence and self-determination. Either way she stands to lose; either way she finds herself diminished, impoverished (1996:342).

#### 4.2 "Woman": Assertive and complete human

As indicated earlier, the main ideological function of women's fiction is to undermine patriarchal ideology by means of a reversal of the initial terms of the sexual allegory. This inversion helps to expose the sexist bias of the male literary tradition and creates space for the female subject. Emecheta and Walker are no exceptions.

To show her intention of giving her female characters a meaning, Walker had this to say in an interview with Mary Washington (8 June 1993):

My women, in future, will not burn themselves up – that’s what I mean by coming to the end of a cycle, and understanding something to the end ... Now I am ready to look at women who have made the room larger for others to move in ... so that my women characters won’t all end up the way they have been, because Black women now offer varied, live models of how it is possible to live. We have made a new place to move (Umeh, 1996:448).

In *The joys of motherhood* Emecheta adopts a convention of the paired woman in her characterization of Nnu Ego and Adaku. They are the antithesis of each other in their responses to their patriarchal society, Nnu Ego choosing to conform to its role definitions and Adaku revolting against them. Emecheta punishes the conservative heroine Nnu Ego and rewards Adaku for her radical action. While Nnu Ego sinks further and further into poverty and remains dependent Adaku prospers and achieves independence, reinvesting her profits from prostitution in the cloth-vending business and sending her daughters to the best schools in the land. She does what Nnu Ego can only wish for. Adaku becomes a woman fulfilled in herself and one who has hope in her daughters. As she states:

As for my daughters, they will have to take their own chances in this world. I am not prepared to stay here to be turned into a mad woman, just because I have no sons. The way they go on about it one would think I know where sons are made and have been neglectful about taking one for my husband. One would think I’d never had one before. People forget that. Well, if my daughters cannot forgive me when they grow up, that will be too bad (p. 169).

Adaku is, in contrast to the former, flexible and adaptable in her attempt to define her identity in a rapidly changing society, though she too comes to Lagos in the first instance with the hope that relations with Nnaife will produce the issue that will confirm her worth. For although she has a daughter from a previous marriage, she has

no son and hence no standing in Ibuza society. Initially she bears the humiliation of having failed to produce male progeny with fortitude. But later she revolts against the standards of Ibuza patriarchy, damning her chi which men advise her to consult to find out why male offspring have been denied her, and boldly declaring that she is going to be a prostitute (1979:165-166).

Stratton (1994:116) backs Emecheta's non-conformity in *Adaku*. She maintains that the freedom that *Adaku* negotiates through her rebellion is not sanctioned by the traditions of her community. But in keeping with Emecheta's irony and realism, *Adaku* is not, in the end, alienated from the society whose laws she transgresses. For despite her non-conformity, she is able to create a place for herself in Ibuza society, at least as that society exists in Lagos.

Further, Stratton points out that Emecheta's female characters are, then, portrayed realistically. They are complex social beings whose personalities are defined and destinies determined by their interaction with their environment. *Adaku* adapts to the changes while *Nnu Ego* remains static. These portrayals, she argues, are the basis of Emecheta's realism. Through them, she encounters the tendency toward gender romance in men's works. Realism is also Emecheta's response to male idealization of motherhood (Stratton, 1994:116).

Emecheta mocks the notion of the supremacy of motherhood that *Nnu Ego* believes in, by juxtaposing her expectations to her actual experience as a mother: her abject poverty, endless toil, and miserable death.

Emecheta is one of the few African writers to portray the polygamous family from a woman's point of view, and her vision of this entrenched way of life is far from flattering. Women who share a husband have two grounds for anxiety: the insecurity of their own position and also that of their children. Hence Nnu Ego's torment when she hears Nnaife and Adaku making love behind the flimsy curtain in their one-room Lagos flat.

Nnu Ego had many children. The cost of this perpetual maternity and this sole feminine identity as a mother Nnu Ego clearly sees in the chapter ironically entitled "The Canonised Mother".

"It was true what they said: "Nnu Ego realized, that if you don't have children the longing for them will kill you and if you do, the worrying over them will kill you (*TJM*:212)."

Walker, like Emecheta, shows signs of using the convention of the paired woman in her characterisation of Celie and Shug Avery. They too are the antithesis of each other in their response to their patriarchal society. Raped by her stepfather and married to a lazy man at the age of fourteen and having her two children taken away from her, Celie represents an extremely battered woman. Yet despite all this heavy yoke and battering, she admits to Shug that Mr. is still her husband. She still sees her relationship with Mr. as that of a wife to her husband, as determined by the patriarchal values of her society, Shug, however, stands to denounce everything male. She ventures into blues singing, a field before then known to be open to men only. But even in that career she does not allow herself to be exploited by men.

Of particular importance here is Celie's development in character. In *The Nation*, September 1982, Dinitia Smith contends that *The color purple* is about the struggle

between redemption and revenge. And the chief agency of redemption, Walker is saying, is the strength of the relationships between women; their friendships, their love, their shared oppression (Smith, 1982: 19-21).

Kenyon (1994:340) points out that Walker rejects male icons through the mouth of Shug, a blues singer. Celie is taught to appreciate the godhead within herself thanks to Shug's lesbian love. Similarly, in *Second class citizen*, Adah learns to value her own ability to survive and even study while providing for her five children, virtually unaided.

It is her love for Shug that enables Celie to shake off her legacy of an abusive paternal environment and construct a new identity within a feminine domain. In an earlier scene in the novel, Celie tells the story to Shug, breaking the father's injunction of silence and discovering a sister-lover, compassion and passion combined. Celie is rescued from her identity crisis by Shug, who tells her, "Us each other's people now" - the two women have mothered each other and now elect to be woman-identified women. Implicit here is Celie's escape from patriarchal law, in breaking the taboo against homosexuality and abandoning the position ascribed to her within the symbolic order (Abbandonato, 1993:303-4).

In their letters, Celie and Nettie share a great bond of sisterhood that nurtures them. Their letters are an explanation of being. Narrating aspects of their personal history, they engage in an ongoing process of demythologising that makes new awareness and change possible. They recollect to recover and restore. They seek to affirm and sustain the initial bond of care and convention experienced with one another in their male-dominated family. This eventually leads to Celie metamorphosing into a

stronger woman, one who is able to affirm herself successfully. This becomes possible because, as bell hooks explains, "understanding the self is the pre-condition for transformation, for radical change", and in the same essay, "Reading and Resistance! *The color purple*", bell hooks explains clearly the recognition of the self as well as women unity:

By eschewing the identity of Mother, black women in *The Color Purple*, like Shug and Sophia, rebelliously place themselves outside the context of patriarchal family norms, revisioning mothering so that it becomes a task any willing female can perform, irrespective of whether or not she has given birth. Displacing motherhood as central signifier for female being, and emphasizing sisterhood, Walker posits a rational basis for self-definition that valorizes and affirms woman bonding. It is the recognition of self in the order, of unity, and not self in relationship to the production of children that enables women to connect with one another (1993:294).

When Celie leaves Albert to move to Memphis with Shug, she opens up a business. Her progression from exploited black woman, as woman, as sexual victim, is aided by her entrance into the economy as property owner. She is rewarded with economic prosperity for her patient endurance of suffering. Back home, Albert sinks into such a state of self-pity and drunkenness that his son, Harpo takes over the traditionally feminine duties of cooking and cleaning for him and even bathing him.

*The color purple* represents Celie slowly learning to become more womanist, more courageous in her dealings with an exploitative husband. It is only after she has rejected the role of worker-mother that she can develop. The nuclear family proves too destructive for this mother, but she can find love in the extended family that develops as her stepchildren grow up. As each mother feels the need to develop part of herself, she can leave her children with the women still in the homestead at that

moment. That cannot yet happen in Africa where, according to Emecheta, "half of the problem rests with women bitching about one another (Kenyon, 1994:341).

While Celie succeeds in her efforts to resist male domination that takes place solely in a private familial context, it is with sadness that we bear witness to Sophia's tragic fate, as she resists sexist and racist oppression in private and public spheres. Unlike Celie or Shug, she is regarded as a threat to the social order and is violently attacked, brutalized, and subdued. Always a revolutionary, Sophia has never been victimized or complicit in her own oppression. Tortured and persecuted by the state, treated as though she is a political prisoner, Sophia's spirit is systematically crushed. Despite her tragic end, Sophia is one of the women in whom Walker shows the undermining of patriarchal values. She is a strong woman, not a figure of vulnerability.

Because Sofia is so strong-willed and Harpo is in shock, they fight often. Since Harpo is baffled by the total control his father exerts over Celie, he feels less than a man because of his inability to control Sofia. In desperation he asks Celie how he can force Sofia to mind him the way she minds Mr.

In *The third life of Grange Copeland* Mem's response to her husband's abuse is not the same as Margaret's. During the many months before his departure Grange leaves Margaret every Saturday to go off down the road to the juke joint, and Josie's bed. At first she sits at home alone but later she follows him down the road. Soon she starts to arrive home the next morning. Having to sell herself at the insistence of her husband, Margaret chooses to give herself freely to the man who drives the truck or to anyone else.

So at first Mem, Brownfield's wife, begins to deteriorate. Her deterioration turns into desolation and hatred. However, eventually she becomes so desperate that she must believe in and fight for something. Her goal, like that of many women, is a house, so the woman's desire to have a house becomes the major conflict in the battle between the Copelands. The woman finds the inner as well as the financial resources to accomplish her goal while the man cannot. Mem becomes so desperate in her struggle for survival and stability, in her engulfing desire to have a home for her children that she is willing to confront her man. She is forced to redefine her definition of herself as a woman, thus inevitably infringing on the man's definition of himself.

Although somehow apologetic to her husband, Mem is determined to make a move, not so much for herself but for her children who, she believes, must now be her primary concern.

Brownfield feels his manhood has been denigrated by his white boss who insists the Copelands move to Mr. J.L.'s place, and now his manhood is being threatened by his wife who tells him that not only has she got a house in town but she has a job there too, all this in a space of one day. In order to help her husband regain his manhood, in order to force him to break away from the belief that he is not responsible for his actions, she forcefully shows him his lack of manliness. Most importantly, she insists on being treated as a human being rather than an object. She has no choice. If she could not challenge Brownfield's definition of masculinity, she and her children will not survive.

Fat Josie, like Adaku, has decided to venture into prostitution. She is the one woman in the novel who is neither virginal nor wifely, and who does not depend on a man for her financial needs. In fact, her profession feeds on the despair of the men around her. So much for the stereotypical loose black woman who gets what she wants through sex. Unlike the stereotype, Josie and Shug and Adaku do not only have men for sexual pleasure, they feel too. As Christian (1980:194) puts it, "Josie not only fucks but feels".

Both Emecheta and Walker provide an alternative and different picture of lesbianism and prostitution. Contrary to popularly held beliefs a black lesbian relationship is here represented as natural and liberating. Shug loves Celie's body and teaches her where to feel sexual pleasure, a pleasure that Mr. never gave his wife. Their relationship is the beginning of a series of events that finally see Celie as a heroine triumphantly rescued from humiliation to gain personal, social and sexual vindication. Through the experiences of Adaku and fat Josie, Walker and Emecheta show the progression made by the two women out of their profession.

Stratton (1994:109) makes reference to Frank's reading in her *Women without men* of Emecheta's *Destination Biafra*. According to Frank the novel's heroine, Debbie Ogedemgbe, is the apotheosis of the African new woman. She embodies a liberating ideal of potentiality of a rich, active and fulfilling future for African women and it is an autonomous future she embraces, a future without men.

In *Kehinde*, the title character swings around the whole notion of polygamy as seen through the eyes of patriarchy. She makes it favour a woman. As she speaks to her

son Joshua, who was accusing her of loving another man besides his father, she tells him:

... but it's not a crime to love. Your dad has taken two other wives in Nigeria, and I'm not complaining. That's one of the beauties of polygamy, it gives you freedom. I'm still his wife, if I want to be, and I'm still your mother, it doesn't change anything (*K*:138).

Berrian (1996:177) argues that since Albert pulls at will from the value systems to affirm his manhood, Kehinde the woman has the freedom to do likewise. This is in total contradiction to the stereotype of men having the right to take wives the way they feel like, while a woman must have one husband and only one.

In her pursuit of giving voice to a female subject and thus elevating the position of women characters, Emecheta plots the downfall of Albert. He has lost his job and has countless money problems that lead to periodic arguments between him and his second wife, Rike. In England, in a period of three years, Kehinde has obtained a university degree and is prospering. This is the writer's proof that women can do, and better so, without men, and in fact, that men can block women's progress.

In *Second class citizen*, Adah as a woman child shows signs of rebellion very early in life. She does not like the men that Ma and her clever cousins push to her. She vows that never in her life will she get married to a man, rich or poor, to whom she would have to serve his food on bended knee. She would not consent to live with a husband whom she would have to treat as a master. She knows that all Ibo women do this, but she is not going to comply with this invidious and demeaning practice.

Stratton (1994:122-124) has provided a good overview of the way in which Emecheta's women always find a way out of their gloomy experiences. Adah learns to avoid gloomy people as they make her unhappy. So, since she cannot avoid seeing Francis and his sad face, she shuts him out of from her mind's eye. She sees him but her mind does not register him any more. After giving birth she comes home by taxi. She makes everybody believe that she wanted it that way as she wanted to surprise her husband. When she gets home, she writes a very nice letter to them all, thanking them, and she can hear them in her mind's ear saying what a happy African woman she must be as she seems to have no troubles in the world. Because of this attitude, her problems pale into insignificance as they are quite simply part of her life.

To Walker, the struggles that her women characters face show that for her, opposition is not necessarily insurmountable: struggles and crises can lead to growth, to the nurturing of the self. Men and marriages in *In love and trouble* (1984), responsible for thwarting women's careers and mutilating hapless schoolgirls, at least bring out the strength and imagination of the women they victimise.

The incidence of bad marriages is rife in Walker's writings. Also, the mental anguish suffered by most women characters who engage in unladylike acts like attacking their husbands with chain saws ("Really Doesn't Crime Pay") or setting fire to themselves up in convents ("Her Sweet Jerome") or lock themselves up in convents ("The Diary of an African Nun")(all these from *In love and trouble*). In presenting these incidents, Walker is trying to show a point here, that women do these not because they are mentally or emotionally deficient, but because they are responding to the stress of

situations not of their own making. Certainly, marriage offers women nothing (Petry, 1993:194).

The female mutilation in *Possessing the secret of joy* is made more horrible because it is visited upon women by other women. However one could understand that the women visiting this upon their sisters are so caught up in the prevailing social situation that opting out of it would seem to be far from women's minds.

In *Destination Biafra*, Debbie's father Ogendemgbe uses his position to make money and live extravagantly. Self-serving and corrupt, he is shown to be more interested in the balance of his Swiss bank account than in the welfare of the nation.

Stratton (1994:122-124) provides a useful analysis in pointing out that the common factor in Nigerian civil war literature, particularly men's literature, portrays women who, faced with material hardships (like Gladys in Achebe's *Girls at war* [1972], Aku in Okpewho's *The last duty* [1976] and Wanja in Ngugi's *Petals of blood*), relinquish their principles and trade in sex in order to obtain essential commodities. He makes the particular point that that "Lurking in these stories is the Manichean allegory of gender, for while women are portrayed as lacking in moral resolution, there is always a male character who maintains his integrity. Emecheta seeks to subvert the allegory by highlighting in her narrative incidents of male sexual assault on women. Even before war breaks out, the soldiers who come to kill Debbie's father take 'liberties', ordering her mother to undress and fondling Debbie's breasts" (1994:122).

Stratton (1994:122) goes on to point out that while travelling to Biafra, Debbie, along with other women, is subjected to the same terrible treatment by federal soldiers

manning road-blocks. One of Debbie's companions, a pregnant woman, is brutally killed by soldiers who savage her body and even cut off the head of the unborn baby. Soldiers also rape and kill the nuns from whom Debbie seeks medical help for the sick children who have come under her care. In an ultimate act of horror, Debbie herself is gang-raped by a band of soldiers, despite the fact that she desperately tries to inform them that she is also a soldier in the same army. To compound the horror, when her mother reports the incident to the authorities, the commanding officer states:

It's war madam ... Hundreds of women have been raped. So what? Its war (*DB:135*).

The point is thus made rather bluntly that rape, the ultimate crime of violence against a woman, is one of the hidden facts of the Nigerian conflict. In her graphic recording of this reality from the point of view of women, Emecheta challenges the "conspiracy of silence, a silence that protects male interests. Acts of sexual violence against women, she insists, are part of the record" (Stratton, 1994:123).

While trying to persuade Abosi that Biafran success is in nobody's interest, Emecheta uses Debbie as a voice to "interrogate conventional views of women as well as interpretations of national identity. Such views and interpretations show that they do not permit women to express their national aspirations" (Stratton, 1994:124). While serving her country she is raped not only by ordinary soldiers but also by one of her fellow officers, a fellow who had been informed of her missions. He tellingly states that his intention was to show Debbie that she is "nothing but a woman" (*DB:175*). This opens the way for Saka Monoh and Abosi to see Debbie in the same way, so that one could state that in the male perception, then, the national subject is by definition

male and Debbie remains inescapably female despite her attempt to lay claim to the status of national subject.

Debbie's choice of a conventionally male vocation, a career in the army, is an alternative to the stereotypically female roles of wife and mother that her society prescribes for her:

She wanted to do something more than child breeding and rearing and being a good passive wife to a man whose ego she must boost all her days, while making sure to submerge every impulse that made her a full human. Before long she would have no image at all, she would be as colorless as her poor mother. Surely every person should have the right to love as he or she wished, however different that life might seem to another? ...

Yes, she would join the army (*DB:45*).

While Emecheta portrays some of her women, such as Akunna and Nnu Ego, as being in bondage, many of her characters transcend their oppressive conditions. Where Nnu Ego in *The joys of motherhood* attains feminist consciousness only after her premature death when her spirit denies Ibuza women children, Kehinde, in the novel of the same name, immediately recognises her "second-class status" within her polygamous household and takes decisive action. She shares her psychological torture with her friend, Moriammo, who helps to liberate her. Faithful to the realities of African women in Ibuza society, Emecheta shows how African women make sisterhood work for them when the men fail to live up to their promises (Umeh, 1996:xxvii).

By examining the social, economic and historical realities of African women's lives, Emecheta and Walker not only destroy myths about women's contentment with the appalling status quo but also give fresh insight into women's struggles under male

domination and women's ability to map out strategies to enable them to survive the patriarchal society that was structured to dominate and oppress them.

Both Walker and Emecheta show the spiritual growth of their protagonists, Nnu Ego and Celie in particular. Both heroines rise above their suffering by resisting the training for submission that they have had within the patriarchal culture into which they were born. Both finally are able to release themselves from dependency because they have acknowledged, at least inwardly, the patriarchal cause of their suffering.

In this chapter, light was shed on the two important issues, viz. the way in which the patriarchal system victimised women and the way in which women develop into articulate, self-assertive and complete subjects as opposed to the abject object status that they used to inhabit.

At the same time the women writers depict men differently from the male literary modes. Their men are more ordinary, they are presented as oppressors, but finally they trace the development of men as they come to live side by side with women, as it will be demonstrated in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 5: THE EVOLUTION OF MAN IN WOMEN'S LITERATURE

In their literature, both Emecheta and Walker trace the change that their male characters undergo: they show the oppression and cruelty of men on their women, and expose such practices as barbaric, unlike the male literature that glorifies the same. However, their male characters undergo a great change for the better, especially when they interrelate with their women as equals, and even learn from them.

### 5.1 Man: the oppressor

In a 9 June 1994 interview with Ogundele, Emecheta had this to say when asked whether her male characters possessed particular strengths or weaknesses:

No they don't possess any type of weakness. I describe Nigerian males as we see them but once they are read outside the culture people realize how weak they are. But our men don't realize that they are weak because they hide behind the women and at the same time they put the women down by not acknowledging the type of addition the women make their our daily living. By so doing, their weaknesses don't show in real life until you put them on paper, then they become visible. When you see these characters in black and white you will realize that our men need to re-educate themselves or re-examine their actions because it is overflowing from individual families to our government (Ogundele, 1994:453).

While Emecheta and Walker portray their female characters realistically, their male characters tend towards stereotype. They are egotistical, callous and irresponsible,

and it is because of them, what they do or what they fail to do, that misfortune keeps befalling women.

Stade (1985:265-6) has this to say about men characters in women's literature:

As for men, with a few exceptions they are brutal in the flesh because they are impoverished of spirit. They are pitiless when they are not self-pitying. They are misogynist and they are pedophobic. They are petty, arrogant, spiteful, hurtful and treacherous. They are also complacent, lazy, insensitive, incompetent, inartistic, contemptuous of women, but quick to take credit for their work".

As Stratton (1994:62) states, the main ideological function of women's fiction in patriarchal societies like especially Nigeria is to undermine patriarchal ideology by means of a reversal of the sexual allegory. This inversion of female and male, good and evil, subject and object is a subversive manoeuvre. Inversion is a strategy that other women writers also employ in their attempt to combat patriarchal manicheism.

The story of *The third life of Grange Copeland* is marked throughout by the motif of physical and spiritual murder, by suicide and infanticide, by wife-beating and wife-killing. A man who is denied power over his life finds it easy to disavow the evil he does, even when the target of his abuse is the woman he loves. Oppressed by white society, victims of the sharecropping system, Grange and Brownfield take out their frustrations by brutalising their women, by becoming the brutes the white men who own their labour perceive them to be. At the age of ten, Brownfield loves his mother and already his father seems unreachable. Grange hardly talks to his son, hardly admits to his existence. Practically the only words he speaks directly to his son are to the effect that he "ought to throw you doe to the god dam well".

On countless occasions Grange tries to get his wife to sell herself as they find themselves in the straits of dire poverty. Feeling guilty because of this, Grange turns into a silent man and so their life follows a kind of cycle that depends almost entirely on Grange's mood. Late on Saturday night Grange would come home lurching drunk, stumbling and shooting his shotgun. He'd threaten Margaret and she would then run and hide in the woods with Brownfield huddled at her feet (*TTGC*:11-12)

When Grange spends weekends at the Juke-joint and in Fat Josie (his mistress's bed), his wife remains home. But later on Margaret begins to follow him, having become restless about her own life. Somewhat along the line she has changed, and it seems to Brownfield that, one day, his mother would be as he knew her before - submissive, and the next day she would be a wild woman, looking for frivolous things, her heart's good times, in the embraces of strangers. It is during weekends that she becomes a huntress of soft touches, gentle voices and sex without argument (*TTGC*:19-20). Perhaps what Walker is conveying here is that men, through their selfishness and brutality, can change the personalities of their women, from being essentially good and good-hearted creatures to becoming immoral, easy-going people. Brownfield blames his father for his mother's change, as it is Grange whom she follows at first. It is Grange who leads her to the rituals of song and dance and drink and also Grange who first turns to someone else, to fat Josie.

As if that is not enough, Grange leaves his family to go north. At last, Margaret, Brownfield's mother, is found, with her poisoned baby, dead. This horrifying find would seem to be emblematic of the extent of the suffering women are forced to undergo at the hands of their husbands. At the funeral, tears are in short supply and

pity scarce as most people simply, callously, think she got what she deserved. In revenge for his father's rejection, Brownfield kills his newborn albino son, a white baby that looks like his father. In a clear drunken stupor, after years of stupefying guilt and self-hatred, Brownfield murders Mem, leaving his own children, as his father has done before him, to fend for themselves (Christian, 1980:83).

That is the year that Brownfield accuses Mem of being unfaithful to him, of being used by white men, his oppressors; a charge she tearfully denies. Like his father before him, Brownfield at first dreams of going north, but even those dreams finally die. Imprisoned in his own life, he, like Grange, begins to see his wife as a trap and piles on her the blame for his misery and the essential failure of his life. Both Grange and Brownfield know deep within themselves that Margaret and Mem are not to blame for the waste in all of their lives, but since they cannot get near the true cause of their poverty, their wives are accessible targets upon whom they can vent their frustration.

Christian (1980:188) succinctly sums up the situation of father and son.

Trapped in the hardships of sharecropping, the Copeland males try to free themselves by first working hard. When this fails, they hate themselves for their incompetence, inability to fulfil the masculine urge to power. Finally, they use whatever power they feel they have, primarily their power over their women, in a destructive way. Their masculine urge is blocked and therefore turns in on itself. So Grange abandons his family and goes North where he learns the harshness of invisibility and Brownfield attacks the only vulnerable person available to him, his lovely wife.

Like his father, Brownfield's cold heart is shown by the way he relates to his children. To his three daughters he gives the dregs of his attention only when half-drunk. To him they are not really human children, although his heart at times breaks for them.

He cannot see them as innocent or even as children. He scolds Ornette with the language he would use on a whore and the baby Ruth he never touches (*TTGC*:74).

Walker points out that Brownfield is set on changing Mem. Everything about her he changes not to suit him for she suits him when they are married. He changes her into something he does not want so as to make it easier for him to treat her in the way he feels she deserves. He has never had sympathy for ugly women, for according to Brownfield, a fellow with an ugly wife can ignore her. He also frustrates Mem, for she saved for a house and he buys a pig which then dies. She saved for a house, he takes the money and buys a worn-out car which is then repossessed. Brownfield does all this to frustrate Mem as he does not want the woman to succeed where he has failed. So not only do men in *The third life of Grange Copeland* fail, but they also make others, particularly their women fail, and deliberately so.

At last Mem becomes like a woman walking through a dream, but a woman who has forgotten what it is to make up. As Walker describes her,

She slogged, ploddingly, like a cow herself, for the sake of the children. Her mildness became stupor, then her stupor became horror, desolation and, at last, hatred (*TLGC*:59).

Brownfield's rage can and does dump all the blame on her, and she accepts all his burden along with her own and deals with them from her own greater heart and greater knowledge. He does not begrudge her the greater heart, but he cannot forgive her the greater knowledge as it puts her closer, in power, to them - men - than he could ever be.

Over the years they reach an unbelievable decline. He beats his once lovely wife regularly, because it briefly gives him a sense of mastery. Every Saturday night he beats her, trying to pin the blame for his failure on her by imprinting it on her face. The tender woman he married he sets out to destroy – but destroying her he is first determined to change her. And change her he does. Brownfield kills Mem partly because he likes plump women, and Mem has become skinny and has not, as a final reproach to him, reverted, even when well fed, to her former plumpness.

Walker skilfully depicts Brownfield turning into a murderous, whining beast. Her sympathy, however, is plainly with his wife, with all black women whom she sees as the victims of both whites and their own husbands' rage.

Frank (1982:479) says:

In Emecheta's novels, the tyrants and oppressors who reduce women to slaves vary from novel to novel: from husbands and racist whites in *Second Class Citizen* to traditional mores and taboos in *The Bride Price*, to men (brothers, masters, husbands) in *The Slave Girl*, and finally children in *The Joys of Motherhood*. But whoever or whatever the enslaving power may be, Emecheta shows that the oppression of women is invariable constant. The most a woman can hope for is to be able to choose.

To further show how inhumane men could be, Emecheta presents a plot of how men can go all out, and can do anything, to better their situation, at the expense of women. In *The slave girl*, Okolie sells his little sister, Ojebeta, to a rich relative, Ma Palagada. After an argument about the price, the buyer throws the pennies on the floor. Okolie's manliness deserts him as he goes down on his knees to grapple for those coins. Emecheta sums it up clearly:

In the intensity of his search he forgot his dignity, forgot what it was he had done. All the human pride he had, that he was a man, pride that he was the best horn blower of his age-group, pride that he was Ibuza's greatest orator - all was submerged in his urge to find money, and more money (*TSG:57*).

Spencer-Walters (1996:132) points out that even in situations where the male characters are indolent, inept, greedy and clearly irresponsible, such characters use tradition and history to secure political, social and economic domination. This is primarily shown when Okolie chooses to sell his sister and also very tellingly when Pa Palagada, whose actual economic contribution is zero, insists on, and is given, unlimited power over everyone, especially the compliant and subservient female members of the household.

Spencer-Walters (1996:131) further states that Pa Palagada epitomises the terror in the eyes of the children. He is a man to be feared, to be loathed, for his relationship with the enslaved females is putative and sexually abusive. His sadistic desire to see Amanna and Ojebeta physically destroy each other is symptomatic of his contemptuous disregard for women. He further says that perhaps it is a recognition of this trait in Pa Palagada and a realisation that they are both in terror of one man that Amanna and Ojebeta deny Pa Palagada the pleasure of seeing them continue the fight. Ojebeta sits by Amanna, and they both swear that they will always be friends, that they will never again betray each other just to amuse Pa.

Pa Palagada is a pompous, boastful man who would not forget to remind people of his riches, which had in fact been amassed by his wife Ma Palagada. Pa Palagada is typical of an Ibuza man - a big, manly male who would not hesitate to tell you that women have been created as playthings for men, that they are brainless, mindless, and

easily pliable. And yet it is to a woman that he would go to pour out his troubles, wanting her to listen, to sympathise and make appropriate noises, to give him a cuddle, tell him how handsome and kind he is, and how everything would be all right and that he should not worry. Yet he never respects any woman. Now here he is - he has attempted to cane the girl, Amanna but the cane curls back and lashes his wrist - and he calls upon his mother, long since dead, to come out of the grave and take away the stinging pain he has inflicted upon himself (*TSG:98*).

But this boastful rich man has the heart - when his wife is in hospital - to take Chiago to bed. Chiago is one of the slave girls the Palagadas have. Clifford, Ma and Pa Palagada's son, has always doubted that Chiago's long stays in his father's bedroom were merely to tidy his bed and cut his nails, but nobody has said anything so he lets it be. It torments him to think that when his mother is recovering from hospital, this so-called father of his is having a good time with one of the slave girls.

Ma Palagada, from her experience of men, in particular her husband, talks to Ojebeta, her prospective daughter-in-law - as she has had an affair with Clifford:

You must stay by my son. Men are not as clever as they look. They always need someone, a woman, to look after them. Look after him for me (*TSG:139*).

During her early years at the Palagadas in *The slave girl*, Ojebeta reflects:

All her life a woman always belonged to some male. At birth you were owned by your people, and when you were sold you belonged to a new master, when you grew up your new master who had paid something for you, would control you (*TSG:112*).

Even when she is released from her servitude and returns to Ibuza after Ma Palagada's death, Ojebeta is still not free, because:

No woman or girl in Ibuza was free, except those who committed the abominable sin of prostitution or those who had been completely cast off or rejected by their people for offending one customer another. A girl was owned, in particular by her father or someone in place of her father or her elder brother, and then in general, by group or homestead (*TSG*:157).

What makes Nnaife's disregard and ill-treatment of Nnu Ego worse is the way Nnaife is presented to the reader: both his looks and the type of job he does. As Eziegbo (1996:16-17) observes,

Raised in traditional society, Nnu Ego arrives in Lagos to meet her husband Nnaife, expecting to live with a strong, well-built and healthy man. She comes with a set of ideas about what men are, what they should look like, and the strong position they occupy in the household. She is rudely shocked by the reality of Nnaife's repulsive physique and unnatural occupation.

Her previously held perception of acceptable manliness is rudely shocked:

When in walked a man with a belly like a pregnant cow, wobbling first to this side and then to that. The belly, coupled with the fact that he was short, made him look like a barrel. His hair, unlike that of men at home in Ibuza, was not closely shaved; he left a lot of it on his head, like that of a woman mourning for her husband. She thought she would go back to her father; marrying such a jelly of a man would be like living with a middle-aged woman. It could not be! This could not be the man she was to live with (*TJM*:42-43).

Eziegbo (1996:17) states that

Nnaife's emasculation is total; he is a servant in the house of the Meers where he is employed as a washerman. Nnu Ego feels the humiliation intensely 'every time she saw her husband hanging out the white woman's smalls'.

Cordelia, the cook's wife, captures quite succinctly the tragedy of these men in the colonial societal setup:

Men here are too busy being white men's servants to be men ... Their manhood has been taken away from them. The shame of it is that they don't know it. All they see is the money, the white man's shining money (*TJM*:66).

This ugly and inferior man finds it unacceptable that his wife cannot fall pregnant and is able, in spite of his evident shortcomings, to visit all the traditional insults upon her.

Yet when a woman falls pregnant, though generally the news is celebrated, in some instances, she still can face the wrath of the man. In *Kehinde*, the title character is accused by her husband, Albert of having fallen pregnant as if she has done it by herself, hence Kehinde's words:

Haven't I been warning you that it could happen? ... I hope you're not doing like some Nigerian men and suggesting it's my fault (*K*:5).

Berrian (1996:172) states that

Albert's dream about a new life of ease is to be realised at all costs, therefore Kehinde's happiness about being pregnant with a third child must take second place to his dream. The solution is for Kehinde to have an abortion, so that money will not be diverted away from the accumulated savings designated for the Nigerian trip. Unbeknown to Kehinde the abortion foreshadows the end of her marriage to Albert.

There was also a tendency among Ibo men of bringing pregnant wives down. A tough woman could be brought to heel by a husband claiming that the child she was carrying was not his, and then forgiving her all the same. In the midst of this preposterously magnanimous gesture, very few would believe the woman's side of the story (*K*:6).

Men would either disown their children, or persuade by force women to abort. Albert, who forces Kehinde to abort their boy child, goes home to Nigeria leaving Kehinde in England, and marries Rike mainly because she bears him a boy child. The

chief character in *Meridian*, Meridian Hill, falls in love with Truman Held, but when Truman falls in love with Lynne Rabinowitz, a Jewish Civil Rights volunteer, Meridian aborts her baby and has her tubes tied. Truman finally marries Lynne whom he later abandons with her child.

Before his departure to his homeland, Albert tells his office mate:

Here I am nobody, just a shopkeeper. I'm fed up with just listening to my wife and indulging her (*K:35*).

Another surprising thing about men is the way they relate to children. When children do well in life they belong to their father but when they are out of hand they belong to their mother. Francis, in *Second class citizen*, like any African man, begins to dissociate himself from the children. He is not working and the wife is employed, something that does not go down well with him, and he asks Adah:

Who is going to look after your children for you ... I can't go on looking for you ... I can't go on looking after your children for you. (*SCC:45*).

Again Francis blames Adah after he has failed his examinations. Had she not brought her children and saddled him with them, had she allowed them to be fostered; had she not become pregnant so soon after her arrival, he would have passed – or so he claims (*SCC:50*).

Francis' family is a patriarchal family. Adah does not know her husband very well because most of the decisions about their own lives have had to be referred first to Big Pa, Francis' father, then to his mother, then discussed among the brothers of the family before Adah would be referred to. She finds all this ridiculous, the more so if the decision involves finance. After all, she would have to pay for the plan in most

cases but the decision would have been made behind her back. Of course Francis would be simply a puppet in such cases, and so would she.

To Francis, a woman is a second-class human, to be slept with at any time, even during the day, and if she should refuse, to have sense beaten into her until she gives in; to be ordered out of bed after he had done with her; to make sure she washes his clothes and gets his meals ready at the right time. There is no need to have an intelligent conversation with his wife because, you see, she might start getting ideas. So much is Francis bent on pulling Adah down that one day when she comes home from shopping she finds him burning her manuscript *The bride price* or *Head above water*.

Then Francis ends by disowning Adah and the children in a court of law, and shows his lack of humanity when he tells the magistrate that he does not care if the children should be sent for adoption. But Adah refuses and indicates that she would stick with the children. They are hers, no matter what.

After Nnu Ego has been told that she can not cool a man and she was all bones, she takes trouble to look more feminine than usual - Emecheta says that that was the quality Ibuza men appreciated; they wanted women who could claim to be helpless without them. Agbadi, Buchi's father, was no different from many men. He himself might take wives and then neglect them for years, apart from seeing that they each received their one yam a day; he could bring his mistress to sleep with him right in his courtyard while his wives pined and bit their nails for a word from him. But when it came to his daughter, she must have a man who would cherish her (*TJM*:36).

After the death of her son, Nnu Ego tries to commit suicide. When Nwakusor, Nnaife's friend comes to the bridge he scorns her:

What are you trying to do to your husband, your father, your people and your son who is only a few weeks old? You want to kill yourself, eh? You're shaming your womanhood, shaming your motherhood (*TJM*:61).

Nwakusor does not care to know the reason for Nnu Ego's action, nor bother about the life of this troubled woman. All that matters to him is the husband and the boy child and the public shame that they would be subject to.

Nnu Ego knew that going back to her father would not help her. He would tell her that she should not disgrace the name of the family again. Within this context, ironically, what greater honour could there be for a woman than to be a mother, and once one is a mother, not of daughters who will marry and go, but of good-looking healthy sons, one is effectively caught up in the system, so that a woman should be a wife, a mother, and a private possession of a man.

Day (1993:33) explores this idea when he states that Myrna and Roselily's husbands in *In love and trouble* share the same limited perception of women's roles as do almost all men. Each expects no more of his wife than that she should stay and have babies. Neither wife is physically abused, yet both are denied psychological freedom and wholeness. Roselily is not sure what would constitute total fulfilment for her - she wants to live for once. But she doesn't know quite what that means - yet she senses that whatever it is, there will be no room for it in her husband's home or in his religion. He will mould her, in any case, into the wife he wants. Myrna knows that fulfilment comes to her through her art, yet her husband thinks the role of artist is not a "correct" one. He succeeds in making her according to his image of what the wife

of a successful businessman should be, but, ironically the end product brings him no satisfaction.

In *The color purple*, when Celie's mother becomes too ill and too worn out from child-bearing to satisfy her husband's sexual appetite, Afonso rapes Celie repeatedly and then sells or gives away the two children born of his sin. Celie is also left wondering whether he has perhaps even murdered them. She is also left unable to have any more (TCP:5).

In the first letter, we learn Pa won't leave his wife alone even though she has just had her sixth and is deathly sick. When his wife goes to visit the doctor, he rapes the fourteen-year old Celie. By the second letter Pa has managed to kill his wife, by whose corpse he sits, dropping crocodile tears. He has also stolen off with Celie's and his baby, most likely to kill it. By the third letter he has taken Celie's and his second child away, probably to sell it. He turns ominously to Celie's little sister. From the fourth letter Pa has brought home a new wife, another teenager (Stade, 1985:265).

According to Celie's narrative, Pa barely waits for one child to be born and most importantly for the mother to heal, before he is ready to start another. No one's tears or ills seem to matter in the face of Pa's lust. After her mother dies screaming and cursing, Celie writes that Pa comes home married to a girl Celie's age. Pa demands sex of the girl so often that she often appears dazed, wooden and walks around in a trance.

In a sense reminiscent of a slave auction, Celie's stepfather then offers her in marriage to the widower Albert, who looks her over, like a head of livestock, and marries her in desperation because he needs someone to cook and clean for him and take care of his four children. Thus Celie is passed like a piece of property from one cruel and

domineering black male into the hands of another. The rest of the novel is Celie's struggle to gain self-respect (Day, 1993:86).

Love is noticeably absent from Celie's marriage to Mr-. Sex with Albert holds no pleasure for her, as she tells Shug Avery, Albert's long-time lover:

Mr - can tell you, I don't like it at all. What is it like? He git up on you, heist your nightgown around your waist, plunge in. Most times I pretend I ain't there. He never know the difference. Never ask me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, go of, go to sleep (*TCP:81*).

This startles Shug who asks Celie:

Do his business. Why, Miss Celie.  
You make it sound like he going to the toilet on you (*TCP:81*).

Celie takes Mr -'s insensitivity further:

My mama die. My sister Nettie run away. Mr - come git me to take care his rotten children. He never ask me nothing bout myself. He clam on top of me and fuck and fuck, even when head bandaged. (*TCP:117*).

When Harpo asks Mr - why he beats Celie, he answers "cause she my wife". Harpo assimilates this kind of domination and when Sofia does not allow him to oppress her, he is shattered. Celie asks him whether he still bothers Sofie and he answers: "She's my wife", and that:

I want her to do what I say, like you do for Pa. When Pa tell you to do something, you do it, when he say not to, you don't. You don't do what he say, he beat you. But not Sofia, she do what she want, don't pay me no mind at all. I tray beat her, she black my eyes (*TCP:66*).

Stade (1985:267) says about male characters:

The male characters in *The Color Purple*, all black, are not as may be thought, made awful by their mistreatment at the hands of whites. Nettie's letters from Africa make precisely this point. It is learnt that Harpo is awful to women because that is what his father, Mr. - taught him to be. Mr.- is also awful to women because his father forced him to be. Left to themselves, these men wanted to help their women with household chores, but everybody laughed at them. Celie redeems these men by giving them the courage to be women, by releasing the woman already in them. But masculinity is unredeemable; masculinity is radical evil, irreducible, the causeless cause of all that's wrong in the world.

Emecheta records her own dissatisfaction with marriage, which eventually brought about her own permanent separation from her spouse. Her marriage ended with much bitterness primarily because of her husband's disregard for her artistic development, culminating in the burning of *The bride price*. To her the point is that mutual respect between male and female is an important ingredient for lasting wedlock. The pain and frustration of African women who, like herself, yearn for sensitivity in their relationships with their partners but hardly ever get anything approximating this have, in her case too, been a shaping experience in the development of her views on men and marriage.

## **5.2 The reconstructed/reborn "man"**

According to Day in his preface to *Alice Walker* (1992:XI), what is somehow neglected in Walker scholarship is the fact that her male characters also grow and change. Men, in Walker's fictional world, mellow as they age, becoming less threatening sexually. These male characters achieve psychological health and wholeness only when they are able to acknowledge women's pain and their role in it. Her women achieve psychological wholeness when they are able to fight oppression,

whether its source is white racism, their own black men, or their own self-righteous anger. Walker's concern is with the survival of a whole people.

Near the end of *The color purple*, a reformed Albert asks Celie to marry him again, this time in spirit as well as flesh. Grange, in *The third life of Grange Copeland* comes back from his "Second Life" in New York, a new and responsible man and a loving grandfather. Truman Held, in *Meridian* takes on the burden that Meridian finally puts down when she walks away, refusing to be a martyr.

And Suwelo in *Temple of my familiar* grows from using Carlotta's body without considering her pain, to recognising that she is far more than blind flesh, that indeed all women are.

If nothing else could have moved Walker to put aside the anger of her early years, her concern for the planet has done so. Hers is a planet where all people, male and female, respect one another.

There is no heaven. This is it. We're already in heaven, you know, and so in order for the earth to survive, we have to acknowledge each other as part of the family, the same family, and also reaffirm those things in ourselves and in other people that we've been brought up to fear or hate (Day, 1993:132-3).

At the end of *The color purple* Albert is working his fields once again and keeping house for himself, even cooking. He appears later in the novel sewing with Celie on the porch of the house they once shared and actually designing shirts to go with Celie's pants. Celie tells him that in Africa, after all, men quilt and wear "dresses". She is the one now wearing the pants and smoking a pipe.

It is only when Celie's brutal husband sits beside his wife sewing that he begins to redeem himself. This is where they differ from the characters conceived by Emecheta. Emecheta cannot envisage the possibility of redemption for males in her native or immigrant cultures; she suggests the need to develop a way to live without them (Kenyon, 1994:339).

Walker's radical re-visioning of the oppressive patriarchal social order is her insistence on the transformation of Mr Albert. His transformation begins when Celie threatens his existence, when her curse disempowers him, since sexuality and power are so closely linked to politics of domination, Mr Albert must be completely desexualized as part of the transformative process (hooks, 1993:289).

The heroine of *The Color Purple*, Celie is pestered by the sexual demands of her husband, Mr., until she stabs him in the hand, wins over his mistress for herself, and finally redeems him by unsexing him (Stade, 1985:265).

Celie's husband finds peace finally when he begins to sew beside the women he had despised. They smoke a pipe together, further transcending cultural stereotypes.

Towards the end of his third life, Grange Copeland can at last stop being hard on himself and look with kindness upon himself and wonder whether any achievement can be more revolutionary.

In the *Saturday Review*, August 22, 1970, Josephine Hendin states that at one time the self-hatred of Grange Copeland was so intense that he could not bring himself to touch his son. But when he discovers in New York that he hated whites even more, that he could act on his hatred and preach it in the streets, Grange loses his self-

loathing. By beating up as many whites as he could, he presumably glimpsed his own worth. Now an old man, he is able to return to Georgia and feel love for his granddaughter. In his third life he does take care of his son's youngest daughter after her mother is killed by her drunken husband, finally he can say to his beloved granddaughter:

I know the danger of putting all the blame on somebody else for the mess you make out of your life. I fell into the trap myself (1993:5).

Grange shows remorse when talking to Ruth, his granddaughter!

The mean things I have done, think of me when I'm gone, as a big, rough-looking coward. Who learned to love himself only after thirty-odd years. And then overdone it (*TTGC*:157).

Ruth was not to know until another time, that her grandfather, as she knew him, was a reborn man.

When Grange talks to his son, Brownfield, he finally acknowledges all the excesses inculcated by his male ego, and pours out self-blame.

...Nobody give a damn for me but your Ma, and I messed her up trying to be a big man? I just couldn't face up to never making no progress. All I'm saying Brownfield is that one day I had to look back on my life and see where I went wrong, and when I did look back I found out your Ma'd be alive today if I hadn't as good as shot her to death, same as you done your wife. We guilty Brownfield, and whether one of us is going to move a step in the right direction until he admit it.

*The third life of Grange Copeland* is characterised in thematic and structural terms by their emphasis on possibilities of change. Grange is a man who experiences three lives: one in which he hates himself; one in which he hates his oppressor; and the final one in which he is able to love his granddaughter, and therefore, himself.

Although novels of the Copeland history are horrible and painful, the novel itself is optimistic, for in spite of all this, Grange is able to change. By taking responsibility for his own life, he is able to love himself and pass on the possibility of “surviving whole” to his granddaughter. At this point, the text re-introduces Grange, now older and wise. In his third life, Grange is now the story-teller, the person who has travelled for and returned to share his wisdom. He has undergone a major conversion. At the heart of Grange’s transformation is the novel’s ideological statement that one cannot be so dehumanised by a system as to lose one’s own humanity.

In this chapter an attempt has been made to show that women writers, especially Walker, do not only affirm the societal status of women and reverse the elevated status of men as has been perpetuated by patriarchy, but they also show how men grow, develop and look at women differently, as their equals. Their male characters undergo a serious and necessary conversion. They are able to acknowledge women’s pain and their role in it.

## CHAPTER 6: A CONCLUDING SYNTHESIS OF THE VIEWS OF EMECHETA AND WALKER ON THE STATUS OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY; RECOMMENDATIONS

The two women writers dealt with here, in spite of their differently situated cultures, share some common experiences and views with regard to the status of women in society. Whereas they come from places wide apart geographically and in terms of the relative development of the societies they come from there are striking similarities.

Walker, an African-American, was born in Georgia, grew up in a particular kind of culture, but lived in a country considered highly-developed and western. Emecheta, an Ibo from Nigeria who emigrated to Britain, came from a developing country in a continent generally considered not to have advanced too far along the route to westernisation. When she started writing she found herself in the old world, the developed world of Britain, but against the background of her African past and still located within the bruising realities of a patriarchally-based expatriate community in London.

In spite of the fairly dissimilar backgrounds in terms of political, socio-historical and economic realities, the authors in question do share some striking similarities in their avowedly post-colonial situations (as discussed earlier in the study), and this led to their exploring similar themes and concerns in their novels.

They fictionalise the topic of motherhood that had for long in African history been the great unwritten story. Being a mother is the experience of most women, but in the societies in which they were both embedded the institution of motherhood was still firmly and aggressively under the control of men, and the relative fertility of a woman perhaps the single strongest decisive factor determining her social standing and security. Motherhood would therefore always have been interpreted via the male myth, religion, science, politics and economics. Both carefully and critically examine what it means to be a woman in predominantly patriarchal societies, where thought is structured in terms of the simplistic polarities of male/female, active/passive, rational/irrational (Kenyon, 1994:340).

Both Emecheta and Walker acknowledge the contributions of their predecessors, black women writers who had laid a foundation for women writers whom they also look up to as their role models. Emecheta was inspired in her works by Flora Nwapa, her fellow Nigerian writer. Walker was inspired by the works of Zora Neale Hurston. As Kenyon (1994:342) states, Hurston's research released both herself and Walker from the often condescending records of white folklorists, and inspired their growing respect for the achievements of black women.

Walker and Emecheta can in many ways, although not exclusively, be regarded as feminist writers. They can both be regarded as crusaders for the rights of women located within a stifling male patriarchal context, and they both focus on the achievement of change in terms of the woman's status within this context. A study of the female

characters in their fiction shows a new conception of women who grow in strength, influence and ultimately independence of thought and action. They have in most instances decisively moved out from under the societal constraints placed on women and even in a case where the main female character dies, as in the case of Tashi (*Possessing the secret of joy*) the sense of escape brought about by the reality of rebellion against fate there is a strong sense of victory. They review and renew the roles of women inside and outside the family circle, in America, Britain and Africa in order to arrive at less divisive and more creative ways of living together.

One other common factor to be found in the writing of these two black women writers is their perception of the role of religious beliefs. Kenyon (1994:349) points out that Emecheta is, in her way, as emancipated and as idiosyncratic in her religious beliefs as Walker. Though Christian missionary work is considered and appreciated, Walker boldly resorts to African myth and traditional religious belief in order to create a space for living freed from rigid and outwardly imposed Christian morality and religion. Celie has to stop writing to a patriarchal God and become capable of rejecting the vision of a stern and unforgiving white-bearded Father before she can become an autonomous person. The Olinka worship the snake, which they consider to be the smartest, cleanest, slickest thing (p. 233). Walker's strategy is to reverse and re-envision the Christian concept of the snake and thus of evil. This reversal and re-envisioning can also be true in the case of Emecheta's work. She translates Christian faith into a form compatible with an African outlook

Heaven is down here, on earth. When someone dies, they go back into the earth. The land was here before we came, we are all just passing through ... I try to go

to church every Sunday, and praying I equate with the African way of talking to oneself (Emecheta, quoted in Kenyon, 1994:349).

To highlight the inequality that patriarchy has embedded in societal structures and consciousness, in *The slave girl* (1989) Emecheta uses the slave as the symbol of the universal condition of women. And like Walker in *The color purple*, she condemns the over-specialisation of gendered spheres – women doing woman's work, in the home, men earning a living outside the home. Both writers deal in some detail with the dilemma of the two spheres, in which women are subordinated by way of subtle or not so subtle notions of women's proper occupation being bounded by gossip and stupid girlish behaviour. They both show women being used as convenient scapegoats, called backward when conforming and wanton and immoral when trying to break out of the constricting mould by exercising at least a modicum of choice (Kenyon, 349-340). Their heroines, especially the strong women such as Meridian in the eponymous novel and Adah in *Second class citizen* suffer double domination - being dominated by whites and by their own males. Both therefore find sexism as restricting as racism, and are vivid and striking examples of the double bind of the black woman in post-colonial society.

Concomitant with this, it is interesting to note, in the works under consideration, that work in the city is glossed over by Walker, whereas Emecheta stresses a mother's loss of status in urban wage-earning society (Kenyon, 347). The mother is praised and made much of for adhering to her traditional role even if over-burdened with children and other home duties, but the wage-earning woman (often driven to this by the very exigencies of life imposed on her by a man) is abused and even rejected for another woman if she should be guilty of the double failure of leaving the home and not producing the (right)

heir. In the case of the immigrant finding herself in the racially-determined ghetto of her adopted country the ostracism is exacerbated by white racism, as so vividly and poignantly represented in *Second class citizen*.

Both Walker and Emecheta address the plight of women. Each in her own way within the broader feminist project tries to redress the injustices implicit in the ways in which male writers had tended to portray women in their works. Male writers for long relegated women to a low status, presenting them as that which they should not be – the object of male dominance. It is this “othering” that the emergent female writers, in this case Walker and Emecheta, address vehemently in their fiction in a way intended to declaim injustice and attempt to reverse the current social views, mores and perceptions vis-à-vis women. What is of particular interest within this framework, given the insistent quality of their indictment of social injustice, is that some at least of their works can be said to be strongly autobiographical, especially in the case of Emecheta, with *The joys of motherhood* and *Head above water*.

Both these writers question long-standing traditional customs, arranged marriages (they have the courage to give utterance to the notion that marriage is good only if it works for both partners), polygamy, motherhood (especially the notion of procreation as the prime, indeed sole justification for woman’s existence), women’s unquestioning obedience to their husbands (and other males in the family hierarchy), the custom of the bride price, wife-beating and the further iniquities attendant on the still-prevalent practice of genital

mutilation. It is curious to note that Walker speaks out on this topic, while in Emecheta's work (the novels under consideration) there is deep silence about this particular topic.

Stratton has this to say about the function of women's fiction in the literary world, especially with regard to Emecheta in *The joys of motherhood*:

It has two major ideological functions: to valorize the emergence of a female literary tradition to refute conventional images of women. Secondary functions include challenging the construction of motherhood and prostitution in patriarchal ideology and highlighting various aspects of colonial experience. The relationship between *The joys of motherhood* and male tradition is characterized mainly by antagonism. For although there is intertextual agreement on the damaging effects of colonialism on African societies, Emecheta's focus is on its impact on women. More importantly, her major concern is to challenge patriarchal ideology (1994:119).

Emecheta and Walker share common ground in the sense that they attempt to eradicate stereotyped portrayals of women. In the past, that is the past underlying and implicitly framing their works, women were naturally excluded from public affairs, they were viewed as unsuited and unable to hold positions of responsibility outside the home, to be in a position of seniority vis-à-vis men and had to be "invisible" when serious matters of state and society were discussed. It is for this reason that the experience of marginality is reflected in the thematic pre-occupations of African women's literature as exemplified by these authors, while men's literature for a long time tended to be full of ideological valorisations of the status quo of male domination.

African women's writing is a multi-voiced discourse. As McLuskie and Innes observe (in Stratton, 1994:173):

when women began publishing their work in the mid-sixties in Africa, they faced the problem not only of speaking for the experience of women in their own right ... but also of combating the orthodoxies of colonial and anti-colonial writing. In fact, by merely writing when they did, these women challenged a number of orthodoxies: 'the voiceless nature of the black woman', for example her lack of subjectivity and historical reference, as well as the definition of female creativity as residing solely in the womb and its corollary: the notion of writing as an exclusively male activity.

Unlike the male writers who in their post-colonial literature only expose the oppression and injustice of colonialism within the African context and the rest of the Third World, women writers thus clearly not only concentrate on cultural clashes brought about by the impact of Western urban values on agrarian traditions and values, but they also point out, in their fight against imperialist practices, the invidious patriarchal oppression suffered by women, and which would seem to be harder to shake off than the political oppression implicit within the post-colonial context.

African literature is characterised by protest – protest against domination by one ("superior") race over another. The literature of all former colonial communities has elements of protest deeply embedded in it. In the same way, women's literature is characterised by protest, since women had been (and mostly still are) oppressed from within in terms of a patriarchal system. Protest is therefore a leitmotif in women's literature – a protest that is more wide-ranging than the protest in men's literature. While male writers from oppressed and colonised communities and cultures can "take it upon themselves" to become decolonised and write a literature that can aid in the process through the insidious effect of the written word, female writers have a harder time of it,

but part of the thrust of this study has been to demonstrate that, in certain works by Walker and Emecheta, they succeed in precisely that – creating female characters who are independent and who become increasingly able to resist domination, even if the price they have to pay is often horribly high.

Walker and Emecheta both rethink stereotypes about mothers but in intriguingly different ways. These differences stem partly from their distinctive modes of upbringing (as pointed out previously). Equally politicised, both pay tribute to their cultures, but then particularly to the hard-working story-telling women within these cultures. They are both mothers themselves, and they pay tribute to the extra dimension that this experience had given them. They renounce the cliché of the “sweet mother” and represent, in their fiction, the variety and dignity of the many black mother figures they have known.

Emecheta’s literature offers alternatives to some of the stereotypes that patriarchy had imposed on societies for centuries. Her literature encourages the acceptance of girl babies, for example – girls should not be seen as “scraps of humanity”, as Nwabudike regarded Ogbanye Ojebeta’s baby girl, and men should not see girls as things, as Obi’s wife asks about Ogbanye’s child: “And what is this? I want to be sick!” As a result of the values espoused in Emecheta’s literature, one should never again regard a female child as “a bundle”, or “a scrap of humanity” (Emecheta, 1986:10).

Traditional arranged marriages are among the practices that Emecheta focuses on as being repressive of women. Women should be able to choose their own partners and be

allowed to have a say in the bride price. Not only does she make clear her stance against arranged marriage in her fiction, but she practises it, as she states in *Head above water*: “I refused all the men kept for me and married the man I called Francis” (1986:67).

Both Walker and Emecheta show that by clubbing together, women can overcome male domination. Nnu Ego, in *The joys of motherhood*, is too busy obeying her husband, giving birth to children and fulfilling societal expectations to be able to have time to befriend women and share experiences and ideas with other women. As a result, she dies alone and quietly by the roadside, finally beaten by the iniquities of the life in which she finds herself. In *The color purple*, Walker shows the strength of sisterhood through the relationship between Celie and Nettie, who help each other against the oppressive and cruel men in their lives. They emerge triumphant at the end of the novel, again through Shug Avery who helps Celie recover her lost humanity – a recovery that is also boosted by the knitting sessions with other women.

Of greater importance is Walker’s saying that “Resistance is the secret of joy”. Her literature, particularly *Possessing the secret of joy*, hints that women’s secret of joy is not a matter of keeping quiet when doubly and often triply oppressed, but to offer the resistance that lies at the heart of the liberating impulse expressing itself as resistance.

From this study, it has emerged that while the issue of the African woman writer has come under scrutiny more and more, in fact has been granted centre stage in a number of studies, there are other areas that could do with some exploration.

One such area would be the depiction of woman in literature written by men in the more recent past with a view to establishing what changes, if any, have occurred (as we have seen, some shift could already be detected in the later works of Ngugi).

It would also be of serious interest to study the extent to which African women writers (from the continent itself) deal openly and honestly with the issue of genital mutilation, as Emecheta is curiously silent on this issue in the novels under consideration. It would also, as a concomitant to this, be interesting to study the effects emanating from the interface between rural and urban in the female context, especially at the beginning of a new century and a new millennium. Current news reportage on the plight of women and children within the context of African wars and the resultant problems of refugees paints a bleak and not very encouraging picture, and the representation of this plight in fiction could make for fascinating insights.

Women's situations in general have improved to some extent in some parts of Africa, but as suggested above the overall plight of African women on the continent itself has not been ameliorated to any major extent, and further study and further production of novels by such authors would be crucial for purposes of highlighting these issues and furthering the cause of the liberation of women in Africa – especially within the cause of African Renaissance which is being advocated so ardently and with such urgency within the broader African community.

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