ALTERNATIVE PORTRAITS OF POWER AND EMPOWERMENT IN SELECTED AFRICAN FEMALE WRITERS' WORKS

BY

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DECLARATION BY CANDIDATE

This thesis is my original work and has not been presented for a degree in any other university or any other award.

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DEDICATION

To my Heavenly Father who never fails.

To my late father Nathan Shigali and my mother Finora Vwamula

who believed in a girl child despite clan protests.

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DEFINITION OF TERMS

Patriarchy: is a socially constructed ideology based on a belief in male superiority versus female subordination. In patriarchal ideology power is monolithically defined as dominance and it is presumed to be biologically determined.

Feminism: was coined by a Frenchman Charles Fourier in early 19th century. It is a broad term that embraces all ideologies and movements that seek to end gender discrimination in human relations. However, there are many schools of feminism. The distinction between them is based on their analysis of patriarchy and the emancipatory options they advocate.

African feminism: unlike Western feminisms, is a humanistic feminism that recognizes the multiple forms of oppression which both African men and women are subjected to. Its fundamental tenet is complementarity and inter-dependence of men and women. This tenet problematizes the monolithic concept of power in all discriminatory human rerlations including gender caste, class and race. It engenders an alternative conceptualization of power that subverts idealization of "power over others".

Radical feminism: is a Euro-American ideology that views conflict in human relations as essentially gender based. It advocates the creation of an alternative women's community.

Power: In this study there are five operational definitions of power: "Power over others", "power from within", "power with others", "power to do", and "Supreme Power". We have adapted Joanna Rowlands (1997) definitions of the various forms of power.

Power over/dominance/supremacy is defined as "controlling power". This power is conventionally assumed to reside in a given feature such as maleness, caste, class or race. All discriminatory human relations thrive on idealization of this form of power.

Power to is the human capacity to think and to act. It does not reside in a static condition such as sex, class or race, but it is realized in its exercise. It "creates new possibilities" without exerting domination over other people.

Power with (others) implies co-operation, complementarity, compromise, and interdependence among individuals involved in a given process or simply in the business of human existence. It is the basis of the concept of democracy.

Power from within is the innate spiritual strength and uniqueness that resides in every human being. It is also manifested through exercise.

Supreme power comes from the **Supreme Being** who goes by different names in different cultures and religions.

Empowerment: Depending on a given meaning of the root word "power", empowerment acquires different meanings. The popular meaning of the term in contemporary gender discourse seems to emanate from the monolithic concept of power as dominance. The meaning changes when the term is defined in the context of alternative forms of power.

Gender is unisex. It refers to "attribution of socially constructed roles and attributes that arise out of differential socialization of male and female in patriarchal culture.

Gender insensitivity or blindness involves the acceptance of the above attribution, whereas **gender sensitivity and conscientisation** entails interrogation of the same with the aim of changing the inequalities it engenders and perpetuates.

Gender Equity refers to a fair and just treatment of all members of society irrespective of their sex. Like empowerment, gender equity becomes a relative term depending on the conceptualization of power by a given feminist school of thought.

ABSTRACT

Western radical feminist critics (Frank 1987, Andrade 1990, Stratton 1994) inappropriately applied their separatist strand of feminist ideology to African literature. Their interpretation alienates African female writers from their target audience, but most importantly it silences the unique contribution they make to contemporary global power and empowerment discourse. Both African female writers and critics have contested this interpretation (Emecheta 1986, Ngcobo 1986, Nwapa 1993, D'Almeida 1994, Nnaemeka 1995, Zongo 1996). However, the latter have not interrogated the concept of power and empowerment which underpins western feminist literary criticism. This qualitativelibrary study attempts to fill this gap by interpreting selected African female writers' works using an alternative conceptual framework that defines power and empowerment from an African feminist perspective. The conceptual framework combined with literary stylistics is applied to six novels by four African female writers. The thesis is divided into six chapters. Chapter One forms the introduction to the study. Its highlight is the identification and description of alternative conceptual framework for interpreting the portraits of power and empowerment in the selected texts. Chapter Two is an analysis of two of Buchi Emecheta's novels: *The Slave Girl* (1977), and *Naira Power* (1982). In these texts Emecheta vilifies dominance and elevates positive forms of power. In Chapter Three, we examine Mariama Ba's, *So Long a Letter* (1980) and *Scarlet Song* (posthumous 1981). In the two novels the writer interrogates the basis of male supremacy, especially the version espoused by negritude ideology. In Chapter Four we analyse Amma Darko's portraits of conventional indicators of power and empowerment in *The Housemaid* (1998).Contrary to popular belief, this writer shows that value-free education and property ownership does not necessarily empower women. In Chapter Five we focus on Ama Ata Aidoo's portrait of romantic love in *Changes* (1991). In this novel Aidoo situates romance in contemporary empowerment discourse. She shows that romance and marriage are not incompatible with empowerment of women. Chapter Six includes a summary of portraits of power and empowerment in the selected novels and recommendations.

CHAPTER ONE

1.1 Background to the study

The subject of the current study emerged coincidentally in the course of earlier studies done by the researcher in literary criticism and gender studies. A number of documents were instrumental in shaping the research problem. They include Katherine Frank's article, 'Women Without Men: The Feminist Novel in Africa' (1987), Susan Andrade's 'Rewriting History, Motherhood and Rebellion: Naming African Women's Literary Tradition' (1990), and Florence Stratton's critical text: *Contemporary African Literature and Politics of Gender* (1994), all of which claimed to have discovered portraits of separatism in African female writers' creative writing.

Obioma Nnaemeka's (1995) rejoinder to the preceeding texts reveals problems in Western feminist critics' readings of African literature. In 'Feminism, Rebellious Women, and Cultural Boundaries: Rereading Flora Nwapa and her Compatriots', Nnaemeka argues that western critics are so fixated on "issues of feminism, particularly the separatism of radical feminism, that they see what is not in the text and refuse to see what the text presents to them" (1995:9). Opportune Nzongo (1996) concurs with Nnaemeka and emphasizes the need to scrutinize the theoretical bases of Western radical criticism. Other texts that grapple with this issue include Buchi Emecheta's article, "Feminism with a small 'f'!"(1988). In this paper Emecheta disclaims Western critics' reading of her works. Ogundipe-Leslie's 'African Women, Culture and another Development' (1993) emphasizes that African feminism aims at empowerment of women and society and it is intricately interlinked with other struggles on the African continent. Filomena Steady's 'African Feminism World-wide Perpective' (1998) advocates complimentarity of African women and men in the struggle for gender equity. Joe Rowland's *Questioning Empowerment* (1997) interrogates definitions of power in contemporary empowerment discourse from an afrocentric feminist perspective. On the whole, all these

scholars deconstruct the application of Western feminisms, particularly the separatist school, to non-western women's movements and studies.

Radical feminism is variously designated as: radical, separatist, biological or cultural feminism. Its essential tenet is a male-exclusion emancipatory strategy for women. This strand of feminism is a sectarian Euro-American ideology, but it has been disseminated erroneously as a universal feminist philosophy. Separatist scholars-cum-activists usually refer to their ideology simply as "feminism". This is a misnomer since the term encapsulates a broad spectrum of local and regional perspectives on variants of patriarchy worldwide. The separatist ideology is based on a contestable premise that "the motive force of history is the striving of men for power of dominance over women" (Hartman, 1989:317). Consequently, separatists subsume all human conflicts into two categories: male oppression versus female subordination in essentially polar, as opposed to binary gender relations. They envision empowerment of women as a one dimensional struggle over power between the "male oppressor" and "female victim". The form of power in question is never problematized. Conversely, African feminism problematizes supremacy per se as the basis of all forms of oppression including gender discrimination.

As a proposal for social transformation radical feminism has internal flaws that delimit its emancipatory function. Transposing the ideology in fiction and literary criticism entails transferring its initial flaws to a different realm of knowledge. The trend has been contested by western literary critics, notably Mary Eagleton (1986) and Sally Minogue (1990). Interpretations based on separatist ideology focus on inter-gender conflict in conjugal relations. The approach ignores the multiple gender relations in which all people are engaged. Although all fiction is dynamic, separatist construction of meaning becomes suspect because it entails overt prejudice and conscious silencing of significant aspects of a given text. In particular, separatist literary critics do not focus on stylistics which is crucial in shaping meaning in a literary art. Cross-cultural transposition of separatist theory to African literature compounds a hitherto complex ideological, critical, and epistemological problem. Unfortunately the approach –

euphemistically labeled feminist criticism of African literature – has acquired prominence in contemporary criticism thereby silencing crucial aspects of African female writers' works that challenge supremacy and suggest structural social transformation, albeit fictionally.

Erroneous universalization of radical feminist literary criticism emanates from Western feminists' imperialist tendencies which foreground their region- specific strand of feminism, at the expense of alternative feminisms in other parts of the world. Organized opposition against discrimination of women all over the world has been one of the major global issues in the last half of the 20th Century. The United Nations Organization has highlighted the issue and sought solutions. However, the UNO's search for one feminist agenda, through its Conference on Women which is held every decade since 1975, has been challenged by the divergence in the empowerment options proposed by women in the different cultures that comprise the international community (Sen and Grown 1988, Ogundipe-Leslie 1993, Kishwar 1994, Steady 1998).

The term empowerment emerged from the experience of the postcolonial world where gender inequality is closely linked with racial and class oppression. If the root word power is defined as dominance, empowerment of women would indeed imply gaining power over men. In this context, empowerment of women is viewed as a contest over the power to control and dominate. Central to the current study are Afrocentric feminist notions of power that is both feminist and humanist. The end result of an empowerment process based on this ideal would be the elimination of oppression as opposed to reversal of discrimination. Consequently, the concept of equity implies a situation where everyone is treated equally and fairly. Whether or not this ideal is achievable in real life is a question best delegated to gender activism. Our concern, in literary scholarship, is to investigate portraits of equity as depicted in fiction.

The empowerment approach in development discourse deconstructs the underlying assumption that all men in every society benefit from socio-economic development at the expense of women. It further challenges the

assumption that all women all over the world want to be integrated into the western individualistic capitalist ideologies of development and social transformation. As already stated these assumptions are negated by advocacy for non-Western approaches to advancement of women in gender activism in Asia and Africa. Scholars and activists in these regions tend to embrace a humanistic vision, which extends beyond women's rights. A number of African female scholars have developed alternative feminist social theories that affirm this worldview, the most comprehensive of which includes Nigerian critic Molara Ogundipe-Leslie (1993, 1994) and Sierra Leonean anthropologist Filomena Chioma Steady (1981, 1998). The two scholars contend that African feminism views gender relations as binary but not always polar. On the basis of her own research, Deidre Bádéjo affirms Steady's definition of African feminism thus:

> African feminist ideology founded upon the principles of traditional African values that view gender roles as complementary, parallel, asymmetrical, and autonomously linked in the continuity of human life. As such, African feminism recognizes the inherent, multiple roles of women and men in reproduction, production, and the distribution of wealth, power, and responsibility for sustaining human life. This feminist perspective is underscored by traditional mythical beliefs and religious practices found in African oral literary traditions and festivals that place women at the centre of the social order as custodians of the earth, fire and water and uphold men as the guardians of women's custodial rights. (Bádéjo, 1998:94)

In summary this scholar emphasizes complimentarity and interdependence of men and women.

In literary criticism, universalization of the radical separatist approach has been contested on cultural grounds. Nnaemeka maintains that "Western feminism is part and parcel of Western cultural imperialism". She argues that radical feminists' distortion of African literature targets the "outdated myths about African indigenous cultures" which were initially distorted by Western anthropologists and are yet to be re-investigated (Ogundipe &

Davies, 1994:1-5). When these myths are translated into literary criticism the result is a configuration of the African female writers' perspectives (Nnaemeka, 1995:94). Katherine Frank is one of the Western critics who achieve such configuration. In her article, 'Women without Men: The Feminist Novel in Africa' (1987), Frank's separatist empowerment option is imposed on the African novel as follows:

> All these novels embrace the solution of a world without men: man is the enemy, the exploiter and oppressor. Given the historically established and culturally sanctioned sexism of African society, there is no possibility of a compromise, or even truce with the enemy. Instead, women must spurn patriarchy in all its guises and create a safe, sane, supportive world of women: a world of mothers and daughters, sisters, and friends (Frank, 1987:15).

One of the texts that lead Frank to this conclusion is Mariama Bâ's novel *So Long a Letter* (1980). In this long letter, Ramatoulaye says: "I am not indifferent to the irreversible currents of women's liberation that are lashing the world" (88). But she also says, "I remain persuaded of the inevitable and necessary complementarity of man and woman. Love, imperfect as it may be in its content and expression, remains the natural link between these two beings" (Ibid). She goes on to conclude: "The success of the family is born of a couple's harmony --- The nation is made up of all the families, rich and poor, united or separated, aware or unaware. The success of a nation therefore depends inevitably on the family" (89). These views reflect the central tenets of African feminist social theories, but Frank proceeds to impose a separatist ideology on the text nonetheless. In her interpretation of Emecheta's *Double Yoke* (1982) Frank claims: "women and men in contemporary African society are at war with one another that women cannot hope to vanquish their oppressors in open combat. Instead they must cleverly exploit their exploiters and then retreat for their emotional needs to a separatist world of women" (1987:24). Frank further states: "In order to be free and fulfilled as a woman she must renounce her African identity because of the inherent sexism of traditional African culture. Or, if she wishes to cherish and affirm her 'Africanness',

she must renounce her claims to feminine independence and self determination" (qtd. in Stratton 1994:110).

Frank's argument above assumes non-existence of African feminism. Yet the latter does exist and has its own conceptualization of power and empowerment which underlies African women's liberation theories such as Chikwenye Ogunyemi's Womanism, Ogundipe – Leslie's Stiwanism, Filomena Chioma Steady's African feminism, all of which embrace a holistic view of emancipation without downplaying oppression of women. Jennifer Harolds "Carribean Women's Empowerment Wheel (1991)" discussed under conceptual framework in Chapter One, is a classic graphic illustration of this Afro-centric conceptualization of oppression and emancipation. Bell Hooks' holistic definition of feminism captures the multi-dimensional nature of afro-centric approach to emancipation of women and society:

> To me feminism is not simply a strggle to end male chauvinism or movement to ensure that women will have equal rights with men; it is a commitment to eradicating the ideology of domination that permeates western culture on various levels-- sex, race and class, to name a few (qtd. In Collins, 1990:38)

We assume that the fundamental African concept of power that underlies the above social theories and ideas manifests itself in African women's fiction.

There are some Western feminist theories, which may be relevant to the African situation. Unfortunately such theories are not as widely disseminated as those of the radical school. As a result few people are aware of alternative feminisms. In Kenya particularly, articles appearing in the mass media in the last few years which attempt to engage feminist, gender and empowerment discourses exemplify lack of awareness and prejudice. When these limitations are transposed into literary criticism, understanding of African female writers' works is impaired.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Western separatist feminist criticism, which is based on a monolithic concept of power as essentially dominance, has been erroneously applied to African female writers' fiction by its proponents such as Katherine Frank (1987), Susan Andrade (1990) and Florence Stratton (1994). These critics have constructed meanings that claim to affirm separatist feminist ideology in the African text. These readings alienate African female writers from their target audience and simultaneously silence the unique portraits of gender issues and empowerment discourses in the African feminist text. The African female artists in question have contested radical feminist reading of their texts (Emecheta 1986, Nwapa 1993). African female critics have also contested separatist interpretations of African literature (D'Almeida 1994, Nnaemeka 1995, Zongo 1996, Wilson-Tagoe 1996). But both groups have not specifically interrogated the philosophy of power that defines separatist literary scholarship. African critics have not provided an alternative interpretive approach that can effectively deconstruct radical feminist misreading, but even much more importantly they have not analyzed African female writers' unique portraits of power and empowerment. Consequently the latter remains unexamined to the point of being erased from the text, yet it constitutes the African female writers' crucial contribution to contemporary feminist debate and power discourse. The current study seeks to fill this gap.

1.3 Research Objectives

1. To interrogate the concept of power and empowerment that underpins radical feminist criticism of African literature.
2. To determine the divergence between radical feminist and African feminist concept of power and empowerment.
3. To construct an alternative conceptual framework for interpreting African female writers' works.
4. To analyse the portraits of power and empowerment in selected African female writers' works using the alternative conceptual framework.

1.4 Research Questions

1. What is the philosophical concept of power and empowerment that informs radical feminist criticism of African literature?
2. What is the divergence between radical feminist concept of power and empowerment and African feminist concept of the same?
3. Which literary and African feminist theories can provide an alternative framework for interpreting portraits of power and empowerment in African female writers' works?
4. What are the verifiable portraits of power and empowerment in the selected texts by African female writers?

1.5 Research Assumptions

1. Radical Feminist criticism of African literature yields misreadings as disctinct from alternative readings of dynamic literary texts.
2. African female writers' fiction is informed by African feminism which aims at empowerment of women and society as a whole.
3. Analysis of selected texts using an alternative conceptual framework will yield different verifiable portraits of power and empowerment.
4. African feminist literacy artists provide a unique fictional world in which a genuinely alternative perspective on power and empowerment can be experimented.

1.6 Justification of the study and selected texts

As already stated there is a gap in contemporary literary debate between Western critics and African female writers and critics. The Western critics whose readings of African literature have been contested espouse radical – separatist feminist school of thought. But the contestation by African literary scholars remains inadequate because they have not scrutinized the fundamental theories that underspin radical feminist literary critism. The need for scholarly research in this area has been expressed by African critics (Nnaemeka, 1995, Zongo, 1996). In "Rethinking African Literary Criticism: Obioma Nnaemeka", Opportune Zongo re-emphasizes

Nnaemeka's plea: "we must ... thoroughly scrutinize the theoretical and epistemological issues, the methodological procedures and pedagogical questions in feminist scholarship as it addresses marginalized women, particularly African women" (Zongo, 1996: 179).

No specific literary study has been done in this area. African critics who have engaged this controversy have not interrogated the basic fallacies of radical feminist criticism. Firstly, radical feminism has erroneously mandated itself to speak for all feminisms. For example radical feminist literary critics refer to their interpretations generally as "feminist" without naming their specific feminist orientation, but a keen analysis of their readings reveals the inherent separatist tenet. When {Catherine Frank (1987) refers to African women's writing as the "feminist novel in Africa," she creates the impression that the authors share her ideology. African critics fall into the trap set by separatists when they refer to it generally as "feminism" as if it designates essential principles of all feminisms put together. Secondly, the philosophical cause of radical feminist misreadings (Frank 19S7. Andrade 1990. Stratton 1994) has not been examined and consequently distinguished from the philosophical base of African women's perspectives on patriarchy and the Woman Question which are manifested in creative writing.

So far, there is little documentation of African feminist literary criticism to counter radical feminist literary theories in the same way as African feminist social theories cited above do. The debate on literary criticism is rather belated because the search for African feminism started in the late 1970s spearheaded by AAWORD (Baffoun, et. al 1985). The first substantive text on feminist criticism from an African standpoint is Carole Boyce Davies and Anne Adams Graves' Ngambika: Studies in African Literature (1986). Since then a number of relevant critical texts by African scholars have been published. The list includes Feminism in African Literature edited by Helen Chukwuma (1994), Irene D'Almeida's, Francophone African Women Writers: Destroying the Emptiness of Silence (1994), Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi's Africa Wo/mati Patava (1996), Juliana Abberiyi's Gender in African Literature (1997), Phanuel Egejuru

and Ketu Katrak's Nwanyibu: Woman being and African Literature (1997), *The Politics of (M)Othering edited by Obioma Nnaemeka* (1997). In as much as these critics make a case for African feminism, their protesr against radical feminist interpretations in particular tends to be obliterated when they refer to this particular strand simply as "feminism" or "Western feminism". At the same time the critical texts do not address the concept of power specifically.this study aims at clarifying the issues discussed above by constructing an alternative interpretive approach based on tenets of African and Afrocentric feminist social theories and concepts.

1.7 Scope and Limitations of the study

The scope includes six novels by four African female writers from West Africa. The texts address themes of oppression and emancipation in various dimensions and portray men and women at various sites including traditional institutions, national liberation struggles and post independence structures. Each of the texts has been selected because of the unique dimension it brings to the current debate in terms of interrogating the conventional monolithic definition of power as dominance and definition of power and empowerment of women and society.

Buchi Emecheta's *The Slave Girl* (1977) depicts African women's participation in illegal slavery and slave trade in early 20th century Nigeria. The immediate setting of the story is the famous Onitsha market in Nigeria. In this setting the market mammie or female business tycoon wields economic, social, and even political supremacy over others. Emecheta scrutinizes the true nature and function of the market mammie's supposed power and empowerment. Pitted against the girl-child she enslaves, the slave mistress's "power" becomes highly suspect. The novel's seemingly paradoxical title makes it the story of the "powerless" slave girl rather than that of the "powerful" market mammie. The power relations between the two characters and others in the novel intimate a redefinition of conventional perceptions of power and empowerment. In this novel Emecheta also portrays the supreme power of God which western secularized criticism usually silences. In the African feminist worldview

spirituality is an essence that shapes subsequent conceptualization of power and empowerment

The second text is Emecheta's *Naira Power*. At surface level this novel appears to be an ordinary critique of the stereotypical portrait of Nigeria as the epitome of corruption in Africa. But at a deeper level the text engages the conventional materialist concept of power. It negates the perception that money signifies power. Emecheta advances a paradox that the quest for naira power is in fact tantamount to powerlessness. This novel exemplifies African feminist subversion of conventional materialism. The writer seeks to persuade contemporary capitalist-oriented readers that money is not synonymous with power. Such is the redefinition, defamiliarization, deconstruction and reconstruction of the concept of materialist power over others that *Naira power* offers. In this sense the novel achieves a redefinition of power and empowerment.

The third text is Mariama Bâ's So *Long a Letter* (1980). Frank 1987 and Stratton 1994 have hailed *So Long a Letter* as an archetype of separatist ideology in the "feminist" novel in Africa. This interpretation is based on the experiences of two main female characters: Ramatoulaye and Aissatou whose marriages end in separation and divorce respectively. However (and with all due awareness of the dynamism of literary art) the reading above is not verifiable. It is based on extreme selectivity that silences even the very major characters' own views on the issue. Furthermore, it focuses entirely on the endings of the problematic marriages to the exclusion of all other human relations in the novel such as familial and intra-gender-relations. All these relationships are not anchored on power over others. The term power must have a different meaning in each of these relationships. Since Aissatou is hailed as an exemplification of empowerment, the concept seems to denote western education, economic independence and singlehood. Jo Rowlands (1997) defines this type of empowerment as a "westernization" version. By inference there must be non-western version. A close reading of *So Long a Letter* reveals that indeed there is a counter-separatist concept of empowerment.

The fourth text is Mariama Bâ's *Scarlet Song* (1981 - posthumous). This novel brings very unique dimensions to the debate on empowerment of the African woman. It is set in Senegal during the presidency of Leopold Senghor who made negritude the official government policy. This historical context enables Mariama Bâ to investigate the concept of empowerment of African women and society in the context of what may be described as ideal traditional African culture. The author does not create any unrealistic feminists or feminist movement in this novel; instead she interrogates the impact of all discriminatory ideologies on human relations. She shows that all ideologies that celebrate the concept of power over others are retrogressive irrespective of their cultural origin. The flaws in both negritude and western liberalism are portrayed in the experience of the central character Mirelle, a French woman married to Ousmane an elite Senegalese Muslim. In this story Mariama Bâ subverts the conventional patriarchal ideal which claims that male is synonymous with supremacy. On the whole, *Scarlet Song* effectively problematizes and deconstructs indigenous African concept of male supremacy. The novel substantiates the central argument of this study that the crucial contribution that African female novelists make to contemporary gender debate revolves around their deconstruction of conventional monolithic concept of power as dominance

The fifth text is Amma Darko's The *Housemaid* (1998). This text subverts two contemporary conventional signifiers of power. The author demonstrates that western education per se and property ownership for its own sake does not result in meaningful empowerment of women. In this sense Amma Darko achieves a defamiliarization with truisms that permeate all contemporary empowerment discourse such as *The Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies (1985)* and *The Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action (1995)*. The author awakens her readers from the complacent belief in materialistic indicators of empowerment and makes them aware of the need for meaningful redefinition of the concept.

The last text is Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes* (1991). This text was selected because it addresses the issue of the power relations that affect sexual relationships. Like Amma Darko, Aidoo examines conventional signifiers

of empowerment but she goes further to contextualize them in love poetry. She suggests that conventional materialistic signifiers of empowerment are no substitute for conjugal relationship even though the very relationships are dogged by the adulterated monolithic concept of power. *Changes* has been cited as yet another African feminist novel that affirms the incompatibility of empowerment of women and the institution of marriage (Jita 1991, Nada 1999). The two critics apply separatist parameters in their interpretation of *Changes* and conlude that romance is incompatible with empowerment of women. Aidoo does not negate romantic love. On the contrary she scrutinizes the effects of the myth of male supremacy and supremacy per se on sexual relations. Her portrait echos Trinh Minh-ha's view that "Between knowledge and power, there is room for knowledge without power" (qtd. in Aidoo, 1991) by inference 'between power over the other in sexual relations and power without the other in separate worlds, there is room for power with the other'. In a nutshell *Changes* engages the politics of love in relation to empowerment of African women

This scope has one major limitation: It is not representative of the African feminist novel. The ideal scope would have included many more texts by female writers from all regions of Africa. Due to limitation of the study schedule, this was not possible.

1.8 Literature Review

Why do African creative writers and literary critics reject Western feminist literary criticism? What alternative approaches do they offer? Irene D'Almeida summarizes the gist of this debate thus:

> I cannot dissociate theory from who I am: an African woman raised within an African culture and still closely connected to it, who yet happens to be trained in, influenced by, and appreciative of Western theories of criticism. The implied conflict in this situation is familiar, I think, and closely related to the matter of an African feminism. We must recognize that any application of Western theory, however balanced and careful, involves the imposition of a Eurocentric point of view. A writer from an African background must have reservations about the appropriateness of critical methods born of societies that are

> – if I may generalize – inward looking and inner-directed, framed in terms of the individual and the abstract. (qtd. in Harrow, 1988:179).

D'almeida argues further that African texts are neither written nor meant to be read in the context of western feminism. Since theories are ideological lenses through which we view literary texts, the nature of the lense, its aims, objectives and assumptions, determines the image we see. For example the radical feminist critic sees inherent separatist ideology in every conjugal conflict depicted in the African novel. Indeed, there are such conflicts in the novels, but there are also other types of gender relations as well as other forms of human conflict and discrimination.

In his article 'I am not a (Western) Feminist but... A Review of Recent Critical Writings on African Women's Literature' (1998), Kenneth Harrow gives the impression that there is one form of Western feminism (of which he is not a part). But the issues he highlights denote the separatist strand of Western feminism. He argues that "turning one's back on theory [read Eurocentric] exposes one to the critiques of formalism, essentialism, or structuralism that are now generally accepted as invalid" (188). What is generalized as Western feminist criticism is based on the many Western socio-political theories among which radical feminism seems to dominate. Harrow argues that eschewing (Western) theory would lead to production of "close readings or sociological analyses" (188).He assumes that non-western theories do not exist.

The late Flora Nwapa-Nwakuche (1931-1993) contested Frank's reading of her works. Contributing to a discussion of Ama Ata Aidoo's paper 'The African Woman Today' at the first international conference on "Women in Africa and the African Diaspora: Bridges Across Activism and the Academy" held at Nsukka Nigeria in July 1992, Nwapa disclaims but simultaneously acclaims feminism:

> "When I go on my tours to America and Europe, I am usually asked, "Are you a feminist?" I deny that I am a feminist. Please I am not a feminist, oh, please. But they say, all your works, everything is about

> feminism --- Having heard Obioma on Monday, having heard Ama today, I think I will go all out and say that I am a feminist with a big 'f" because Obioma said on Monday that feminism is about possibilities; there are possibilities, there are choices. Let us not be afraid that we are feminists" (Nnaemeka, 1995:82-3).

Nwapa's earlier denial exemplifies the confusion that is created by a generalized reference to feminism. The author clarified her position before her demise in October 1993. In an interview with Marie Umeh in Scarsdale New York in December 1992, Nwapa emphasized that she was not a radical feminist. Summarizing Nwapa's contribution, Umeh categorized the writer with other African female authors such as Ifeoma Okoye, and Zaynab Alkali – "whose aim is not only to present the female point of view but also to subvert patriarchal authority over women in world literary history" (Umeh, 1995:23). Subversion entails re-evaluation of partriarchal authority and by implication the partriarchal notion of power. It is this re-evaluation that makes African feminism and feminist writing unique.

The late Bessie Head (1938-1986) is on record in a post-humous publication (1990) for disclaiming feminism. Yet the same author laments the plight of women in her patriarchal, racist and class society in Southern Africa. In her collection of short stories *The Collector of Treasures* (1977), Head subverts the supremacy-subordination dichotomy on which patriarchal ideology rests. She shows that all customs and superstitions, which subordinate women, are one mistake in the cultural heritage package. She recognizes that African men are themselves victims of racial and class oppression. In effect, she examines the paradox of the supremacy of oppressed African man. In the short story "The Collector of Treasures" Head demonstrates that all forms of oppression are closely inter–linked although gender discrimination is the oldest of them dating back to the dim past:

> The ancestors made so many errors and one of the most bitter-making things was that they relegated to men a superior position in

> the tribe, while women were regarded, in a congenital sense, as being an inferior form of human life. To this day, women still suffered from all the calamities that befall an inferior form of human life. The colonial era and the period of migratory mining labour to South Africa was a further affliction visited on this man... African independence seemed merely one more affliction on top of the afflictions that had visited this man's life. Independence suddenly and dramatically changed the pattern of colonial subservience... Men and women in order to survive had to turn inwards to their own resources. It was the man who arrived at this turning point, a broken wreck with no inner resources at all. It was as though he was hideous to himself and in an effort to flee his own inner emptiness; he spun away from himself in a dizzy kind of death dance of wild destruction and dissipation. (1977:92)

Empowerment in this context must take cognizance of the condition of African men. In *A Question of Power* (1973), Head examines patriarchal, racist and class philosophy of domination, which is, in fact, challenged by other notions of power. This orientation unsettles the dichotomous perception of gender relations on which radical separatist emancipatory strategy rests.

As stated earlier, radical feminists do not problematize domination per se, but African feminists do. Mbye B. Cham's reading of *So Long a Letter* affirms this fact. In her article "Contemporary Society and the Female Imagination: A Study of the Novels of Mariama Bâ", Cham describes the struggle in the text thus:

> Power struggle, then, is to be seen not so much in terms of victory/defeat, since it is the kind of struggle that yields a no-win situation, but is to be looked at from the perspective of the impact of the experience on the individual and the latter's ability to examine, articulate and utilize the transformation capabilities of such an experience of struggle. The heroines in Une Si longue lettre – Rama, Aissatou and Jacqueline – are a living testimony to the

> positive capabilities of a negative experience born of the problem of abandonment. Each one emerges from basically the same experiences stronger and better placed to understand more clearly, cope with, analyze and articulate the problems and aspirations not only of women, but also society in general (Cham, 1987:90-1).

Cham's definition is a good example of"power with others" and "power from within".These forms of power motivate women to act against their oppression without reversing the situation against men. Such interrogation of dominance is an aside in Cham's paper, but it is central to the current study. If African feminism is anti-patriarchy and yet not anti-men, what are the aims of the struggle? What exactly are the aims and objectives of African feminism? How are they depicted in fiction? Such interrogation should lead to an alternative concept of power and empowerment.

At the Second African Writers' Conference in Stockholm in 1986, Buchi Emecheta also distanced herself from Western feminism and defined herself as a feminist with a small 'f', if at all (Petersen 1988). Earlier on, she had rejected separatism specifically. She emphasized that African women need both their men and gender equity. Emecheta's negation and affirmation is another case of ambivalence born out of the erroneous universalization of the radical feminist school. Emecheta's protest is particularly telling considering that she has lived in the West since 1962. A critical analysis of the article above reveals that Emecheta embraces the tenets of African feminism espoused by Steady (1981, 1998) and Ogundipe-Leslie (1993, 1994).

Ama Ata Aidoo has argued that feminism, is an indigenous phenomenon in Africa, but it includes concern for the entire African community and the Third World (Petersen 1988). This view of the struggle for gender equity sharply contrasts the fundamental woman-centred principle of western feminisms. Aidoo recognizes the multiple forms of oppression that both African men and women suffer under capitalism, colonialism and neo-colonialism (Petersen 1988, James 1990, Aidoo 1992). In this context, the conventional perception of the African man as the dominant other needs to

be re-examined. Aidoo concurs with Bessie Head's view of male supremacy as paradoxical powerlessness. We assume this is the new dimension that African female artists inject into the tired discourse of male dominance versus female subordination. It is this kind of challenge that makes literature a philosophical inquiry into human nature and simultaneously enlivens literary study. Feminist literary pedagogy stands to benefit from this kind of musing.

The South African writer Lauretta Ngcobo acclaims feminism, but opposes separatism (Petersen, 1988). For Ngcobo, empowerment of women should not be sought in a "world without men", rather it is necessary to "work through problems" with the men (ibid: 184).

In her article "From Orality to Writing: African Women Writers and the (Re) Inscription of Womanhood." Nnaemeka discussing Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* and Ba's *So Long a Letter* concludes: "The endings of the novels foreshadow new beginnings. After redescent into themselves and the return from their orphic journeys, these female characters are armed with the resolve to use the lessons of the journeys in constructive, self-fulfilling, and empowering ways" (Nnaemeka, 1994; 154). This conclusion poses questions that are left pending investigation: What forms of power bring the characters to this awareness? In what ways is their empowerment "constructive" as opposed to the discriminative patriarchal power they react against? How distinct is this conceptualization of power from the radical feminist view? Such are the questions that justify the current study. Answers to these questions lie in definitions and redefinition of power to be found in African women's works.

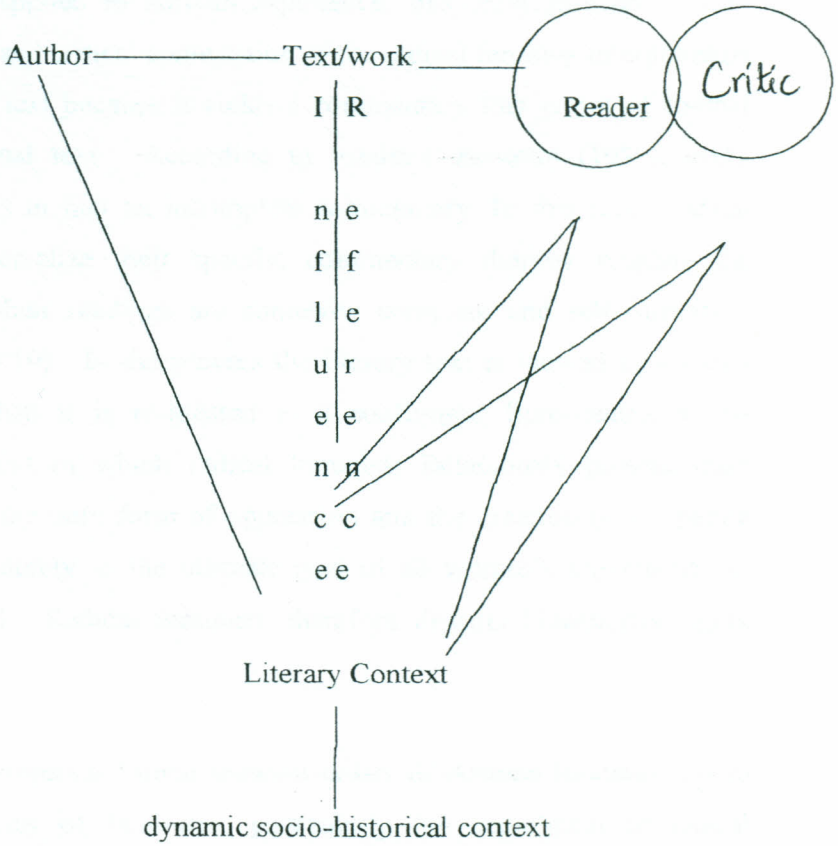
1.9 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study – the ideas, concepts and established theories that link the research problem, data collection, and analysis – is eclectic. It comprises three sub-frameworks: a critique framework for interrogating radical feminist criticism of African literature, a critique framework for interrogating radical feminist notion of power and

empowerment, and an alternative African feminist framework for analyzing *African women writers' conceptualizations of power and empowerment.* Each sub-framework serves a specific function in the comprehensive conceptual framework as elaborated below.

1.9.1 Critique of Separatist Literary Criticism

Contextualization is basic to the critical process. The meaning of a given *text must first be constructed in the context of its socio-historical setting* even if the meaning so constructed should become relevant to a different setting. Presuming a one-to-one correspondence between EuroAmerican *radical feminist activism-cum-scholarship and African female writers'* fiction is highly questionable. In *Unlocking the Text: Fundamental Issues in Literary Theory (1987)*, Jeremy Hawthorn describes the critical process *graphically as follows :*



Source: (Hawthorne 1987: 9)

This figure illustrates Hawthorn's argument that:

> It is --- potentially misleading to separate the 'literary context' from 'socio-historical

> context', as the former is actually an aspect of the latter and inseparable from it. We can also posit that both the author and the literary and socio-historical contexts are in a sense 'in' the text as well as standing outside and apart from it (Hawthorn 1987:9).

Hawthorn's argument is supported by M. M. Bakhtin's emphasis:" However forcefully the real and the represented world resist fusion, however immutable the presence of that categorical boundary between them, they are nevertheless indissolubly tied up with each other and find themselves in continual mutual interaction" (qtd. in ibid 9).

Contextualization of the literary text in its socio-historical background is also a basic tenet of western feminist literary criticism. According to Patrocinio Schweickart "a literary work cannot be understood apart from the social historical and cultural context within which it is written." (2000:434). Applied to African experience, this tenet justifies African female writers and critics' contestation of the radical feminist interpretation of the African text because it yields a commentary that is out of context with the original text. According to Frederic Jameson (1989), every interpretation is in fact an incomplete commentary. In this sense radical feminists universalize their specific commentary thereby creating the "illusion that their readings are somehow complete and self-sufficient" (Jameson 1989:10). In the process the literary text is viewed as a social document. Then it is re-located in a configured Euro-centric socio-historical context in which radical feminists fallaciously present male domination as the only form of oppression and the creation of a separate women's community as the ultimate goal of all women's movements all over the world. Radical feminism therefore distorts Hawthorn's figure above.

As Nnaemeka observes "some feminist critics of African literature are so fixated on issues of feminism, particularly the separatism of radical feminism, that they "see" what is not in the texts and refuse to see what the texts present to them". (Nnaemeka, 1995:91) Her observation concurs with

Thiselton's (1992) earlier comment on "different notions of inter *textuality*":

> It is customarily acknowledged that understanding may be difficult in cases where the subject-matter of a text or its genre or code may be distant from the reader's assumptions and expectations and entirely unfamiliar... if the reader's expectations and assumptions, especially those which have been ingrained by individual or corporate habit, transform the text into a reflection of the reader's own local and domestic concerns (Thiselton, 1992:35-36).

In their criticism of the literary text, radical feminist critics diminish the *essence of form. They believe that poetic forms have been fashioned by* men. As a result of this anomaly these critics construct sociological rather than critical tools that constrict literary objects into social documents. *Aesthetics or form is basically gender-neutral until the literary artist imbues* it with a specific attitude which may, for example, connote prejudice. Racial, class, and gender tropes result from prejudiced use of devices and *not the nature of devices. The idea of any literary technique being* inherently masculine and therefore unsuitable for feminist creative writing and criticism is a misnomer and so is the notion of a literary criticism that *eschews stylistics.*

1.9.2 Critique of Separatist Perception of Power

The principle tenet of separatist ideology revolves around a contest for dominance. Since it is not possible to wrest dominance from men in a patriarchal world, a separate "world without men" becomes the only emancipatory option for this strand of feminism. There is a lot of literature for and against the separatist school of thought. The discourse focuses on its viability as a strategy for socio-political transformation aimed at recreating an equitable culture. In the current study we focus on the dimension of separatist ideology that seems to disrupt sound literary criticism of African fiction to the extent of distorting the African feminist

novel and silencing the innovative conceptualizations of power and empowerment therein.

As stated earlier, radical feminism like most EuroAmerican feminisms does not problematize the concept of dominance per se. This is a faulty premise for any emancipatory strategy that seeks to deconstruct patriarchal culture which idealizes this very concept. It is idealization of dominance that engenders discriminatory and dichotomous inter gender relations as well as other discriminatory human relations such as caste, class and race. We assume that African female writers are informed by a feminism that negates dominance per se. Therefore, they have a holistic view of oppression and empowerment. They conceptualize oppression of women as one form of human conflict that is intricately interlinked with similar conflicts that originate in idealization of power over others.

1.9.3 Alternative African Feminist Conceptualization of Power and Empowerment

In *Questioning Empowerment (1997),* Rowlands expounds on the different forms of power defined earlier. These forms of power lead to a three-dimensional empowerment model. At the personal level they lead to a development of self confidence and the ability to challenge internalized oppression. At the relational level they enable the individual to "develop the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of a relationship and decisions made within it" (1997:15).At the collective level the alternative forms of power enable the individual to work harmoniously with others in order to have a greater impact.

Rowlands (1997) gender analysis of power concurs with Ogundipe – Leslie's (1993) analysis of the African women's cause which encompasses six levels of emancipation: from colonialism and neo-colonialism, traditional structures, backwardness, man, racial inferiority, and negative self-image. These six levels signify multiple forms of oppression, five of which are also experienced by the African man and woman. This means

that a purely woman-centred approach would be inadequate for African woman's cause.

Filomina Chioma Steady (1998) whose analysis concurs with Ogundipe-Leslie's (1993) argues that the humanistic aspect in African feminism makes it a superior emancipatory option for women and society because it "combines racial, sexual, class and cultural dimensions of oppression". She explains further that African feminism's holistic approach originates in the fundamental African worldview in which spirituality and sexuality are recognized as foundamental to human life. Consequently human life is viewed,

> "..from a total, rather than a dichotomous and exclusive, perspective. For women, male is not "the other" but part of the human same. Each gender constitutes the critical half that makes the human whole". (1998)

In the absence of any well-developed African feminist literary theory, we have developed critical parameters from the social theories above and combined them with stylistic criticism. Analysis of content of selected texts is based on the following deductions from the principles of African feminism:

1. African feminism negates supremacy/subordination dichotomy in human relations. Gender relations are viewed as binary but not necessarily polar.
2. African feminism aims at structural transformation of society, it does not seek to feminize the monolithic concept of power, therefore African feminists do not aspire to be merely co-opted into the system that thrives on this notion of power.
3. African feminism entails a belief that supremacy per se is not only oppressive but also indivisible, therefore genuine gender equity cannot be negotiated within the context of an ideology whose very existence depends on institutionalized "power over others". Therefore there is need to explore the meaning and implications of alternative forms of power that generate harmonious gender and human relations.

4. In as much as African feminism censors patriarchal culture, it is not anti-men. It recognizes that both women and men are subject to multiple forms of oppression that originate in erroneous idealization of dominance including intra-male and intra-female gender discrimination. Therefore both men and women need emancipation, but more importantly, their emancipatory processes are interlinked.

1.10 Research Methods

This is basically a library study based on qualitative methods of data collection and analysis combined with literary/linguistic stylistics. The alternative conceptual framework cited above is applied to six novels by four west African female writers.

1.10.1 Sampling and Analysis of Secondary Documents

As stated in section 1, the research problem evolved out of random reading of various social science documents on development and empowerment discourse in the course of previous social science gender studies. After conceptualizing the problem as a literary project, the non-fiction documents were re-read carefully to identify the specific aspects that had relevance to the literary debate in this study. Thereafter the selected documents and specific information were further sampled into three categories. The first category provided data for background to the study and literature review. The second category facilitated construction of a comprehensive conceptual framework. The last category provided data for justification of the study. Some of the documents overlap the three categories. The conceptual framework comprises three complementary sub-frameworks; therefore the secondary documents for this section were further sampled into three categories.

Most of the secondary materials were collected from various institutions and libraries between 1995 and 2004. The main sources include Association of African Women for Research and Development

(AAWORD) Kenya Chapter, British Council libraries formerly in Kisumu and Nairobi, Organization for Social Science Research in Eastern and Southern Africa (OSSREA), Centre for Basic Research (CBR) in Kampala Uganda, Zimbabwe International Book Fair (ZIBF) 1999, Oxfam Publications, and Moi University library.

1.10.2 Sampling of Primary Texts

The choice of writers and primary texts for this study has undergone various revisions. Initially the choice was limited to African women's works that had been interpreted by western critics. However, such a scope tended only to reaffirm the existence of the study problem. In this case textual analysis would have been limited to reactive interpretation rather than the proactive alternative interpretive approach which the study seeks to advance. It was therefore necessary to widen the scope. We began with writers and selected texts from East, West and South Africa. But this scope proved to be unmanageable within the estimated study period. Finally we settled on six novels by four female writers from West Africa. The purposive selection was based on two criteria. Firstly we considered the thematic issues in the works and chose those that addressed specific gender issues and had explicit bearing on contemporary empowerment discourse (see overview of each text under section 1.7). Secondly, we presumed a correlation between the perspectives espoused by female creative writers and the worldview advanced by feminist social science scholars in West Africa whose theories are incorporated in the conceptual framework for this study.

1.10.3 Data Analysis

Interpretation of the selected texts combines textual content and stylistic analysis. Both analyses are done concurrently. Content analysis is based on the four parameters outlined under the alternative interpretive approach (selection 1.9.3). In the literary text the first parameter is realized through portraits of various types of human relations including inter-gender conjugal relations. It is a major contention of this study that exclusive

focus on the latter leads to misreading of the text, particularly the conceptualization of empowerment therein. Therefore we analyze portraits of all foregrounded categories of interpersonal relationships in each text.
The second parameter is realized through character development in a given text. We examine this aspect in respect of all the major characters in a given text and scrutinize the indicators involved in specific characters' development.

The third parameter outlines monolithic concept of power and its conventional indicators in patriarchal culture and contemporary power discourse. We examine the portrait of these indicators in the selected texts.

The fourth parameter is realized through characterization of both male and female characters in inter-gender relations including conjugal relations. We focus on the specific portrayal of conventional gender stereotypes of these relations.

Stylistic analysis focuses on the stylistic devices which combine with thematic content to produce textual meaning. They include linguistic techniques, figures of speech and point of view. The stylistic aspect is crucial to our overall interpretation as well as presentation of our findings. Rather than present the findings in thematic blocks that include all the texts, we have opted to present the discussion of each text in a separate chapter or section. This presentation enables us to highlight and delineate the effect of each writer's and each text's individual artistic qualities that are an integral part of the overall meaning of the text.

CHAPTER TWO

BUCHI EMECHETA: *The Slave Girl* and *Naira Power*

Buchi Emecheta was born in Lagos, Nigeria in 1944. Her parents were from Ibuza community. She was educated at the Methodist Girls High School in Yaba. She was married at the age of seventeen. In 1962 she joined her husband who was studying in London. She has been living there ever since but she maintains strong links with her home country. She has written over ten novels most of which address issues in Nigeria. In *The Slave Girl* (1977) and *Naira Power* (1982) Emecheta engages conventional notions of power as dominance. Both texts are critiques of two different social crises in Nigeria. *The Slave Girl* exposes perpetuation of slave trade in colonial Nigeria at the beginning of the twentieth century, while *Naira Power* is a popular fiction which examines materialism as one of the ramifications of the oil boom in post independence era. In both Emecheta deconstructs male supremacy on its own patriarchal terms. But even more significantly she vilifies reversed gender discrimination as epitomized by Onitsha market mammies. In effect *The Slave Girl* becomes a class, racial, inter-gender, and intra-gender contestation. *Naira Power* is the story of a young man who craves material power, which is one of the indicators of male supremacy. In this novel Emecheta examines paradoxical powerlessness of materialism from an African feminist perspective.

2.1 The Slave Girl: Interrogating Male Supremacy

In an interview with Adeola James in August 1986 Emecheta stated that the novel was her mother's story. In Emecheta's autobiography *Head Above Water* (1986) the statement is more elaborate revealing a number of factual details about the slave girl:

> My mother, Alice Ogbanje Ojebeta Emecheta, that laughing, six-foot-tall, black glossy slave girl, who as a child suckled the breasts of her dead mother; my mother who lost her parents when the nerve gas was exploded in Europe, a gas that killed thousands of innocent Africans who knew

> nothing about the Western First World War; my laughing mother, who forgave a brother that sold her to a relative in Onitsha so that he could use the money to buy *ichafo siliki* – silk head ties for his coming-of-age dance —— my mother, that slave girl who had the courage to free herself and return to her people in Ibusa, and still stooped and allowed the culture of her people to re-enslave her, and then permitted Christianity to tighten the knot of enslavement (3).

In *The Slave Girl* the protagonist's last name is changed to Okonji. At surface level *The Slave Girl denotes the story of Alice Ogbanje Ojebeta's* experience at various stages of development as an Ogbanje, an adored baby girl, an orphan sold into slavery, Christian convert, freed slave, wife and mother. At all these sites Ojebeta is pitted against a number of antagonists including her brother Okolie, Ma Palagada, Pa Palagada, the Palagada children, fellow slaves and later relatives in Ibuza. At a deeper level the novel connotes a struggle between a positive form of power within signified by Ojebeta and a negative form of power over others signified by most of the antagonists she encounters throughout the novel. Her power within encapsulates power to act constructively despite her limitations and power to cooperate with her fellow slaves and others in similar circumstances.

Ojebeta is an Ogbanje (a girl child born after her mother Umeadi had delivered several baby girls who died soon after birth).It is believed that Ojebeta survives because her father Okwuekwu Oda risks his life and travels to the old Benin Empire in order to procure protective charms for his only daughter. Okwuekwu Oda is reputed for great physical power and he exercises it to serve others. The diction with which Emecheta describes this character paints a picture of positive masculinity.Ekwuekwu's concern for both his wife and daughter demonstrates complimentarity of men and women. Ojebeta survives despite expectations to the contrary because of the risk her father takes. Consequently she assumes the "quality of preciousness" in spite of gender discrimination in her traditional Ibo society. Both of her parents die of influenza during the First World War leaving seven year old Ojebeta under the care of her brother Okolie who is

unable to cater for Ojebeta so he sells her to Ma Palagada, a rich relative at Onitsha market.

Emecheta's portrait of Ojebeta, her brother Okolie, and Ma Palagada the slave mistress constitutes an objective scrutiny of assumptions, notions and dichotomies in conventional definitions of power in gender relations. Gender conflict is ordinarily perceived in one dimensional dichotomy as male supremacy versus female subordination. Empowerment in this context implies a redistribution of power between the powerful male and the powerless female. The site of contestation in this case is usually restricted to conjugal relations. Such is the perspective imposed on *The Slave Girl* by Donna Haraway in "Reading Buchi Emecheta: Contests for Women's Experience in Women's Studies". This critic concludes:

> "In *The Bride Price* (1976) and *The Slave Girl* (1977), Emecheta explored fundamental issues around marriage, control of one's life from different women's points of view, and the contradictory positions, especially for her Ibuza women characters, in every location on the African cultural map, whether marked foreign or indigenous. (Evans 1994:147)"

Haraway reads "marriage" not "slave trade" as the central theme of the novel. She assumes that all women struggle to acquire dominance because they are oppressed within the institution of marriage. The critic fails to notice Emecheta's foregrounding of female oppressors and the subtle portrait of both intra-gender and inter-gender oppression in other human relations in the novel. By silencing Emecheta's empathy for Okolie and her overt vilification of Onitsha market mammies, Haraway constricts *The Slave Girl* to a novel of women's issues. Such an interpretation trivializes the author's efforts to scrutinize the notion of supremacy as exercised by both men and women. Haraway further silences Emecheta's explicit negation of reversed oppression against men. This is a crucial nuance in the author's conceptualization of power as distinct from a mere representation of conventional definitions. The female novelist-against-fellow-women's-oppressive-traits approach and the spirit of honest self-examination that the novel exudes bestows verisimilitude to Emecheta's case against patriarchy and other forms of oppression that originate in

idealization of power over others. Therefore, attaching pre-eminence to the theme of marriage, as Haraway does, is a disservice to *The Slave Girl*.

One of Emecheta's notable achievements in *The Slave Girl* is her impartial scrutiny of the effects of sexism on both genders. Her delineation of this social problem concurs with the views of gender sensitive male artists. For example Mazisi Kunene contends that "masculinity is a negative quality" (*Agenda*, 37 1998:72). At the Second African Writers' Conference in Stockholm in 1986, a number of male artists expressed similar sentiments: Njabulo Ndebele, Ngugi wa Thiong'o and Emmanuel Ngara (Petersen, 1988). But Emecheta's impartiality transcends that of her male colleagues because she engages gender discrimination logically as a two-dimensional problem that victimizes both genders. He reckons that "even if Ojebeta was an only daughter, she was still only a daughter" (78). In essence Okolie's claim to supremacy over his sister is baseless and it is further deflated when he fails to exercise his presumed masculine power to provide for her.

Paradoxically the proceeds from the sale of Ojebeta boost Okolie's masculine image at the coming-of-age dance, but his stature diminishes in inverse proportion exposing stereotypes of sexism. But his superficial economic empowerment is soon overtaken by its ramifications. Before long Okolie acquires "a title, but one he knew he could not live up to" (82). Soon after he is given yet another manly responsibility that he finds overwhelming:

> What was more; he had so impressed the girls, with his dancing and his well-fed body and expensive outfit, that he was forced to accept the gift of a wife.
>
> Although he protested to the girl's parents that he could not afford to pay bride price, the elders of her people laughed and said 'only a foolish man would admit that he is rich. A rich man does not tell people he is rich but his behaviour says as much'. Okolie did not know whether to run away or to bury himself alive (ibid).

In this case Emecheta employs situational irony to reveal the society's concern with appearances of male supremacy rather than the reality of Okolie's natural weaknesses.This contradiction confuses both genders. Okolie assumes that male supremacy is biologically determined. In theory society affirms this assumption. Yet, in practice, the same society evaluates him mainly by his performance of male gender roles which are acquired through socialization.

After he is initiated into manhood Okolie is expected to exhibit all attributes of masculinity axiomatically. When he fails to do so, people wonder. In effect Okolie becomes a victim to idealization of sexist patriarchal ideology. Supremacy should encapsulate the power to execute commensurate gender roles and power within explored by the individual. Okolie lacks the two forms of power. He grudgingly accepts a wife because his relative dares him to demonstrate his potency. He even attempts some farming but his yams do not grow because he is too lazy to tend them:

> Within a year he was in debt with his in-law; he could not afford to pay the bride price of his wife; his wife did not conceive and people wondered why. She was becoming dry and thin and people knew that this was due to hunger. Okolie did not know what to do but to put the blame on Felenza, on his elder brother for going away and leaving him, and on his wife for running to him at all - - -(83)

Emecheta scrutinizes patriarchal concept of power on the system's own terms. On patriarchal terms Okolie becomes a caricature. Through his experiences Emecheta re-examines the predicament of the boy-child who does not explore power to and power within. In the process the author satirizes and subverts the concept of male supremacy from an empathetic gender-sensitive perspective rather than a sympathetic woman-centred position. In effect she achieves a credible redefinition of power which in turn authenticates her vision for meaningful structural change r gender equity in gendre relations.

2.2 Interrogating Reversed Female Supremacy

In contemporary development discourse Ma Palagada may signify a model of empowerment of women Jo Rowlands locates this model in what she has dubbed "development-as-Westernization" discourse in: *Questioning Empowerment* (1997). As Rowlands rightly points out, contemporary discourse is basically patriarchal and materialistic. Empowerment of women based on this premise is questionable because it entails co-option of a few women into the existing discriminatory patriarchal, social, economic and political structures. This tokenism facilitates strategic expansion of patriarchal space that paradoxically obstructs structural change. The women so co-opted remain true to patriarchal culture. They replicate its injustices, dominance and discrimination. Unfortunately this model is universalized. As Rowlands laments, the view of "development-as-Westernization" has come to dominate development discourse to such an extent that has become virtually impossible to imagine any different form of development" (Ibid. 11). The same applies to the concept of empowerment. It is therefore imperative to interrogate the monolithic concept of power before depicting alternative forms of power. In *The Slave Girl* Emecheta handles the two discourses concurrently.

In *The Slave Girl,* Ma Palagada fits perfectly into the westernized empowerment model. Her type of empowerment is reversed version of supremacy which combines both intra and inter gender oppression of fellow women and men respectively. Olopo alias Ma Palagada is an Ibuza girl who is co-opted into the slave traders' class by virtue of her cohabitation with a Portuguese slave trader. When the "Potokis" leaves, he bestows some of his ill-gotten wealth on Ma Palagada. After their separation Ma Palagada starts off at Onitsha market with a comparative advantage over her fellow women traders. Her continued association with European traders and later with Church Missionary Society boosts her business even more. To maintain her business empire she perpetuates slave culture long after it has been abolished.

Ma Palagada wields zero-sum economic and social power over everyone she interacts with. Emecheta employs various stylistic devices to vilify this power. Its callousness is foregrounded through Ma Palagada's expansive physical appearance, her voice, tone, her explosive nickname Palagada which denotes her "Onomatopoic" movement and her behaviour towards other people. Juxtaposed with the slave girls, especially Ojebeta who is physically small as well as economically and socially helpless, Ma Palagada's dominance appears excessive and consuming. In her household everyone is virtually powerless. Her second husband is an African man. The man who remains nameless but his identity is also subsumed into his wife's nickname. He becomes Pa Palagada by virtue of his marriage to Olopo alias Ma Palagada. This couple exemplifies many aspects of reversed discrimination in conjugal relations. The wife and husband are deeply aware of this anomaly. Therefore, to exercise a semblance of patriarchal conjugal relationship Ma Palagada compensates her husband by pretending "to let him make the rules" in the household (92). But Pa Palagada still hankers for real male supremacy which is stereotypically presumed to include masculine aggression against the female sex. He is aware that he lacks the major attributes of masculinity particularly economic status. Consequently he compensates himself for that inadequacy by inflicting sadistic violence on the slave girls. Paradoxically Ma Palagada indulges her husband in this act. Her conduct challenges the myth that all women are oppressed by men. For Ma Palagada the intricate connivance with her husband is a strategy of control over him.

As a slave mistress Ma Palagada wields her supremacy with such finesse that her slaves learn to accept her as a mother. On the surface, Ma Palagada's is one harmonious household with a benevolent owner. But her benevolence is a strategy for control. The apparent harmony in her household signifies the effectiveness of that strategy. The slaves are very conscious of the many forms of oppression in the household yet they do not rebel. Steven Luke's describes this façade of harmony in power relations as follows:

> The most effective and insidious use of power is to prevent --- conflict arising in the first place --- by shaping [people's]

> perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as a natural and unchangeable or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial (qtd. in Rowlands, 1997: 10).

The negative effect of Ma Palagada's dominance is further emphasized through the pictorial imagery of her slave girls "who behaved so quietly, as if frightened for their lives," they reminded Ojebeta of "wooden dolls" (85)

Emecheta effectively deconstructs and vilifies this dominance signified by Onitsha market mammies who form a comprador female wealthy class. This perspective should not be mistaken for naïve dismissal of wealth as a basic requirement in holistic empowerment of women. On the contrary, Emecheta negates ill-gotten wealth and subsequent misuse of that wealth to dominate others including its genuine producers. A number of critics miss out this dimension in Emecheta's critique of power because they presume the stereotypical singular definition of the concept. In *Criticism and Ideology* Petersen notes that: "Buchi Emecheta is a firm believer in achievement through personal effort, and asked for better educational facilities for girls. She is, however torn between admiration for successful women, like the ones who carried out the Aba riots in Western Nigeria in 1929 ---" (Petersen 1988 14). A Nigerian critic Modupe Olaogun (2002) holds a similar view though more cautiously. While these critics espouse a materialistic concept of empowerment, the African feminist artist insists on value-based progress. Rowland's observation cited earlier is repeatedly verified. In this particular case it is imperative to examine the stylistic devices by which the female traders are portrayed. For example, Ma Palagada, though wealthy does not engage in any genuine work activity throughout the novel. Every time the narrator focuses on her she is swaggering around, negotiating business, watching over the slave girls or just idling. Her arrivals at the clothes stall effects fearful silence from the slave girls. She maintains an impersonal relationship with the slave girls. She talks to them "in the tone of someone used to having her orders obeyed in seconds"(85). Indeed Emecheta highlights Onitsha market women's

bravery in their fight against colonial oppression, but she also makes it clear that the brave action against the colonizers does not absolve them from intra-gender enslavement of the girl-child. Emecheta foregrounds value-based logic in African feminist conception of success. In 'African Society and the Concept of Freedom', Zulu Sofola states: "In African world view, the emphasis is --- on harmony and communion. There is no need to destroy another creature in order for one to exist---" (qtd. in *Research in African Literatures* 26:1995).

Ma Palagada's economic prosperity is a result of both slave labour and underhand dealings against fellow female traders. She even acquires an additional cloth stall through her connection with the Church Missionary Society as a reward for allowing her slave girls to attend Sunday school. Even her version of Christianity thrives on exploitation. In the church Ma Palagada is the best giver on harvest day but the gifts she gives are not the fruits of her own labour. She buys animals and farm produce from the non-Christian poor farmers around, then shows off the product to the real owners. Her version of Christianity is sarcastically potrayed as "A Rich Religion".

At Otu market Ma Palagada is known as a fighter, but she only fights in self-interest. When the British colonial government introduces taxation of women, all the other female traders propose violence against the colonizers, but Ma Palagada opts for negotiation. Caught in an intricate inter-racial, intra-class and intra-gender crisis in which she is an all-round double-dealer, she finds herself in dilemma. Her death, potrayed as escapism, constitutes a verdict on the form of power and perception of empowerment that this female character signifies.

Emecheta's negative portrait of Ma Palagada demonstrates intricate objectivity. This issue was raised by Emmanuel Ngara at the Second African Writers' Conference in Stockholm in 1986 at which Emecheta presented her famous paper "Feminism with a small 'f'". On that occasion Ngara lamented that some African women writers' portraits of fellow

women were equally biased. He recommended that writers should "argue *reasonably the case of women*" (Petersen, 1986:153). This recommendation is indeed gender-sensitive but it does not imply that female writers should construct unjustifiable positive portraits of all female characters in their stories. In literary art characters are carriers of values, virtues or vices. This determines their stature and fate in a given text. The same unwritten law applies to African female writers unless they aspire to construct some kind of court poetry in praise of female characters. Emecheta acknowledges the existence of female oppressors in real life. The historical realism of *The Slave Girl* makes any propagandist cover-up not only deceitful but also impossible because African feminism negates the need for such propaganda.

Emecheta's gender-sensitivity entails objective view of both good and bad female characters. It affirms her authorial statement made in an interview in 1979:

> The main themes of my novels are African society and family: the historical, social and political life in Africa as seen by a woman through events. I always try to show that the African man is oppressed and he too oppresses the African woman --- I have not committed myself to the cause of African woman only, I write about Africa as a whole (qtd in Evans 1994:147).

Even if this author were to commit herself to the cause of women only, as an artist, she would still be obliged to address intra-gender injustices. According to Wole Soyinka "the author must not content himself with chronicling the customs of society. He must play the part of bard and oracle, he must see more clearly and exactly than other people, he must be a visionary, a warning voice and a builder of the future" (Petersen, 1988:18). In *The Slave Girl* Emecheta sees more clearly than Onitsha market female tycoons. She knows that their prosperity emanates from gross exploitation of others including the girl child. To her, motherhood and perpetuation of child slave labour are irreconcilable. This author's vision transcends that of the market mammies who replicate a simplistic singular view of power. Per Wästberg's view of power resonates with

Emecheta's. In his keynote speech at the Stockholm conference (1986) he argued:

> The writer is a connoisseur of power. In his very profession lies power to influence --- he knows the essence of power through his own job as persuader just as the politician must know his. He knows the attraction of power but he also knows life in the shadow of big power. On his insight in these matters depends the weight of his words (ibid. 20).

Emecheta scrutinizes both the female slave owners who wield the power to dominate and the slave girls who have the power to produce wealth yet suffer in the shadow of the exploiter's social status. In essence, Emecheta exposes a silent intra-female-gender class struggle. She interrogates petty bourgeois class dominance, but much more importantly she foregrounds the little examined alternative forms of power.

As the "voices" of all groups of society, Emecheta the artist is privileged to view ensuing power contests from both the centre as well as the periphery. At both sites there are men and women who wield and cherish power over others. Emecheta's approach concurs with Mariama Bâ's prescription for objectivity in art. Bâ contends that it is the artist's duty "to convey the aspirations of all social categories, especially the underprivileged. Denouncing the evils and scourges that eat away at our society and delay its full development and striking out at the archaic practices, traditions and customs that are not a real part of our precious cultural heritage" (qtd. in Petersen, 1988:64). Bâ is even more emphatic on the essence of objectivity in African women's writing. She believed that "the woman writer has a special mission. More than her male counterparts, she has to present the position of women in all aspects".

2.3 Power within affirmed and elevated

Ojebeta is the credible symbol of empowerment of African woman in an Afrocentric feminist sense. In *The Slave Girl*, a text whose central theme is precisely anti-slavery, positive power or heroism is assigned to the character who rises above captivity. Her captors are powerful, but only as

villains. In all fiction the power of the villain, however colossal, remains typically negative. Emecheta assigns both the roles of villain and victim to female characters.

When Ojebeta is sold into slavery, her demeanour comes through as an anti-thesis of the subdued personalities she encounters in the older slave girls in Ma Palagada's household. At the age of seven Ojebeta is also a contrast of her sixteen year old brother. Whereas Okolie allows himself to be humiliated by Ma Palagada, his little sister surrenders to enslavement only after her attempt to regain freedom is foiled. Even then, she symbolically clings on to her identity by preserving her Ogbanje protective charms. Ojebeta is credited with capacity for deep thought at a very early age. In this respect she resonates with Sembene Ousmane's character Ad'jibid'ji in *God's Bits of Wood* (1962). After her father's death Ojebeta is forced into some level of maturity:" she had become more thoughtful, so that many a time now her mother would ask what it was she was thinking about. Startled, she would say quickly, 'Nothing, Mother'" (22).

This gender-sensitive characterization of the girl child has several effects. Firstly it deconstructs the stronger-male-sex versus weaker-female-sex stereotype. Secondly it challenges the idea of biological determinism that is used to justify gender discrimination in patriarchal ideology. Power within is depicted to be innate. This explains why Ojebeta is a contrast of her older brother Okolie who fails to nurture this power. Ojebeta resists enslavement spontaneously. This act affirms the fact that the need for emancipation is basic to all human beings. It need not be externally determined. In this sense Ojebeta is an indigenous African feminist because she explores the constructive forms of power accessible to her in a bid to emancipate herself. This scenario creates space for a redefinition of power and empowerment that advocates self-empowerment of women as a basic tenet of emancipation. Emecheta's vision resonates with African feminist social theory propounded by Steady (1998) and Ogundipe-Leslie (1993). It also concurs with the gender analysis of power advanced by Rowlands. Underneath the Afrocentric concept of self-empowerment is acknowledgement of the supreme power of the Creator of mankind.

In *The Slave Girl* affirmation of spirituality is depicted early in the plot. This plotting is significant. On the way to Onitsha Ojebeta encounters the Supreme Power in the universe. It strikes her spontaneously through serene images of nature. Although she cannot, at that moment in time, express it in so many words, the reader is made aware of the fact that this protagonist's young mind has registered the existence of a Divine Power. This point is made in an exceptional expose that is deliberately foregrounded. The mood is solemn and the tone is serious. Readers are prompted to take note of the character's experience and reaction:

> By the time they had passed all the huts, their red earth track was fast falling into a mere bush path. Still they padded, and without speaking. The silence of their surroundings had affected Ojebeta somewhat. Gone were her usual bird-like prattles, her bat-like bumping into things, her teasing of adults. She felt that she was in the presence of a Power mysterious. She felt that she was being watched by that hushed, hidden someone. Had she ever been taught how, her reaction might have been to kneel and pray to that lurking Power who had made the plants so lush, the animals so quiet, the stars so retiring. But she was not a Christian; neither was her big brother Okolie, though she sensed his need for silence now too, and knew somehow that the feeling was mutual. She tried hard, and effectively, to subdue the jangling sounds made by little bells and the empty tobacco tins tied round her arms---
>
> She gazed at the undergrowth, all bright and fresh, at the water that splashed over jutting rocks and small stones, and at silvery-white sands in the bathing areas where there were no pebbles. It looked so pure and so clean, cleaner than she could ever have imagined possible at the usually very busy Atakpo stream. She was taken aback by the purity of it all --- 'Why is the water so pure and clean?' (25).

In this episode Emecheta depicts a form of power whose immensity seems to be indescribable. Ojebeta and her brother recognize that it is Divine even though they have not had any prior religious teaching. Ironically this awesome power is portrayed in passive images of serenity and purity. Its impact is felt in involuntary meditation and it elicits instantaneous reverence. The diction and parallelism in the extract create a solemn rhythm.

Throughout the novel, Ojebeta's inner strength seems to be implicitly attributed to her spirituality. This power is displayed in style at the entry point into slavery. While Ma Palagada and Okolie haggle over her slave price at a hotel, Ojebeta resists her capture into slavery. As she plans her escape, her motive is firstly to find her brother and then return to Ibuza even if she does not find him. When she runs off Ma Palagada's older slave girls raise an alarm and her fellow traders arm themselves anticipating a robber. Instead, they see "a sight so peculiar that people simply stared bemused as it sped past their stalls – Chiago tearing along the pathway chasing a small, helpless terrified child: a little girl festooned with bells and cowrie shells, just like a slave prepared for sacrifice! They stared and did not understand" (55). In this episode Ojebeta's inner power is foregrounded by the diction used to describe her swift movement and the commotion it generates among adults in the market. The two episodes above are deliberately juxtaposed to show the contrast between the forms of power signified by Ojebeta on the one hand, and the power symbolized by all her antagonists on the other. By pitting a seemingly helpless girl-child against strong adults, Emecheta affirms and elevates power within signified by the former and simultaneously satirizes and subverts the variants of supremacy espoused by the latter.

Inevitably Ojebeta is forced to succumb to capture but she is fully aware that from henceforth "Her survival depended on herself" (68). This is a powerful thought in the mind of a seven-year old girl-child. It may be a biographical detail from Emecheta's mother's real experience but it also has significance for African feminism. Even though this girl-child is stripped of all social support, she must take responsibility for her own

she comes to a sober realization that a marriage to the slave master would be tantamount to extension of slavery. Ojebeta's power within prompts her to reject being inherited as a slave by Ma Palagada's daughter.

Ojebeta's last encounter with Pa Palagada is yet another moment of reckoning between opposing forms of power. Unexpectedly the episode is a walk over for her. Ma Palagada's death impacts differently on the two forms of power signified by her husband and this slave girl. Whereas the death metaphorically releases Ojebeta's latent inner strength into activity, on the contrary it subdues the bully in Pa Palagada. The tone of Ojebeta's request in this episode is confident though a little apprehensive. On the contrary Pa's response connotes resignation which is completely out of character. At a deeper level Ojebeta's resistance to slavery has matured from the demeanour of a "helpless terrified child" who attempts to escape in vain to that of a self-empowered confident young woman demanding her release honourably. Both actions are premeditated and consciously executed. On the contrary, Pa Palagada has in a sence degenerated. He has changed from his initial sadistic bully behaviour to a humane composure. This episode has ironical implications. The bully in Pa Palagada seems to have undergone self-destruction because it has outlived its defensive purpose. Ordinarily one would expect this man to be all the more dominant in the absence of Ma Palagada. But ironically he has sobered up. The form of power signified by Pa Palagada throughout the novel is vilified. Ojebeta summarizes it thus:

> He was not completely mad in the sense that he needed locking up, but he was a very intolerant master. The only method he knew of making those under him do as he wanted was by caning. If you did not look at him when he was talking to you, you got the cane. If you stared at him too much, you were caned. If you laughed at him, the same treatment applied; but if he cracked a joke and you did not laugh, you were caned. The man was crazy about power (94).

The monotony achieved in this description, through the use of repetition, satirizes Pa Palagada's presumed supremacy which manifests itself in ambiguous parameters. Pa Palagada's version of supremacy is negated

further when it is juxtaposed with Ojebeta's inner power portrayed as consistent and just. The fact that his ambiguous supremacy is evaluated from Ojebeta's point of view foregrounds the contrast between the two. Ma Palagada's death exposes the fallacy of Pa Palagada's perceived supremacy. Pa Palagada is an aggressive nominal head of household who is notorious for reminding people that Ma Palagada is his wife. In this sense, his power resides in his partnership with a spouse who wields dubious power over others. He is jeered by other men for taking over a "Whiteman's cast-off", so he takes on Chiago the older slave girl. When Chiago gets pregnant, she disappears mysteriously only to reappear with a baby boy during Ma Palagada's funeral. Paradoxically after his domineering first wife's death Pa Palagada regains his sanity. When Ojebeta requests for her release, Pa Palagada's reaction is out of character: "Ojebeta had expected him to thunder as he was wont to do when Ma was alive, but his personality seemed to have changed. He was calmer now, more humane; he seemed like a contented person who did not wish to have his peace disturbed" (147). Pa Palagada has finally sobered down but for the wrong reasons. Chiago the slave girl-cum-wife is not a threat to his perceived masculinity. At the same time he is finally a property owner. The crux of the matter in this scenario revolves around idealization of a singular form of power in human relations.

Ojebeta leaves the Palagada home on the understanding that her slave price will be refunded someday. The episode is a mockery of the finality with which Ma Palagada presumed to have secured her ownership of Ogbanje Ojebeta at the beginning of the story. From Ojebeta's point of view, amply delineated in the last two chapters of the novel, slavery and marriage are antonyms. Ojebeta marries Jacob Okonji by mutual consent. As far as she is concerned the marriage is therefore a defacto partnership despite inherent discrimination. After the eight pounds are refunded to Clifford, Ojebeta kneels before her husband and says: "'The contract is completed, after all these years. I feel free in belonging to a new master from my own town Ibuza; my mind is at rest'" (184). This last episode is paradoxically titled 'Slave with a New Master'. The use of paradox enables Emecheta to conclude Ojebeta's emancipation from one form of subordination and

simultaneously acknowledge the struggle ahead. The portrait of Ojebeta at this stage is deliberately ambiguous because the author seeks to underscore the view that it is the notion of supremacy that engenders subordination of others in all human interaction including conjugal relations. In effect emancipation from one form of oppression is only a part of the emancipatory process. This perspective concurs with Ogundipe-Leslie's view of a multi-faceted emancipatory process.

The story ending is yet another exemplification of this artist's unrelenting objectivity. All facts fairly assessed, Jacob Okonji is commended. Not only does he court and marry Ojebeta on mutual terms but he also refunds her slave price, over and above her bride price. Okonji is a constituent of the novel's optimistic vision. He is still a patriarch but one who has intelligible claims. For Ojebeta, kneeling before this man does not demean, it dignifies. Although the man is not an ideal signification of equity, he is a construct in the right direction. His variant of male oppression is noted en passant. One gets the impression that the writer deliberately defers specific women's issues and concerns in order to dispense with the greater evil of female-dominated domestic slavery. Indeed Emecheta focuses on the former in her other works which are not included in the scope of this study for logistic purposes.

Given the novel's setting in time (1910-1945 Nigeria) Ojebeta's empowerment is realistic and credible. It fits into McWhirter's definition of empowerment discussed in Chapter One. As an individual, Ojebeta is conscious of the power dynamics in her life at a tender age. She develops appropriate skills for challenging her captivity and gaining control over some aspects of her life. Most importantly she exercises that control "without infringing on the rights of others" (qtd. in Rowlands, 1997:15). This definition of empowerment collates with the one advanced by Ogundipe-Leslie (1998). Ojebeta prevails over external oppression in the Palagada household. Her post-slavery conduct challenges a number of traditional structures. Even during captivity she takes advantage of the openings available to emancipate her from backwardness and negative self-image. She has no visible racial inferiority complex. She is proud of her

colour and tribal facial marks. She confronts Victoria – Ma Palagada's half-cast daughter without exhibiting any sensitivity to racial difference. In this confrontation it is Victoria, the product of luxurious upbringing, who emerges as a weaker character. Ojebeta returns to Ibuza with an elevated economic status but she does not use this status to oppress others. Instead she acquires a level of economic independence. Her encounter with a variant of African man's oppression in conjugal relations is comparatively the lesser of all the mountains she has had to surmount in thirty five years.

Stratton (1994) attributes Ojebeta's transformation to her belated acquisition of basic literacy. This reading silences Emecheta's focus on the essence of power within in human development. For this author, craving for freedom is a human instinct. External factors only enhance it. This explains why the girl child character is made to claim her space from a tender age. Ojebeta's need for and process of emancipation is entirely self-motivated. External factors such as education and Ma' Palagada's death only enhance it. Katherine Frank (1987) who pegs women's empowerment on a character's rejection of marriage has imposed a pessimistic reading on the novel. Because Ojebeta opts to get married, her emancipation is defacto annulled and her choice equated to death in Frank's article, 'The death of the slave girl: African Womanhood in the novels of Buchi Emecheta'(1982). Such misreading trivializes Emecheta's remarkable achievement in this novel in which five forms of power including the power of God are conspicuously foregrounded and re-examined. In the process the conventional monolithic notion of power as dominance is effectively deconstructed.

2.4 Naira Power: Powerlessness of Materialism

In the preceeding sections of this chapter we have analysed Emecheta's conceptualization of power in the story of a girl child protagonist. In *Naira Power* we analyse the author's conceptualization of power in the story of a boy child protagonist. This case enables us to test the gender sensitivity or explanatory adequacy of the conceptual framework guiding this study. In Chapter One we have stated that African Feminism opposes patriarchy but

it is not anti-men. Emecheta's characterization in *Naira Power* affirms the statement. We have also acknowledged that the exclusion of male writers from this study is a regrettable limitation. However, the portraits of male characters from an African feminist perspective, to some extent, compensates for this omission.

Through Ramonu's experience in *Naira Power* Emecheta engages the concept of materialism by interrogating one of the truisms it engenders namely, that money confers power on its owner. She examines the source, nature, function and impact of the supposed money power. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the writer concludes that craving naira power is a social malaise. She constructs both male and female characters who are vulnerable to the seductive power of money, but oblivious of its illusive and dehumanizing nature. At the same time Emecheta subverts the conventional belief of materialism as signifier of male supremacy. In effect, the author defamiliarizes the readers with the notion of power pegged on money. To Emecheta this is a universal delusion turned truism. As René Wellek and Austin Warren note in *Theory of Literature* (1949), the literary artist endeavours to "remind us of what we have ceased to perceive or make[s] us see what, though it was there all the time, we had not seen" (34). By questioning a seemingly stable notion of economic power Emecheta shocks us into a fresh awareness of it and prompts us to contemplate alternative meanings. From an African feminist standpoint this subversion amounts to caveat. Since feminism is a reaction against male supremacy, there is need for feminists to critique all the significations of the concept in order to clarify their own perspectives.

Naira Power is the story of Ramonu, a young man from a Muslim polygamous family. Ramonu signifies elusive economic dominance while his father Lemonu signifies two opposing forms of power namely "power within" and "power over". The story is set in the city of Lagos and it is constricted in one day timescale within which Ramonu is lynched for theft and his life history narrated posthumously by Amina. The narrator's authority is authenticated by the fact that the two were childhood neighbours and later lovers. Bintu – Amina's sister-in-law – is the sole audience of this narration.

Ramonu has dubious credentials. At the age of sixteen he quits school because he is a weak student. He is later expelled from his home for committing incest with his stepmother Idayatu while his father is still alive. He turns to professional crime euphemistically dubbed "business". He becomes wealthy too fast and joins a crime syndicate whose economic power is suspect, mysterious, extraordinarily immense, but ironically fleeting. When Ramonu reappears in Isalegangan slum five years later posturing a new status he becomes a celebrity instantly. He exercises dominance over everyone around him. With naira power he is able to buy forgiveness from his father, admiration from the residents of Isalegangan, and even fame of sorts nationally. The entire society's naïve obsession with naira power is satirized.

For several years Ramonu succeeds in evading justice despite his criminal activities including murder. At one time Ramonu is bailed out of a life sentence after serving for four years only. Ironically his money can only buy his injustice. In essence this irony negates its power. But ultimately justice catches up with him. He is caught pick-pocketing and consequently lynched by a mob on Murtala Mohammed Highway in Lagos city. His half-burnt remains are eventually buried in a public grave because its identity remains anonymous. Accustomed to his mysterious disappearance and reappearance, his family does not look for him. From the text's epilogue we learn that Ramonu's family is still expecting his reappearance one year after his demise. Paradoxically Amina the eye witness keeps the secret from Ramonu's ignorant widow Moriamo so as not to "ruin the dream of another woman" (108). This widow is allowed to live in delusion that someday Ramonu will return with goodies from "Overseas" as he always did.

From Amina's point of view Ramonu becomes rich and therefore powerful. The source of this wealth is deemed immaterial and the nature of power it bestows on the owners is presumed to be axiomatically dominance. Amina's point of view is ambivalent and subjective in keeping with the satirical mode. She is unable to see through Ramonu's pretences and

delusion. As a narrator of satire, she is as debased as all the other characters in the narrative. But the author strategically intrudes with rhetorical questions and statements in order to persuade the reader to interrogate the source of Ramonu's wealth and locus of the power he wields over the community.

Paradoxically Ramonu the symbol of naira power is a weak, inconsistent and insecure character. Superficially Ramonu's lifestyle is a celebration of the power of the naira, but the reader's attention is repeatedly drawn to the limitations of power pegged on materialism. At the surface level naira power appears to be the only power possible, simply because it is the only type that is acknowledged and acclaimed. Other forms of power are backgrounded into apparent erasure. The notion of money being synonymous with power is represented thus: "if you haven't got naira power here – you are lost. Money can buy you everything, even justice. Everything --- money speaks here, auntie, nothing else'" (10). Amina's brother Latifu abandons school to join Ramonu in business because "education is not everything, but money speaks the universal language" (81). And Amina is determined to marry Ramonu at the time because "he had all the naira power a woman could ever want in this world" (ibid). But later in life both Amina and Latifu are forced to retract their sentiments when the mirage of money power disappears with Ramonu's disappearance.

Superficially naira is accorded extraordinary capacity. Amina says that the naira can "buy anything, even a good name" (87). The monotonous repetition of this motif prompts the reader to examine its validity. The real value of this money which commoditizes everything including integrity gradually becomes suspect. Overtly the reader is aided from confusing truism and delusion with truth by Bintu's persistent intrusion: "Money does *not* buy everything" (10). All the utterances in praise of money power are attributed to other characters but never to Bintu. Her intrusion exposes Amina's subjectivity which becomes all the more obvious when we learn that she has remained secretly in love with Ramonu despite her being privy to some of his crimes. Ironically Amina hangs onto the view of naira as power in spite of her awareness of its contradictions. It is said that

"women love money" (96). And Amina had wanted to marry Ramonu because he was wealthy, but as Bintu observes there are "women who run away from bad husbands, refusing their money and wealth" (94). Although Amina says that money can "buy justice" (read injustice) she also believes that justice must prevail one day: "the day of the owner who cannot be bought or bribed with naira. The owner who sees and judges all things, Allah" (108). The reader is therefore taken aback when in spite of all the demonstrated awareness Amina insists that Ramonu would still have escaped lynching if he had had more naira. It becomes clear that Amina's naïve belief in the power of money is being subjected to scrutiny.

At the end of the narrative ambivalence over the power-cum-powerlessness of naira remains, but only from Amina's standpoint. At a deeper level this ambivalence is resolved. In a typical satire ambivalent ending is true to form. For example guilt is never ascertained nor justice dispensed. But Emecheta transcends that typicality. In *Naira Power* clarity is achieved when the author dispenses poetic justice to Ramonu. The plot begins with the lynching of Ramonu. A verdict precedes narration of Ramonu's life history, as opposed to the typical linear plot in a biography. When Ramonu receives overdue justice, his death confirms his guilt and the limitation of money power.

Parallelism is employed to subvert affirmation of naira power. Using this technique Emecheta contrasts Ramonu with other characters such as Nurudeen- Amina's husband. Stripped of the mirage of economic flamboyance, Ramonu comes through as a shallow personality in comparison with Nurudeen. Ironically Nurudeen envies Ramonu's ill-gotten wealthy, yet he is the richer of the two. He has "a regular respectable job and a pension at the end of it" (10). Ramonu's wealth is ill-gotten. It is not associated with the power to work and produce wealth genuinely. This parallelism exposes Ramonu's paradoxical powerlessness which is rooted in a notion of power pegged on exploitation of other people's labour.

On the other hand Nurudeens' variant of dominance is vested in maleness. He too is equally debased. Amina his third wife responds to this supremacy, not by resisting but acting as a stereotypical ideal wife. She pretends to be weak and submissive in his presence. She reasons that a "woman cannot be completely herself. She has to pretend to be dependent, dumb, passive and delicate. She has to pretend to meet her husband's dream of ideal woman" (53). Amina the stereotype in the domestic sphere is "more knowledgeable than one might think" (34). She is strong enough to dare a murderous market mob in a desperate attempt to save Ramonu's life. She is a trained primary school teacher but she opts for stereotypical housewife existence rather than a poorly paid teaching job. Ironically she forfeits the very financial independence that other women such as Ramonu's mother long for.

Amina observes that many elite women are involved in this game; because they "still help men to carry on the pretence" that "they are doing all the giving" (53). The power dynamics in these conjugal relationships are ambivalent. Whereas men cannot acknowledge gender complementarity, there is no concrete proof of their powerfulness so long as it is pitted against women's connived compliance that is that is clearly distinct from internalized subordination. Amina delineates this scenario without realizing that she is part of this double-edged disempowerment of men and women. Emecheta exposes and subverts this pretence which is tantamount to self-subordination. More importantly she interrogates women's role in perpetuating gender stereotypes.

Ogundipe-Leslie has argued that oppression by African man in conjugal relations is only one among the six mountains that keep African women in subordination. The other five include external oppression from colonialism and neo-colonialism, traditional structures, backwardness of the African woman, race, and her own negative self image. Materialism – the main theme of *Naira Power* creates space for women to examine at least four of these mountains. However, the female characters in the novel only focus attention on oppression in conjugal relations. Furthermore they are incapable of articulating the phenomenon clearly. Their situation is that of

stagnation with few prospects for genuine awareness of empowerment. In this case Emecheta's feminist stance resides in her revelation of the intricate obstacles to articulation of the problem of gender discrimination. It is impossible to define an empowerment strategy when the very meaning of power remains ambivalent. The author's convincing deconstruction of naira power makes her portrait of alternative forms of power credible.

2.5 Memories of Lemonu's "Power Within"

The variants of supremacy in *Naira Power,* ambivalent as they may be, are pitted against power within. Unlike in *The Slave Girl* where this form of power is allowed to thrive to fruition, in *Naira Power* it is functionally invisible. It is mentioned in retrospect as a preamble to Ramonu's craving for naira power. Nevertheless the reader's attention is briefly focused on a contrasting form of power which is both productive and constructive. This form of power which originates within the individual elicits obedience by inspiring others to act in a positive way. It combines power within, power to and power with others. Paradoxically this power is signified by Ramonu's father Lemonu in his younger days before he acquired materialistic tendencies. In the novel's milieu power within is relegated to history and satirically dismissed as inconsequential. The episode that foregrounds this form of power is depicted in a flashback that is not, ideally, part of the story of *Naira Power.*

We are told in retrospect that the younger Lemonu comes to Lagos as a Hausa cattle merchant long before Nigeria's independence. He meets misfortune but survives. Initially he is a devout Muslim. While feigning blindness and begging to amuse himself he encounters an Alpha. The latter advises Lemonu to get a job and exploit his youthful energy. With the Alpha's assistance, Lemonu is employed as a hygiene inspector by Lagos City Council. He takes to his job passionately and works diligently "he faced it like the Prophet Mohammed. It became his calling. It was the will of Allah. He was determined that all mosquitoes would be exterminated in all parts of Lagos" (20). The author overtly links Lemonu's productive inner power to spirituality. It is in the line of this calling that younger

Lemonu encounters corrupt political power in the character of Chief Okelemeji-Oba of Lagos. In the ensuing contest, Lemonu's incorruptible power within challenges corruptible political supremacy and magical powers. Having failed to evade justice, the Oba enlists the services of his reputed medicine men. Their magic inflicts blindness to Lemonu's workmates but Lemonu himself is not affected. "Many people thought Lemonu would drop dead..... But Lemonu did not drop dead; in fact he did not seem to have heard all the ballyhoo he was causing.....He went on with his work and said his prayers to Allah at his favourite mosque in Lafiaji."(24) Lemonu's power within which is associated with spirituality is further affirmed and elevated when the Oba ironically rewards his honesty and diligence:

> Allah was with him, because instead of the Oba killing him, he commended Lemonu. He told him that our part of the world needed men like him, men who were fearless, men who were brave and loyal. Whether all this made an impression on Lemonu, it was hard to tell... As far as he was concerned; he was doing his duty (ibid)

The diction and repetition in this quotation foregrounds the power symbolized by the character of Lemonu at this stage of development. Repitition of 'men' suggests a positive masculinity signified by constructive traits. Lemonu spends the money he is given by the Oba wisely; to celebrate Ramadhan, visit Mecca and marry his first wife Kudi. Thereafter Lemonu is successively promoted to higher ranks with commensurate remuneration. Unlike Daouda Dieng in Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* who retains his noble character despite economic and political power gain, Lemonu's prosperity consumes his noble character. Ironically his inner power fizzles and his stature diminishes gradually.

Further dimunition attends Lemonu's later life making him a parody of his younger life. The transformation is achieved mainly through binary opposition and parallelism. Whereas the inner power of the younger Lemonu: "the fearless, the blameless"(24) is pitted against images of immense political and magical power, in later life he is comparable to

dimunitive minor characters. His second wife "Idayatu" was very thin. She *was too small – a young girl, still growing. She could not be anything* else but a house-girl. To think that an Alhaji, a big man who had been to the Holy City of Mecca would have anything to do with a small girl like that was sacrilege" (47-48). Nevertheless Idayatu becomes pregnant in six months after her arrival in Lemonu's household and unceremoniously becomes his second wife. His first wife Kudi wonders whether true Islam would approve of such a union. However, Kudi resigns herself to the polygamous union and seeks economic independence through petty trading. By the end of the story Lemonu has been phased out of public space and constricted to domestic space where he engages in devious struggles with his two wayward younger wives. Pitted against younger women he retrogresses further, this time from powerlessness to insanity.

In old age Lemonu is a parallel to his son's shallow character both of which are binary oppositions to the younger Lemonu. Besides the younger Lemonu, the Alpha is the only other character who exudes constructive inner power closely associated with spirituality. The Alpha's lone voice is stylistically backgrounded by his early exit from the text. This erasure contributes to the double vision of the novel rooted in irony. Although power within is commendable and necessary it is relegated to the past. But while it lasts it is accorded urgency and intensity. In this sense it overshadows other forms of power including money power. In the contemporary experience depicted in the novel, this power is silenced due to human folly which engenders obsession with appearances at the expense of reality.

In *The Slave Girl* Emecheta portrays several forms of power at various stages of the story and all within the theme of slave trade and slavery. She also addresses the racial dimension. This is her prerogative for a particular creation. In *Naira Power* she depicts the powerlessness of the naira in order to create skepticism over conventional notions of power with the aim of reconstructing the concept of power. The satirical mode provides appropriate stylistic techniques. In satire all issues are subjected to ambivalence. This framework defies ostensible dichotomies such as

powerful/propertied, proactive, stronger sex, male/oppressor versus powerless, oppressed, passive, weaker sex, victim It also negates conceptualization of character development in the sense of positive conscientisation. In this case the satirical form has no provision for a ready made empowered character. All characters are static, playing games in vicious circles without prospects for development. The absence of meaningful empowerment for all the male and female characters is true to satire. In this sense *Naira Power* is a deep feminist engagement with conceptualization of power at its most debased level. This is a fitting caveat for women's empowerment process that aspires to an equitable world. For the radical feminist critic *Naira Power* would not qualify as a feminist novel because it is a man's story. Furthermore, it connotes powerlessness, and it does not create empowered female characters. Such are the lapses that Nana Wilson-Tagoe implies when she discusses representational inclinations in radical feminist criticism (qtd. in Research in African Literatures. 29.3: 178). In African context, literary art that exposes the trickster warns the rest of the society. In this sense *Naira Power* is indeed an African feminist text. Both *The Slave Girl* and *Naira Power* create new meanings of power that deconstruct conventional hegemonic patriarchal perceptions of power.

CHAPTER THREE

MARIAMA BÂ: *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song.*

3.1 Introduction

The late Mariama Bâ (1929-1981) has two published works: *So Long a Letter* (1980) and *Scarlet Song* (1981 posthumous). Bâ is remembered as the individual "who adopted as her personal course the defense of women in our developing societies" (Bâ, 1981: 111). She was a primary school teacher who was refuted to have "been active in the feminist movement in Senegal." The specific feminist perspective she subscribed to is not stated. However, her novels should indicate her specific feminist stance. Critics have explicated various feminist meanings from her works. Radical feminist critics claim to have discovered a separatist ideology in these works (Frank 1987, Stratton, 1994). Indeed Bâ interrogates gender discrimination in her works, but there is no textual evidence to sustain purely woman-centered radical feminist interpretations which espouse conventional western conceptualizations of power and empowerment. In the current study we argue that Bâ projects an alternative concept of power through her interrogation of the notion of dominance, portraits of equity, and deconstruction of both negritudist and liberal feminist concepts of power.

3.2 Interrogating Spurious Dominance

So Long a lette,r has been interpreted as an exposition of women's victimology. In his article "Still a Victim? Mariama Bâ's *Une Si Longue Lettre*" in *African Literature today* 12(1982) Femi Ojo-Ade summarizes his reading:

> According to Bâ, two camps are precisely delineated: the victimizer, the slave-master, the ruler of this hell on earth is Man: the victimized, the slave driven at times to the point of mental exhaustion is Woman – – – Man the unfaithful husband; Man the womanizer; Man the victimizer – Bâ's novel

> describes him in all negative forms, without exception to console his pride. (1982: 75)

Ojo-Ade's emphasis expressed through repetition and graphology substantiates his victimology theory which he illustrates with antagonistic gender-relations in the text: Modou Fall versus Ramatoulaye and Binetou, Mawdo Bâ versus Aissatou and Young Nabou, Samba Diack versus Jacqueline. But all these relations do have their initial harmonious phase before they eventually turn sour. Besides, there are also harmonious relations, which the critic silences. The victimology theory fits in with the class structure and biased quotation of religious beliefs in society which Ojo-Ade uses as epigrams to his study:

> 'Women are man's proletariat'. (Karl Marx)
> 'Woman is inferior to man and is his subject.'
> (The Koran)
> 'The head of every man is Christ; the head of every woman is man.' (The Bible)

In this scenario Man is the all-powerful oppressor and Woman the passive oppressed victim. Power in this sense is presented monolithically as power over others in an inter gender dichotomy. Ojo-Ade is oblivious of other forms of oppression that affect various categories of society. The scenario suggests neither hope nor possibility for liberation of women and society from patriarchy and other discriminatory structures. It presents *So Long a Letter* as a simplistic exposition of unchanging polar gender relations and any attempt at change as externally instigated – "occidental phenomenon" (72). Bâ's portrait of gender relations in the novel is much deeper, but more importantly it is also optimistic. The gist of her perspective on gender relations and the woman question as a whole lies hidden in both polar and harmonious gender relations in the text. The latter include: Daouda Dieng and Aminata, Abu and Daba, Ibrahima Sall and young Aissatou. Equally important, Bâ's meaning is to be inferred from her representation of intra-gender relations. This category includes Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, Binetou versus Ramatoulaye, Daba versus Binetou, Aunty Nabou versus Aissatou, Aunty Nabou and her niece – cum – daughter-in-law Young Nabou, Modou Fall, Mawdo Bâ, Tamsir, and the Imam. The author also interrogates filial relations that manifest power

relations. The category includes Aunty Nabou and her son Mawdo Bâ, Aunty Nabou and her brother Farba Diouf, Ramatoulaye and her children. All these relations are compounded by other forms of social stratification including caste, class, race and religion. A comprehensive interpretation of the text must take cognizance of all these relations and the factors that define them.

The intra-gender and inter-gender conflicts culminating into Aissatou's divorce from Mawdo Bâ emanate from what the author describes as "absurd divisions" that result from caste/class stratification in the Senegalese society of the novel's milieu. Mawdo Bâ is a Toucouleur, the son of Aunt Seynabu Nabou who is a Dioufene princess of the Sine. Her community is supposedly noble by birth. The source of this nobility is not verifiable in any tangible and logical terms, hence the absurdity. Nevertheless the belief in the idea of nobility is used to rationalize the group's claim to superiority over men and women of other groups who are supposedly of "humble birth". Aissatou's father who is a goldsmith falls into the latter category. Bâ exposes the absurdity of this division by foregrounding the goldsmith's work. An appraisal of his work is presented from Mawdo Bâ's point of view. Mawdo Bâ describes the goldsmith as a 'creative artist' and laments the impending extinction of this art. In this episode it is the goldsmith's productive and creative activity which signifies tangible power. Implicitly Aunty Nabou's claim to supremacy is subverted.

Mawdo Bâ marries Aissatou in spite of his mother's opposition. Their marriage is initially harmonious. It is based on mutual love and cooperation. Nonetheless Aissatou is isolated by her in-laws on account of her "humble birth"– her professional status notwithstanding. But years later Mawdo Bâ succumbs to his mother's manipulation and marries his cousin Young Nabou. Aissatou initiates divorce in protest against the ill-motivated polygamous marriage. She is infuriated by its underlying class divisions. In this complex intra and inter gender conflict, Aunty Nabou's brother Farba Diouf, her son Mawdo Bâ and his two wives fall victim to the former's long-term revenge plan. It is Aunty Nabou who demands to

adopt the young girl for company. She educates her, chooses her career and later hands her over to Mawdo Bâ as a second wife. In this context young Nabou appears to be a passive rather than an active player in a well orchestrated scheme. She is socialized to accept Aunty Nabou's orders. However, her inner power gradually manifests itself in the course of her nursing career.

Ramatoulaye describes Aunty Nabou's dominance in vilifying imagery. The latter's belief in "the law of blood" is an outdated fantasy: "She lived in the past unaware of the changing world" (Bâ, 1980: 26). Her love for her only son Mawdo is overbearing. "She devoted herself with the affection of a tigress to her 'one and only man' (Ibid). In her brother's home in Diakho, Aunty Nabou is a bully:

> Royally received, she immediately resumed her position as the elder sister of the master of the house. Nobody addressed her without kneeling down. She took her meals alone, having been served with the choicest bits from the pots.
>
> Visitors came from everywhere to honour her, thus reminding her of the truth of the law of blood. (1980: 28)

Aunty Nabou educates her niece, but simultaneously instills wrong attitudes in her. Fortunately for young Nabou, the power wielded over her soul inadvertently brings out the best in her. At the opportune moment Aunty Nabou threatens her son into marrying a second wife: "I will never get over it if you don't take her as your wife. Shame kills faster than disease" (30) Ramatoulaye acknowledges Mawdo Bâ's predicament:

> Faced with this rigid mother moulded by the old morality, burning with the fierce arduor of antiquated laws, what could Mawdo Bâ do? He was getting on in years, worn by his arduous work. And then, did he really want to fight, to make a gesture of resistance? Young Nabou was so tempting--- (30)

Aunty Nabou's dominance is vested in age, class and blood bond. In these capacities she oppresses both her female and male relatives. Of the five

characters in this particular conflict it is the two men who ultimately appear passive and powerless. Aunty Nabou is vindictive, manipulative and aggressive enough to execute her revenge plan against Aissatou and drag others along. Aissatou is both "an innocent victim of an unjust cause and the courageous pioneer of a new life" (34). Mawdo Bâ expects her to stay so that he can have the love of his life, please his mother, and satisfy his male "polygamic instincts". Yet, by succumbing to his mother's scheme he forfeits his first love, her respect, and companionship.

After the divorce Aissatou makes progress in her career. She raises her four sons and becomes a source of strength for Ramatoulaye. Aissatou is contended in her singlehood not because it is an ideal situation, but because she is keen to avoid compromising her conscience. She earns a place in the well-to-do class by merit. She empowers herself economically and uses some of her material wealth to empower rather than dominate others. Hers is a tangible elite class status as opposed to her ex-mother-in-law's fantasy of noble origins.

Young Nabou is yet another victim of the "absurd divisions" in a different sense. Aunty Nabou manipulates her to enter into an arranged marriage in order to retain "noble blood" in her grandchildren. The latter is redeemed through her midwifery work. She is passive in the struggle for dominance in the Mawdo Bâ home but very active in public service. The power within which enables young Nabou to serve others is affirmed through the gratifying imagery by which she is described, as opposed to the vilifying attributes of her namesake mother-in-law. Young Nabou is caught up in inescapable polygamous marriage, but at least "she let herself be drawn, towards him, naturally, without shock" (46). Out of Seynabu Nabou's ill-motivated informal education young Nabou internalizes virtues of "softness and generosity, docility and politeness, poise and tact" that equip her for noble service to humanity (47). As a nurse, she agonizes over the many health problems among the poor in her society. Ramatoulaye commends young Nabou as a fighter who "had not the least inclination for frivolities" (48). There is hope for this victim turned fighter for a just cause. While Aunty Nabou's dominance is self-centred, young Nabou has the power to

improve the lives of a wider public. She qualifies into a different category of people. She belongs, not with her domineering kinswoman of "noble birth," but with the "true sisters, destined for the same mission of emancipation" (15). Ramatoulaye observes:

> In the midst of life, in the midst of poverty, in the midst of ugliness, Young Nabou would often triumph with knowledge and experience; but she sometimes knew heartrending failure; she remained powerless, faced with the force of death.
> Young Nabou, responsible and aware, like you, like me! Even though she is not my friend, we often shared the same problems. (1980: 85)

The diction and repetition above foregrounds Young Nabou's pleasant character and inner strength which sustains her struggle to serve others in a desperate situation. Unlike Binetou, young Nabou does not exploit her aging husband. Neither does she allow him to dominate her life completely. Although she loves him she cannot cater for all his self-centred needs. Mawdo Bâ complains of her poor home-maker's skills, but the reader is aware that young Nabou's energies are consumed by a higher cause. Her priority is to the serve the sick. The division of labour in the home need not be obligatory, but her health service is a calling: "she would come back from work railing at the lack of beds---" (47). The fact that she also hosts members of the extended "noble" family makes her husband's complaints appear inconsiderate and trivial. When Mawdo Bâ describes her as "finicky" his value judgement becomes suspect. In any case the reader is aware that Mawdo Bâ betrays Aissatou the ideal homemaker. He would like to keep both women for different reasons, but Aissatou's decision unsettles his double dealing.

Modou Fall's family is dogged by the same multifaceted gender relations that originate in class divisions and discriminatory traditional practices. The paradoxes and ironies that emerge from the many contests in the family unsettle earlier readings based on victimology and separatist theories (Ojo-Ade 1982, Frank 1987). There are several forms of power that come into play in the conflicts that ensue, some of which are elevated

and affirmed while others are deflated and negated. Ramatoulaye's marriage to Modou is initially harmonious. It is based on mutual love, respect, cooperation, complementarity and relative equity with minimal economic differences. At the beginning, class status is not an issue in this union. Ramatoulaye prefers Modou, a young poorly paid patriotic lawyer who she loves, to Daouda Dieng a relatively well-to-do doctor but whom she does not love. Young Modou could not afford dowry. Nonetheless their harmonious marriage lasts twenty five years during which period they get twelve children and jointly acquire a matrimonial home; 'Villa Fallene'. When Modou marries his daughter's classmate and friend Binetou, Ramatoulaye is understandably shocked. Although Islamic religion endorses polygamy, Ramatoulaye agonizes over the reasons for this unique marriage: "was it madness, weakness, irresistible love? What inner confusion led Modou to marry Binetou?"(12).

The terms and conditions of Modou's second marriage sharply contrast those of his first. He literally buys his second wife and parents to the extent that he raises them from abject poverty to petty bourgeois class status. Superficially, Modou appears powerful in the new relationships, but objective scrutiny deflates all dimensions of his dominance. In order to "establish his rule" over Binetou, Modou withdraws her from school shortly before her final examinations. In return he pays her a monthly allowance in addition to maintaining her parents in their new-found class status. To sustain the luxurious lifestyle for his second family, Modou acquires a bank loan using the property he owned jointly with his first wife. Unable to decipher the façade of wealth, Binetou's family suddenly acquire a new economic status and dominance. Her mother is keen to display her newfound economic status which is, by inference, another façade:

> She joined the category of women 'with heavy bracelets' lauded by *griots*. Thrilled, she would listen to the radio transmitting songs dedicated to her.
>
> Her family reserved the best place for her during ceremonies and listened to her advice. When Modou's large car dropped her and she emerged, there would be a rush of

> outstretched hands into which she placed banknotes. (49)

To marry Binetou on his terms, Modou exercises male supremacy and exploits his dominant class status. At that point he is the visible oppressor and "Binetou like many others, was a lamb slaughtered on the altar of affluence" (39). But Binetou is sacrificed by both her mother and Modou. For her mother, emancipation from poverty is the ultimate goal and she believes the process is externally controlled, that wealth is to be given, not earned. Like the characters of *Naira Power*, Binetou's mother believes in value-free acquisition of material wealth. She is able to escape from poverty by giving her daughter to a rich old man shortly before she sits for her final examinations. With this mindset her concept of empowerment is flawed and so is her perception of marriage. She does not view marriage as a partnership, but as an opportunity for women to exploit men. To Lady Mother-in-law, man is the predestined breadwinner and woman his dependant by right.

On the other hand Binetou discovers the paradox of her imprisonment in the exploitative union. She seeks only material benefits, but ends up in a dysfunctional conjugal relationship. Ramatoulaye reckons the young girl had underestimated her elderly lover-cum-opponent: "She thought she was stronger than the man she was dealing with. She did not know Modou's strong will, his tenacity before an obstacle, the pride he invests in winning, the resistance that inspires new attempts at each failure" (ibid. 39). This kind of power is ill-motivated. The author vilifies it accordingly. This seemingly strong man is soon reduced to a pathetic masquerader in his desperate attempt to contain his young wife. Ironically, Binetou problematizes all the forces by which her youth and future are disorientated such that the winner turns loser:

> Binetou-- was sharply aware of what she was sacrificing by her marriage. A victim, she wanted to be the oppressor. Exiled in the world of adults, which was not her own, she wanted her prison gilded. Demanding, she tormented. Sold, she raised her price daily. What she renounced, those things which

> before used to be the sap of her life and which she would bitterly enumerate, called for exorbitant compensations, which Modou exhausted himself trying to provide --- The seductive power of mature age, of silvery temples, was unknown to Binetou. And Modou would dye his hair every month. His waistline painfully restrained by old-fashioned trousers, Binetou would never miss a chance of laughing wickedly at him. Modou would leave himself winded trying to imprison youth in its decline, which abandoned him on all sides: the graceless sag of a double chin, the gait hesitant and heavy at the slightest cool breeze. Gracefulness and beauty surrounded him. He was afraid of disappointing --- (48).

Mariama Bâ satirizes this dysfunctional partnership through parallelism and paradox. Modou rejects his aging first wife, but in turn is rejected for the same reason. Paradoxically the very age which is one of the symbols of his dominance during courtship with Binetou makes him subordinate in marriage. He becomes a victim of Binetou's temporary youthfulness which she displays as a signifier of power. She displays her youthful gracefulness as the very antithesis of his aging gracelessness. She exploits all of Modou's mistakes to her own advantage. In these multiple paradoxes and parallelisms it is not clear who tames, controls, contains, dominates, disempowers, victimizes, excludes, delimits, punishes, and subjugates the other. The polar oppositions that emerge in this particular relationship deconstruct the stereotypical male supremacy versus female subordination dichotomy. Two conclusions emerge from this scenario. Firstly, each partner's claim to dominance is fundamentally baseless. All the conventional significations of power which Modou and Binetou exploit are not paramount in a genuine human relationship. The couple projects a trend where dominance is pegged on externals, in which case anything imaginable can become a symbol of their notion of power. Both of them are satirized. Secondly, in their contest over the baseless form of power both of them lose and their powerlessness is ultimately exposed. One sentence in the quotation is very telling, because the term oppressor is explicitly attributed to Binetou by the narrator. "A victim, she wanted to be the oppressor" (ibid). The scenario demonstrates a probable outcome of

co-opting women into a system that operates on a faulty ideology. It validates bell hooks' argument that feminism should aim at "eradicating the ideology of domination" (Collins, 1990:38)

Unlike Binetou, Ramatoulaye believes in gender complementarity – she posits that "a man's success depends on feminine support" (56). On the contrary, Binetou's aggression impoverishes Modou in many ways. To satisfy Binetou's family materialistic demands Modou is perpetually in debt. This exposes the façade of his economic power. Binetou's life is equally impoverished. After Modou's death she does not contest the loss of property. "Lady Mother-in-Law hiccoughed, cried. She was being stripped, and asked for mercy --- sobbed --- Binetou? Indifference itself. What did it matter to her what was being said? She was already dead inside --- ever since her marriage to Modou" (71). In effect, the power by which her dead self controlled the old man becomes even more questionable. Both Modou and Binetou are dislocated from their age groups – one by design and the other by default respectively. Consequently they are both disadvantaged and disorientated in different ways. Their winner-take-all contest is ironically a no-win situation in which all players are losers. Modou dies of a heart attack. Consequently his parasitic dependants lose all their gains. Metaphorically they are all dead. Modou is doubly so because the facade of wealth with which he struggled to win over his young wife and her family die with him. The memory that remains is that of a wreckless debtor and helpless old man who fails to win the love and respect he yearns for from his young wife. Lady Mother-in-Law's dream of a permanent escape from poverty through exploitation of others and the image she had lately acquired die with the demise of her benefactor. At this point their power over one another and others beyond the trio is deflated and in fact exposed as masked powerlessness.

Whereas Mariama Bâ does not negate marriage, she carefully redefines its place from an African feminist view of empowerment. Her interrogation of human relations is that much complex. In the multiple gender relations in Modou's family, it is Ramatoulaye who scores a win of sorts. She

yearns for and offers companionship and complementarity in marriage to *no avail. When Modou deserts her house, she summons inner strength and* manages to raise her twelve children. Modou squanders the family wealth, but Ramatoulaye is providentially rewarded.

Finally when Ramatoulaye is widowed after thirty years of marriage she rejects several offers of widow inheritance. She gives good reasons in each case. Tamsir her brother-in-law is in a big hurry to inherit Ramatoulaye because she is the rich one after all. This self-seeker invokes Islamic and customary law to mask his real intentions. Being presumptuous of male supremacy he simply demands rather than request Ramatoulaye's hand in marriage. Through the latter's response Mariama Bâ articulates yet another soul-searching critique of dominance in human relations:

> 'Ah yes! Your strategy is to get in before any other suitor, to get in before Mawdo, the faithful friend, who has more qualities than you and who also, according to custom, can inherit the wife. You forget that I have a heart, a mind that I am not an object to be passed from hand to hand. You don't know what marriage means to me: it is an act of faith and of love, the total surrender of oneself to the person one has chosen and who has chosen you. (I emphasized the word 'chosen').
>
> 'What of your wives, Tamsir? Your income can meet neither their needs nor those of your numerous children. To help you out with financial obligations, one of your wives dyes, another sells fruit, the third untiringly turns the handle of her sewing machine. You, the reserved Lord, you take it easy, obeyed at the crook of a finger. I shall never be the one to complete your collection. My house shall never be for you the coveted oasis: no extra burden; my "turn" everyday; cleanliness and luxury, abundance and calm! No, Tamsir! (58)

Tamsir believes that supremacy resides in physiology rather than in the *exercise of the very superior strength attributed to the male sex.* He demands rights without acknowledging corresponding obligations and

responsibilities. He is, in fact, a dependant on the labour of his three wives. All the same, he is confident that only biological criteria endorsed by customary law and religion empower him to assume dominance over Ramatoulaye's household and property. His companions, Mawdo Bâ and the Imam are shocked into awareness of this naked truth by Ramatoulaye's response. They resort to the same ill-defined male supremacy and conveniently invoke religion and customary law becaue they cannot counter Ramatoulaye's logical argument. They suddenly become aware of the gender discrimination which cannot be precisely delineated in terms of any consensual principles.

When Ramatoulaye is provoked while still in mourning, she chooses to respond by breaking her thirty years' of "silence" and "harassment". Her timely and justifiable breach of silence deflates Tamsir's "assurance and calm aplomb" (57). Unable to provide a logical response, it is Tamsir's turn to observe silence, not as a reversed victim, but as an oppressor shocked into awareness of the fallacy of predestined male supremacy. The persistent question remains: wherein lies the power base for all the assurance, aplomb and Lordship? Does this "Lord" occupy a position of power or powerlessness?

The Islamic law that Tamsir invokes recognizes the patriarch's right to polygamy on condition that he exercises his power to fend for all members of his family even as he claims power over them. Ramatoulaye makes it clear that Tamsir forfeits his claim to supremacy when he abdicates his masculine gender roles. After her rejection of Tamsir, Daouda Dieng proposes to Ramatoulaye for the second time. Dieng is portrayed as a noble character who is gender sensitive to the extent that he has been branded a "feminist" in the National Assembly. He is one of the few loving husbands in the text. He is totally committed to his first marriage, although he cannot resist the temptation of recovering his first love. But Ramatoulaye rejects polygamy for all the pain it inflicts on all involved. By describing Dieng from Ramatoulaye's point of view, the author succeeds in ennobling her narrator's decision. It is a rational rejection despite the magnitude of temptation. Ramatoulaye receives more proposals but she rejects all of

them: "old men in search of easy revenue, young men in search of adventure to occupy their leisure" (70). Her empowerment in this case lies in her capacity to reject ill-motivated terms of polygamy and marriage generally.

In an attempt to analyze her dilemma, Ramatoulaye cites Samba Diack and Jacqueline's marital problems that result from a combination of gender and religious discrimination as well as regionalism. Jacqueline is a protestant Christian from Ivory Coast while her husband is Senegalese and Muslim. Ivorians and Senegalese share the same history, but the latter view the former as bushmen from the hinterland. So the Ivorian woman is called "gnac" (bushman). She marries a Muslim against her parents' wish, yet when she migrates to Senegal she sticks to Christianity against Diack's family's expectations. Her attempts to get assimilated are frustrated. The couple had met while Samba Diack was practising pharmacy in Abidjan. When they return to Senegal, Diack decides to make up for lost time by openly chasing "slender Senegalese women (42)". This betrayal drives his wife into depression. After various types of treatment Jacqueline is rescued by a doctor who encourages her to fight against the root cause of her mental disorder. The narrator reckons that the patient is healed because "she was morally uplifted" (45). The doctor's advice motivates her to release the inert power from within into action. Ramatoulaye cites Jacqueline's case to illustrate the pain of separation which she had hoped to escape from by remaining in a polygamous union. For her, marriage is a sanctified union and separation the painful last resort. The idea of empowerment enters into this equation at a different level. Both Ramatoulaye and Jacqueline resort to power within and power to in order to carry on after their marital shipwrecks. Mbye B. Cham (1987) describes this kind of power as a force that engenders a new awareness of the status quo:

> Power struggle then, is to be seen not so much in terms of victory/defeat since it is the kind of struggle that yields a no-win situation, but is to be looked at from the perspective of the impact of the experience on the individual and the latter's ability to

> examine, articulate and utilize the transformative capabilities of such an experience of struggle. The heroines in *une si longue lettre* – Rama, Aissatou and Jacqueline – are a living testimony to the positive capabilities of the negative problem of abandonment. Each one emerges from basically the same experience stronger and better placed to understand more clearly, cope with, analyze and articulate the problems, challenges and aspirations not only of women, but also of society in general. (*African Literature Today*, 1987, 90–91)

Cham stops short of naming the alternative forms of power that Mariama Bâ engages. It is obvious that a power struggle in the context of dominance must of necessity yield the victor and the vanguished. But the characters above are neither of the two, therefore the kind of empowerment they experience calls for a redefinition of the root word of this concept. McWhiter defines this kind of empowerment as:

> *The process by which people, organizations or groups who are powerless(a) become aware of the power dynamics at work in their life context, (b) develop the skills and capacity for gaining some reasonable control over their lives, (c) exercise this control without infringing upon the rights of others and (d) support the empowerment of others in the community. (Qtd. in* Rowlands, 1997:15)

McWhiter "makes it clear that taking action is not about gaining the power to dominate others" (ibid).

Aissatou and Jacqueline withdraw from non-functional partnerships as a way of registering their awareness of the power dynamics they encounter. The action they take has nothing to do with a male-exclusion emancipatory option. Srilatha Batliwala (1993) negates the popular assumption that women's empowerment is basically against men simply because it targets oppressive practices that are erroneously considered to be men's rights in patriarchal culture. For Batliwala empowerment of women from these

practices will simultaneously liberate men from the negative power to oppress:

> *Women's empowerment, if it is a real success, does mean the loss of men's traditional power and control over the women in their households: control of her body and her physical mobility; the rights to abdicate from all responsibility for housework and the care of children; the right to physically abuse or violate her; the right to spend family income on personal pleasures (and vices); the right to abandon her or take other wives; the right to take unilateral decisions which affect the whole family; and countless other ways in which poor men- and have unjustly confined women (p.9) (qtd, in* Rowlands 1997, 23 – 24).

The so-called men's rights in this case are tantamount to women's and gender issues from which both sexes need to be emancipated. Supremacy based on these erroneous premises is contestable and the premises indeed spurious. To counter this kind of power signified by some of the male and female characters discussed in this section, Mariama Bâ creates prototypes of gender equity who exercise power with one another. It is important to note that this category of characters also includes both sexes.

3.3 Prototypes of Equity

There are several harmonious conjugal relations in *So Long a* Letter which constitutes prototypes of gender equity. Daouda Dieng and his cousin/wife Aminata are prototypes of harmonious gender relations. Like all other characters in the text this couple is described from Ramatoulaye's seemingly subjective point of view. However, in this particular case the technique creates an illusion of objectivity in view of the narrator's relationship to the couple in question. Ramatoulaye would have been an antagonist to both of them had she not listened to the dictates of her heart. All the imagery used to describe Dieng elicits empathy from the reader. Contrasted with the other male characters in the text Dieng is an idealized man. He stands out as a clear minded male activist for the emancipation of

society and women. He is a "profoundly charitable person, who saw the best in people and ignored the rest"(66). He is a good husband and father to his cousin Aminata and their children respectively. He believes in complementarity in marriage. "He never accepted any honour without associating his wife with it. He involved her in his political actions, his numerous travels," (67). Even after he joins the National Assembly he continues his medical profession as a moral obligation because it was "insensitivity, to give up looking after others for something else!" (68). As a politician: "He was an upright man and each time the situation demanded, he would fight for justice. It was not love of show or money that had driven him towards politics, but his true love for his fellow man, the urge to redress wrongs and injustice" (ibid. 61).

Dieng is a man of character, with inner strength, a sense of value, and love for humanity. His wealth is genuinely earned. He has the capacity for real power to make a contribution towards the creation of a better world for the entire society. Branded "feminist" in the National Assembly he is indeed an African feminist ally. He opposes gender stereotypes and advocates women's participation in public life. He seems to have liberated himself from the fallacy of a physiological male supremacy and urge for power over others that is erroneously fronted as the signification of success. Dieng's power within manifests itself as it is exercised in the service of others. But Ramatoulaye rejects his offer of widow inheritance with good reason. Her rejection of Dieng demonstrates the need for complementarity which the society needs in order to disentangle itself from polygamy. It takes one man and several women to tango in polygamy. Therefore both genders are accountable for the practice. In this sense Ramatoulaye's action is a mark of emancipation and a bold pointer to positive change. At this point Dieng's version of feminism is put to test, it emerges that his feminist awareness is limited to the level of advocacy on behalf of women. He does not understand the deeper African feminist logic behind Ramatoulaye's refusal of his offer of widow inheritance. His confessed gender sensitivity turns out to be supression of male supremacy as distinct from male emancipation. It is exemplified in his demand for "'All or

nothing'" (69). This case illustrates the author's recognition of the multi-dimensional complexities in the social change she advocates.

Farmata, the griot woman, articulates resistance against Ramatoulaye's view of change. However, the character of Farmata elicits empathy because the reader is aware that the griot woman is a traditional structure. She is obliged by social contract to uphold the so-called African culture (read traditional patriarchal status quo) in which case Farmata is a collaborator in patriarchy. In this capacity she is empathetically depicted as a woman in dire need of liberation from a negative image of woman that affirms the stronger/weaker sex stereotype. Her tirade against Ramatoulaye's advocacy for monogamy reveals the negative beliefs and attitudes that shape the griot woman's worldview:

> 'Bissimilai! Bissimilai! What was it you dared to write and make messenger of? You have killed a man. His crestfallen face cried it out to me. You have rejected the messenger sent to you by God to reward you for your sufferings. God will punish you for not having followed the path towards peace. You have refused greatness! You shall live in mud. I wish you another Modou to make you shed tears of blood.
>
> 'Who do you take yourself for? At fifty, you have dared to break the *wolere*. You trample upon your luck: Daouda Dieng, a rich man, a deputy, a doctor, of your own age group, with just one wife. He offers you security, love, and you refuse! Many women, of Daba's age even, would wish to be in your place. (1980: 69).

Farmata believes that the woman is powerless and therefore she must remain virtually a dependant. This view is deconstructed through her very own character. She fends for herself and even provides valuable support for Ramatoulaye's solitude and double parenting duty. In this supportive role Farmata signifies both affirmation of and resistance to change. Mariama Bâ's portrait of Farmata constitutes her recognition of intra-gender resistance in the struggle for empowerment, particularly empowerment from oppressive traditional practices. Nevertheless it is

possible to embrace change as Ramatoulaye does "despite Farmata"(70). *Significantly it is the advocate of monogamy who is accorded the last word* in the contest in this episode. Notably both women are presented as individuals with inner power but which is directed into different directions.

Abu and Daba represent a younger generation "ideal couple" (73). Daba is a contrast of Binetou, her former friend, classmate and later stepmother. Daba is knowledgeable, focused and assertive. Like her mother she believes that marriage is a "mutual agreement" (74). Daba's husband, Abu, is like-minded. He distinguishes wife from servant and slave (73). The author constructs Dada – the young generation emancipated woman- into an ideal partner for this young man who is equally emancipated from the discriminatory fixation with male supremacy.

Daba would fit the label "feminist" by whichever of the many feminist strands documented hitherto. But it is essential to qualify her feminism by examining the specific ideas she espouses. Her ideology is summarized thus:

> She reasons everything out, that child... she often tells me: I don't want to go into politics; it's not that I am not interested in the fate of my country and, most especially, that of woman. But when I look at the fruitless wrangling even within the ranks of the same party, when I see men's greed for power, I prefer not to participate. No, I am not afraid of ideological struggle, but in a political party it is rare for a woman to make an easy break-through. For a long time men will continue to have the power of decision, whereas everyone knows that polity should be the affair of women. No: I prefer my own association, where there is neither rivalry nor schism, neither malice nor jostling for position; there are no posts to be shared, nor positions to be secured. The headship changes every year. Each of us has equal opportunity to advance her ideas. We are given tasks according to our abilities in our activities and organization that work towards the progress of women. Our funds go towards humanitarian work; we are

> mobilized by militancy as useful as any other, but it is a healthy militancy, whose only reward is inner satisfaction. (74)

Central to Daba's treatise is a different concept of power. Her gender perspective deconstructs the terms empowerment, emancipation and liberation in western models. In conventional power discourse these terms connote the process of acquiring power from its incumbent holders. Since men are presumed to be the incumbents it is assumed that women aspire to wrest dominance from them. Consequently, men should brace themselves for reversed disempowerment! Daba's treatise raises different questions and answers them. She posits that disempowerment of men is not the ultimate goal for all women's movements. She proposes a form of empowerment that does not imply the ability to regulate the behaviour of others in a repressive sense. In her view, ability to subjugate others is not synonymous with powerfulness. Her treatise prompts the reader to envision a form of power that does not entitle men or women to load it over one another.

To the majority of readers the monolithic concept of power as dominance is an essence that is not open to redefinition. In this context Daba's redefinition should provoke us into a new awareness. It defamiliarizes the reader with the familiar "untruth" that has ceased to attract scrutiny. One wonders where the good friend-husband-father-doctor-politician Daouda Dieng, for example, would fit in the redefined scheme of things. It is necessary to examine how the new meaning of power relates to Ramatoulaye's authoritative statement that "Life is an eternal compromise" (72) Several relationships in *So Long a Letter* exemplify this fact. In real life it is compromise, not dominance, that sustains harmonious human relationships including inter and intra gender relations. It takes Mariama Bâ's imaginative ingenuity to unsettle the all too familiar fallacy that dominance is powerful. The Tamsir, Modou, Mawdo, Imam, Samba Diack, Aunty Nabou, Lady Mother-in-law and Farmata mindsets emanate from internalization of this fallacy.

Whether or not Daba's ideology is viable in contemporary emancipatory struggles is a different debate which falls outside the scope of this study. However, in the world of fiction her ideology deconstructs the popular conceptualization of power by proposing a reconceptualization. She addresses the many forms of discrimination in her world concurrently. She exposes her father's betrayal of a girl-child's filial love and respect, while she redefines her own space in courtship and marriage. She provides a critical analysis of intra-gender oppression and victimology of her friend Binetou. She questions gender-blind laws on property ownership. She confronts white racism practised in her brother's school, and helps to liberate her mother from Lady Mother-in-Law's intra-gender oppression.

3.4 Interrogating Negritudist Concept of Power in Scarlet Song

In *Scarlet Song* (1981), Mariama Bâ accentuates her gender discourse a notch higher through incisive critique of Negritude as an emancipatory ideology. Negritude was an ideological movement of the 1960s, which advocated a revival of African indigenous cultures as a decolonization strategy against the French policy of assimilation. The late Leopold Sedar Senghor who was the first President of Senegal (1960-81) was one of the founders of the movement and Negritude was the official ideology of his regime. The ideology has some merits which have been hailed by pro-Negritudist scholars such as Jean-Paul Satre (1948). But the ideology's elitist and apologist orientation has been contested by African scholars (Fanon 1967, Soyinka 1976). Mariama Bâ contests the ideology from an African feminist perspective by centering gender issues in Negritude polemics. In *Scarlet Song* she creates a complex plot that exposes Negritudist contradictions. Her engagement with Negritude reveals that all discriminatory ideologies thrive on dominance and therefore they cannot be emancipatory. Her feminist perspective finds expression, not in construction of unrealistic African feminist characters in the novel's milieu, but in her deconstruction of African patriarchal ideology of the Negritude variant which negates empowerment of women and society.

The story of *Scarlet Song* is set mainly in the city of Dakar in post-independence Senegal. Part of the story takes place in Paris. Mariama Bâ's approach in *Scarlet* Song echoes Emecheta's in *Naira* Power which is discussed in the preceding chapter. In both texts the story of a boy child protagonist is portrayed from an Africncan feminist perspective. In *Scarlet* Song the protagonist's father Djibril Gueye sends his son to white folk's school to rescue the latter from being dominated by his mother, Yaye Khady. Ousmane seizes the opportunity. He works hard and excels academically. During his last year in primary school he falls in love with Ouleymatou a classmate from Usine Niari neighbourhood, but she rejects him because he assists his mother with housework. Thereafter Ousmane avoids attachment to women until he encounters Mireille – another classmate in his last year of high school who is the daughter of a French diplomat working in Dakar. After high school Mireille opts to study at the national university in Senegal in order to remain in touch with Ousmane. Their love flourishes but they are soon separated when Mireille's parents discover her love affair with a Blackman. She is sent to study in Paris.

The two lovers maintain contact discreetly. Both of them participate in the historical 1968 students' riots that rocked France and her colonies. Both of them excel academically and get teaching jobs in Dakar and Paris respectively. While Mirelle saves her earnings for their future, Ousmane spends his on his needy family. He moves them from Usine Niari Talli slum to a better location. When his father probes the subject of marriage, Ousmane tactfully dismisses the idea of arranged marriage to his cousin Marieme and later flies to Paris to marry Mireille his own choice. Mireille agrees to convert to Islam as a condition for the marriage. It is noteworthy that Ousmane does not make any major sacrifice as a precondition for the same marriage.

Their parents' reaction to the inter-racial marriage is more or less similar. Mireille's parents disown her. Ousmane's father resigns to this fate grudgingly. But Ousmane's mother resolves to break the marriage at all costs. Soon after their return to Dakar the couple notice a cultural rift which deepens with time. Faced with cultural realities which they had not

carefully examined before marriage. Ousmane retracts his commitment to the inter-racial marriage and takes refuge in Negritude literally and symbolically. He abandons Mireille and their half-caste son Gorgui after reconnecting with his first love Ouleymatou. As a Muslim convert, Mireille is aware of the religion's laws on polygamy. Therefore, Ousmane assumes that she will accept it. Nevertheless, he keeps his bigamous union secret for financial reasons. When Mireille eventually confirms his double life, she becomes insane, kills their son and stabs Ousmane. The novel's title comes from this final confrontation: "A Scarlet song welled up from Ousmane's wounds, the scarlet wounds of lost hopes" (1981: 166).

Besides the protagonist and his spouses the story of *Scarlet Song* involves a conglomeration of inter-gender and intra-gender relations all of which have a bearing on the overall meaning of the text. They include Ousmane's parents, Mireille's parents, Guillaume and Genevieve, Lamine and Pierrette, Ali and Rosalie, Boly Mboup and his catholic wife, Pathé Ngom's polygamous union with Ma Fatim and Maïmouna, Ousmane's mother and her daughters-in-law, Ousmane and his cronies. All these relations exemplify some dimension of the concept of power which underpins the feminist discourse in the novel. In all these relationships, dominance is invalidated mainly through characterization. The stature of every character who espouses dominance is gradually diminished. Conversely non-competitive forms of power based on cooperation, compromise, and complementarity are fore-grounded and affirmed through progressive elevation of the characters who embody these values.

Ousmane and Mireille start off in relative harmony. In the letter he sends his father from Paris, Ousmane attributes his academic success to Mireille's support:

> If I have made a success of my life, if I am, as you say, your pride and joy, if I have fulfilled all your wishes, if you have left the dust of Usine Niari behind you, if you can contemplate serenely the months and years stretching out before you, it is all thanks to her. It is difficult for a man to undertake anything alone. "Nothing can be done

> without a particle of love", one of my earliest school masters often used to say, Mireille – I told Yaye Khady the truth as far as her first name is concerned – Mireille has helped me by her unflagging moral support, to realize my potential.
>
> She was always before me, like a flaming torch, lighting up the path. (64).

Indeed the two lovers are motivated by each other's moral support in high school and during the years of separation. Before marriage their relationship is hinged on liberalist ideology acquired from their philosophy course. In their youthful naivety Ousmane and Mireille uncritically accept the liberalist postulation of a just and fair society. They naively presume implied gender equity in this ideology. The author exposes their naivety by narrating the experience of two generations of women under liberalism - Mireille and her mother Mathilde de La Vallée. The two women epitomize the contradictions in liberalist ideology which superficially espouses equity among bourgeois men while it conceals multiple levels of inequality in the capitalist system including gender discrimination. Whereas Mireille the young elite woman signifies the façade of gender neutral liberalist ideals, her mother is a symbol of the underlying sexism in the ideology. Mireille appears to enjoy the extension of liberal ideals to women relative to her mother, but it is clear that both women are oppressed by the system. This portrait comes out clearly after Mireille's marriage to a black man. Mathilde is grieved because her daughter's bold decision is at variance with the mother's perception of a good bourgeois identity. The older generation of bourgeois woman is a pathetic signification of internalized oppression to whom empowerment is a dirty word. "When she heard talk of women's liberation, she remained indifferent. In her life, only her husband counted. She pampered him, obeyed him and anticipated his slightest whim" (78) Mathilde has no identity of her own. Her response to her daughter's action is a mere echo of her husband's disgust:

> But Jean de La Vallée was planted in front of her, inflexible in the fact of this attack on his honour, this assault on his dignity. He exclaimed loud and furiously, 'snake-in-the-

> grass! Slut! By which his wife understood that there could be no reconciliation. And then, out of habit - thirty years during which she had not had a thought of her own, no initiative, no rebellion, thirty years during which she had simply moved in the direction in which she was pushed, thirty years during which it had been her lot to agree and to applaud – then, out of habbit rather than conviction she sobbed, 'snake-in-the-grass! Slut!' and fell into a faint.
>
> On opening her eyes, her only feeling was total isolation. Her daughter had disappeared into the night. She was sure she would never see her again. She felt plunged into mourning. The only person she had left was her husband, this cold man whom she must wait on, satisfy, applaud, till her heart broke. (78).

In this episode Mariama Bâ depicts the patriarchal underbelly of capitalist liberalism. The diction, repetition, rhythm and tone of the extract above portray a docile and desperate female victim of the capitalist variant of patriarchy who is resigned to a monotonous lifestyle under her domineering husband. Jean and Mathilde de La Vallée symbolize absolute male supremacy versus female subordination in. On the contrary, Mireille symbolizes liberal feminism. The latter is an emancipatory strategy that attempts to empower women simply by co-opting them into existing patriarchal structures but without reconstructing the notion of power that underpins the very structures. Liberal feminism assumes that male supremacy resides in material indicators such as education and economic independence and that women are automatically empowered by acquiring these indicators. Since Mireille is educated, has a career and substantial saving, she considers herself emancipated. She can make her own decision to marry the man of her choice who happens to be black. She assumes that Ousmane is equally emancipated by virtue of the same indicators. She is therefore shocked when Ousmane the "uncompromising disciple of 'Negritude'" (ibid: 135) surfaces. Mireille's shock emanates from her failure to distinguish between indicators of economic empowerment and the negative social structures that underpin and perpetuate gender discrimination. She is caught up in intricate power games all of which emanate from the monolithic notion of power as dominance. The author

seems to suggest that no meaningful empowerment of women and society is achievable in this context. Her vision affirms Rowlands (1997) argument cited earlier in Chapter One that empowerment entails much more than mere co-option of women into existing patriarchal structures. To be meaningful, "empowerment must involve undoing negative social constructions" (ibid:14). Mireille takes it for granted that liberalism and liberal feminism deconstruct racial and gender discrimination simultaneously.

Ousmane the protagonist of *Scarlet Song* is the self-proclaimed "uncompromising disciple of 'Negritude'"(Mariama Bâ, 1981:135). After fraternizing with European culture signified by his wife Mireille, he retracts his steps to his first love Ouleymatou who symbolizes his indigenous African roots:

> In his entanglement with Ouleymatou, far more was involved than mere physical relationship. When those black hands massaged his muscles with infinite tenderness, a deep affinity was established. It ate into his innermost being, shook him to the core, disturbed his very soul, and set him up as a 'fighter', an ambassador of his people' --- 'A people bastardized by history, a people whose fractured skeleton had to be re-assembled --- A people stifled in tunnels of fear and humiliation --- A people! Oh! I was led astray, when I was a young student, stuffed with reading and slogans, bewitched by the novelty of the siren-song that lured me on! The trap-door opens up. I am escaping unharmed!' (Bâ 1981:150).

As an "ambassador" of his people, Ousmane also arrogates to himself the task of liberating African woman. His perception of emancipation entails uplifting a poor semi-literate black woman to a higher economic status.

Mariama Bâ exposes the demerits of this self-contradictory approach by use of satire and paradox. Ousmane confesses that the unstated motive of his supposed liberation of Ouleymatou is an individualistic search for lordship. "At Ouleymatou's he was Lord and master. He undressed where

he liked, sat where he liked, ate where he liked, dirtied anything he liked. *Any damage was made good without a murmur. In this house his slightest* whims were anticipated" (148). Ousmane has reason to celebrate when he abandons Mireille's home for Ouleymatou's: "He whistled softly, 'Down *with all rules and regulations! An end to robot existence! Long live nature!'* (151). In this Negritudist practice, Ouleymatou is a subordinate being who is subjected to greater oppression than the white woman. This fact is veiled *in sensuous Negritude polemics that camouflage inherent gender* discrimination:

> Ouleymatou had become his soul-mate, the woman in whom he recognized the extension of himself--- She was at one and the same his roots, his stock, his growth, his flowering. They were linked by their childhood, spent in the maze of dusty streets. Most important they were linked by their common origins: the same ancestors, the same skies. The same soil! The same traditions! Their souls were impregnated with the sap of the same customs. They were excited by the same causes. Neither Ousmane nor Ouleymatou could disclaim this common essence without distorting their very natures. Cultural heritage was taking its pitiless revenge. It was reclaiming its due and revealing to Ousmane the end-point of his flight (121).

Ouleymatou indulges the vanity of this assertive "disciple of Negritude" thereby enhancing his perceived male supremacy and her own subordination simultaneously. She forfeits the right to her "turn" as decreed by Islamic law on polygamy. She plays hostess to Ousmane's numerous cronies who shift their socialization venue to her house in protest against the "Toubab's" hostility. Ouleymatou submits to all these in exchange for a seemingly prosperous status which paradoxically is located in a more constricted object space:

> Ouleymatou, happy beyond her wildest dreams, made no demands. She and her mother had forgotten the stench of drains overflowing with rotting refuse. No, this was not a dream. There they really were, settled in a brick house ---- they no longer had to stint to save and add a little

> flavour to the insipid fare of the family's meals. As her mother lay under her warm blankets, she no longer remembered the days when she had to get up in the chill of dawn, to go off to her food-stall at the market.
>
> What cause could she have for complaint? Ouleymatou had two servants. One cleaned and did the washing, the other did the cooking. All she had to do was to be beautiful for her husband when he turned up. (154).

Superficially, Ouleymatou is emancipated from abject material poverty and labour. On this account Ousmane the negritudist has "liberated" Ouleymatou on patriarchal terms. But his concept of the empowerment of African woman is the very antithesis of the African feminist concept of empowerment and indeed the one that emerges from Mariama Bâ's authorial vision. As "merchandise that had gone to the highest bidder" (135), Ouleymatou occupies object space in which she signifies a deeper level of powerlessness as a human being. She is completely oblivious of the power dynamics at play in her encounter with Ousmane. She has internalized the object status to such a degree that it makes her powerless to challenge the status quo. In her eagerness to play ideal African wife she forfeits the little freedoms that patriarchy accords women. In this posture Ouleymatou degenerates into a shadow of her younger self. Indeed she becomes the stereotypical image that fits into the options that radical feminists propose to African women. Stratton (1994) posits: "In order to be free and fulfilled as a woman she must renounce her African identity because of inherent sexism of traditional African culture. Or, if she wishes to cherish and affirm her 'Africanness', she must renounce her claims to feminine independence and self-determination (478)". But the paradox is that the bases of Ousmane's dominance are questionable. As a man he is not as self-sufficient as he poses. Throughout his life he has been dependent on his mother's support, on Mirelle's and later on Ouleymatou's. Technically we cannot even analyze his character effectively without considering the contributions of the three women.

Ousmane is practically powerless in the intra-gender filial relationship with his mother who symbolizes reversed female dominance. Like Mawdo Bâ in *So Long a Letter*, Ousmane can never correct his mother even when she

is in the wrong. On the contrary Ousmane has a more equitable filial relationship with his unassuming father. Like Buchi Emecheta, Mariama Bâ vilifies intra-gender oppression symbolized by Yaye Khady. This trait is represented in negative imagery through her own daughter Soukeyna. She confronts her mother on this issue:

> "By your selfishness you are driving Ousmane to eventual disaster; and simultaneously, your're killing another woman's daughter, as Mireille also has a mother ------ Mireille has attempted the impossible to try and please you! She even offered to take a turn in cooking at the brazier in the yard, to give you a rest, but you just laughed in her face. You discourage any attempts at cooperation (152).

On the whole Yaye Khady comes through as a female villain. Like Seynabu Nabou's claims in *So Long a Letter*, Khady's claim to female dominance is equally baseless. Generally the society does not condemn these older women's dominance against younger women. It takes the African feminist to expose the fallacy of the pseudo dominance accorded older women. The false supremacy is yet another patriarchal structure for control. It exemplifies the strategic congruence in patriarchal ideology.

In his conjugal relations with Mireille, Ousmane demonstrates his presumed masculinity in various ways. He forces Mireille to convert to Islam as a condition for their marriage. When they move into their own house he abandons all responsibility of housework and child care. Although they own a joint account Ousmane arrogates himself unilateral power over it. Yet he is aware of his indebtedness to Mireille both emotionally and financially. In his conjugal relationship with Ouleymatou, Ousmane is superficially the dominant partner. However, we are aware that when he first fell in love with Ouleymatou she rejected him only to reclaim him later in life at her own convenience and she proceeds to create a stereotype ideal African woman for her own benefit. These scenarios intimate intricate complementarity as opposed to supremacy. Beneath Ousmane's façade of power over others is an intricate support system that entails power with others. All the inter-gender and intra-gender

relationships in *Scarlet Song* are scrutinized in the context of the above portrait of various notions of power.

Mariama Bâ also interrogates the congruence of patriarchal practice which instigates intra-gender conflict by according pseudo dominance to older women such as Yaye Khady. She affirms African feminism by deconstructing the passive African woman stereotype and the notions of power that create stereotypes. In effect Mariama Bâ alludes to the fact that, prototypes of gender equity can emerge only from a different power base. Mariama Bâ is realistic in not creating prototypes of equity in the novel's milieu in the same way she does in *So Long a Letter*. Nevertheless, her authorial feminist consciousness comes out forcefully through her critique of the myths that preempt advocacy for gender equity. Implicitly African feminism is vindicated. Senghor's Senegal is the ideal setting for this project. Whereas the location of the story of *Scarlet Song* is mainly national and partially international, the specific site is the private sphere of family and home. This is the space in which Negritude ideology removes the mask of inter-gender harmony and exposes its sexism against women. In an authorial statement Mariama Bâ distinguishes African culture from Negritude: Her vision in *Scarlet Song* illustrates her authorial statement: "we no longer accept the nostalgic praise to the African Mother, who, in his anxiety, man confuses with Mother Africa" (qtd. in *Research in African Literatures* 30:2. 1999:119).

CHAPTER FOUR

AMMA DARKO - *The Housemaid*

4.1 Interrogating Conventional Indicators of Empowerment

Amma Darko's *The Housemaid* (1998) is a satire of the contemporary situation in Ghana. The story depicts modern African problems which include social stratification, poverty, urbanization and proletarianization. The novelist situates gender issues in this crisis and critically interrogates the perceptions of power and empowerment that emerge under the circumstances. She focuses on three issues in contemporary gender discourse: education of the girl child, women's economic independence and women's reproductive rights. Like Buchi Emecheta, Darko is skeptical about emancipatory function of unreformed education system that does not aim at change. She is also skeptical about the emancipatory capacity of reconstruction of male and female gender roles and women's participation in the public sphere in the absence of gender-based conscientization. Abortion is one of the controversial issues in liberation discourse. In *The Housemaid* Darko generates debate on the issue from an African feminist perspective. She disrupts conventional notions of these issues and prompts the reader to re-examine assumptions about empowerment based on mere materialistic strategies. In the novel's milieu, women's literacy and property ownership do not automatically translate into genuine emancipation. The women who acquire these rights do not demonstrate conscious recognition of gender discrimination followed by conscious effort to challenge patriarchal status quo with a view to achieving gender balance. In effect, Darko is able to subvert these hitherto stable meanings of emancipatory strategies and conventional indicators of women's empowerment through the use of satirical devices of irony, paradox, parody and ambivalence.

The Housemaid is a woman-centred text. The cast is predominantly female and the story depicts personal and interpersonal experiences of the female characters in relation to one another and to the male characters. This

characterization entails an exposition of pseudo-empowerment. From Darko's perspective this seems to be the only kind of change that is possible in the absence of humanistic feminist conscientization. In this novel both female and male characters are trapped in a debased social setting which limits their worldview to instinctive survival strategies. Under the circumstances their perception of empowerment is equally narrow. It is limited to their immediate environment and the search for basic needs. The female characters perceive empowerment as aspiration to male supremacy signified by material possession.

The story of *The Housemaid* revolves around alleged abortion. A baby girl corpse is discovered in a thicket in Braha Village near the habitation of an ostracized destitute old woman dubbed "witch". The culprit of the crime is Efia, a young girl from Kataso village who works as a housemaid in Accra, Ghana. It transpires that several female and a few male characters are either directly, indirectly involved or falsely implicated in the case. They include the old woman, Tika and her mother Sekyiwa, Auntie Teacher, Efia's parents and grandmother, Efia's friend Akua, Mama Karkor, her daughter Bibio and her two sons.

Tika, the housemaid's employer, is a descendant of Kataso people. Her mother Sekyiwa is a stranger from elsewhere. Tika is born of a marriage between Sekyiwa and an elderly rich married man from Kataso who desperately needs an heir. When Sekyiwa bears him a baby girl, the man abandons his barren first wife from Kataso and transfers all his wealth to the younger second wife. He does so on the understanding that Sekyiwa would care for the family when he grows too old to work. At the beginning of the story the man is old and ailing. He is subjected to psychological and physical violence by his young wife. As soon as Sekyiwa becomes rich: "Young, good-looking male gold-diggers began to vie for her attention --- she gave them good money; they gave her good sex" (Darko, 1998:18). Sekyiwa's oppressive behaviour is witnessed by their young daughter Tika. Eventually the man dies and Sekyiwa is "riddled with guilt". She tries, in vain, to buy forgiveness from her daughter. When Tika grows up and inherits part of her father's wealth, she toys with the idea of appeasing him

by assisting his people at Kataso. It is this idea that culminates in Efia's migration to Accra.

Prior to her encounter with Efia, Tika undergoes her own tribulations. She is educated but fails to qualify for university admission. She turns to import business and discovers that corruption and prostitution are part and parcel of the career. She joins the system in order to realize her materialistic ambition to make a lot of money and succeed in business. In the meantime she sponsors her first love Owuraku through university but their relationship ends when he graduates. Thereafter, Tika rejects marriage and settles for four men friends who are instrumental to her business. Later, Tika aborts a baby who would have inherited the family wealth. She does so to spite her mother who has spent all her adult life, making more money. When Tika realizes that her abortion has caused permanent barrenness, her desire to connect with her relatives in Kataso becomes urgent. She eventually manages to get a housemaid, Efia, through the service of a female character who is identified only by her profession as "Teacher" or "Auntie Teacher". It is mainly through the experiences of the three female characters that Darko critically interrogates presumed emancipatory function of conventional indicators of women's empowerment.

4.2 Formal education and empowerment

In *The Emancipation of Women* [of Ghana] Florence Abena Dolphyne contends:

> Education both formal and non-formal as well as economic independence for women are major factors that can enhance emancipation of women--- Specific educational and economic activities were undertaken for women in Ghana which enhanced the women's self-esteem and their participation in the economic and social life of their particular communities. Such participation has helped to make women effective agents of change especially in rural communities (Dolphyne, 1991: 41).

This view of development and emancipation based on empiricist evidence appears credible and plausible. It echoes Dr. Kwegyir Aggrey's old adage that "'If you educate a man you educate an individual. If you educate a woman, you educate a nation"' (qtd. in Aidoo 1993 ed: 191). This adage is so axiomatic that it is rarely cross-examined. Darko's portrayal of elite women prompts the reader to re-examine this unexamined assumptions.

One of the major characters of the novel is a nameless female teacher designated simply as "Teacher" or "Auntie Teacher". This rather anonymous reference signifies a general trend. The character symbolizes any literate woman who exploits girl child labour and condemns prospective schoolgirls to housegirls. Auntie Teacher is an elite woman whose education impacts negatively on her rural community at Kataso village. Darko's development of this character affirms the essence of women's education but negates positivist assumptions about the benefits of unreformed education system that is constructed in the context of power over others. Such an education system does not effect structural change that entails gender balance.

The nameless character who later becomes a teacher is initially brought to Accra to work as a housemaid. But the man who would have been her employer notices the young girl's potential for formal education. He takes her to school in spite of his wife's skepticism. The man literally cheats a primary school headmistress in order to procure standard one admission for the eleven-year-old girl from Kataso village. In school the girl is called names and mocked because she is too old for standard one class. "But encouraged by her foster father, the girl stayed on and succeeded in making it all the way to teacher training college" (Darko, 1998:35). That affirmed, Darko goes on to scrutinize this character's probable impact on the advancement of fellow women in her Kataso community. Contrary to Dolphyne's argument (1991: 41), Auntie Teacher's education does not transform her into an effective agent of positive change culminating in her own empowerment and that of other women. Instead it merely "uplifts" her into an urban elite class:

> After graduation, she stayed on in Accra to teach. She maintained links with Kataso, visiting once a month at least and joining in the yam festival every year. If Kataso could have exploited Teacher's acquired knowledge to the full and rewarded her fairly for it, perhaps she would even have returned to the village permanently --- her feelings for Kataso never waned. (35)

Auntie Teacher's changed status does not overtly alienate her from Kataso, but it impacts negatively on the rural community. Her status enables her to exploit poor Kataso villagers. Teacher turns into a housemaid recruitment agent instead of an ostensible role model for her illiterate sisters in Kataso. She becomes well known to both urban and rural Katasoans for her alternative role: "Because of her position, Teacher was often given the task of getting young girls from Kataso positions as housemaids with families in Accra --- As a result Teacher was very well known among the Accra Katasoans, Tika included" (ibid). For this service, she receives double reward. City residents pay her cash for availing free girl-child labour, and the villagers reward her in kind for upgrading their daughters to city residence. The girls are usually promised some kind of training in exchange for good services, but many of them end up as lumpen proletariat in the city when they fall out with their employers.

Auntie Teacher reckons that her reputation rests on the good conduct of the housemaids she recruits. Unfortunately this is true. Darko foregrounds this fact by various stylistic techniques such as immediate setting for various episodes. Throughout the novel Teacher's action is most visible in the domestic sphere outside the school and classroom. The only episode in which she is depicted in the school compound is the one in which Tika visits the school in order to send Teacher for a housemaid from Kataso.

Conventional presumption that formal education automatically liberates women and society is negated by Auntie Teacher who remains oblivious of gender discrimination and plays a paradoxical role contrary to expectations. Education partially benefits teacher individually and accords her some

power over others. Her portrait contradicts Afrocentric conceptualization of empowerment. According to Rowlands (1997) empowerment proper has three dimensions – personal, collective and close relationships. At a persona level it entails "developing a sense of self and individual confidence and capacity, and undoing the effects of internalized oppression (15)". At relational level it entails "developing the ability to negotiate and influence the nature of a relationship and decisions made within it" (15) and at the collective level it involves transcending individual gains and struggling for the empowerment of others (Rowlands, 1997:15). Teacher is barely aware of the first dimension but she is obviously unaware of the other two. Her education is an end in itself. Education for the girl child can only spread through the nation if it becomes a deliberately constructed relay process. This multidimensional sense of empowerment cited above resonates Ogundipe-Leslie's (1993) view of the six mountains that obstruct emancipation of African woman. They include negative self-image and internalized oppression such as embodied by Teacher. For this character, housemaid is the natural role for the women of Kataso. She perceives her changed status retrogressively as an exception to that rule, but not as a norm for a social change. Darko depicts this retrogressive symbol stylistically through absence of genuine character development. Auntie teacher retains a housemaid/slave mentality.

Like Teacher, Tika is educated and individually emancipated from poverty but she is not an agent of positive change against gender discrimination. In fact, it is her stereotypical gender role that accounts for her success in business. Ironically she plans to assist Kataso people, not by educating any one of them, but by exploiting girl child labour from one of them. Educated men in this novel such as Nsorhwe and Owuraku are no more enlightened. Their education is used as a tool for exploitation of women and the illiterate masses.

On the whole Darko's portrait of unreformed education (mere literacy) subverts cherished conventional assumptions about its emancipatory potential such as Dolphyne's postulation below:

> It is ignorance that has made women accept the inferior position to which they have been relegated by society for centuries. Spurious beliefs about a woman's subordinate position based on cultural and religious concepts that cannot stand up to close scrutiny as well as misconceptions about her physiology and her intelligence have made women accept without question the superiority of men (Dolphyne, 1991: 56).

Without reference to the quality of education and attendant attitudinal issues, Dolphyne postulates further:

> Only education can foster in women an analytical and critical mind that would make them question the religious, cultural and physiological bases of their supposed inferiority. Only education can give women knowledge that would expose the fallacies behind cultural practices that keep them in subordination --- One can only hope that the economies of African countries will, in the not-too-distant future, be such as can support at least nine years of compulsory and free basic education for all children. It is only through such a programme that true emancipation for African women, especially rural African women, can be ensured (ibid. 56-57).

This is an idealistic non-fiction standpoint. On the contrary Darko's literary perspective is more cautious, more analytical, critical and paradoxically more realistic. The former is inclined toward unexamined feminist activist ideology devoid of structural transformation, while the latter espouses critical African feminist philosophy and consciousness that is deeply concerned with the nature and function of formal education.

Darko's critique of unreformed formal education for the African girl child echoes African male writers' subversion of colonial and postcolonial education which engenders social stratification and alienation. African male writers have argued that western education is not axiomatically emancipatory. Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (1960) and Okot P'Bitek's *Song of Lawino and Song of Ocol* (1976) exemplify typical

interpretations of the impact of unreformed formal education. The African male writers' vision unsettles the official version of development which presumes that any form of education regardless of its objectives and content is emancipatory. Similarly African female writers question the impact of formal education that does not scrutinize entrenched discriminatory social structures. Darko represents the theme of economic independence for African women from a similar critical approach.

4.3 Women's economic independence and empowerment

In contemporary development and other non-fiction discourse value-free economic independence of women is also presented as a major factor and indicator of empowerment. Dolphyne (1991) cites three categories of women in Ghana who "wield a certain amount of power" and are respected in society. The form of power is not specified, but judging from the term "wield" one may assume it is "power over". The categories include female members of traditional royal families, professional and wealthy women. The writer describes the latter thus:

> The third category that society accords respect and status to are women who may or may not have had any formal education, but who by sheer dint of hard work and a shrewd business sense are able to provide adequately for themselves, their children and members of their extended family. The successful market women of West Africa fall into this category (ibid. 43-44).

The indicators of wealthy women's empowerment include participation in social and political life: "They are sought after by politicians, who need their financial support as well as their organizational ability for their political campaigns" (ibid.). Acording to Dolphyne source of wealth and the nature of political purpose to which it is put are non-issues. Moral issues of virtue and value are immaterial. On the contrary, the African feminist creative writer is skeptical about value-free economic empowerment. She is particularly gender-sensitive and critical of the type of power it engenders and its social implications. If market mammies

become political allies of the male powers that be, the female artist's critical eye looks beneath and beyond that alliance in search of genuine empowerment that entails gender balance and justice for only then can emancipation of women be meaningful.

Sekyiwa and her daughter Tika in *The Housemaid* are the Ghanaian version of the Nigerian African female business tycoon in Emecheta's *The Slave Girl*. Both authors negate value-free economic independence of women. As per Wästberg argues: "the traditional role of the African poet is to teach and praise and not to subvert society. But what he celebrates is not the surface appearance of the society but a world in which the spiritual and the material being are one" (Petersen, 1988: 20). In the same breath Wole Soyinka insists that art should "expose, reflect, indeed magnify the decadent, rotten underbelly of a society that has lost its directions, jettisoned all sense of values and is careering down a precipice as fast as the latest artificial boom can take it"' (ibid 19). Kole Omotoso argues that "the artist is also the oracle of the people, the self-ordained priest who helps to make society aware of itself in order to know where it is going" (ibid.). Darko's satirization of the market mammy who has joined the mad rush in the name of power, is an attempt to warn society and women of the kind of emancipation they should avoid.

Assuming, as Dolphyne does, that economic independence per se is an indicator of empowerment, Sekyiwa would be the very quintessence of the same: "Madam Sekyiwa, Tika's mother was 100 percent illiterate, stinking rich and riffled with guilt" (Darko, 1998:18). Sekyiwa becomes rich courtesy of her strategic marriage to an elderly wealthy married man who desperately needed an heir. The man voluntarily transfers his wealth to the mother of his only child even though in the process he dispossesses his childless first wife who may have contributed toward the creation of that wealth. When Sekyiwa acquires the wealth she plays a stereotypical male game. Indeed she works hard and the business expands but she also resorts to hedonistic leisure at her family's expense. She reverses stereotypical perception of prostitution from female body on sale to male prostitution:

"Life's satisfaction shone in her eyes. Her husband mistook it for love; his heart was bursting with affection for his young wife" (ibid).

At this point the reader is instantly defamiliarized with the cliche "stinking rich" and prompted to re-examine the emancipatory potential, if any, of "stinking" wealth vis-à-vis the values of democracy, freedom, equity and justice that are conventionally associated with empowerment of women.

Darko constructs Sekyiwa's household as a parody of stereotypical familial relations under male supremacy. The family starts off in harmony. Initially the couple has a mutual understanding on division of labour and joint ownership of resources in the family. Sekyiwa is assigned income generation responsibility outside the home. The decision is based on a gender-neutral factor of age. Since Sekyiwa is younger and stronger she spends most of her time working outside the home while her old and ailing husband stays at home and takes on most of the parenting duties. Ideally, Sekyiwa is expected to manage family finances as a trustee but she unilaterally decides to squander it on hedonistic pleasures. She relegates her spouse to a subordinate role that becomes discriminatory and punitive. She concentrates on business but at the same time engages in prostitution in the public space. In addition she subjects her husband to psychological and physical violence.

After her husband's death Sekyiwa shifts parental responsibilities to a house-help. Her maternal obligation to her only girl child is deferred indefinitely as the dialogue below shows:

> Tika nodded. Then, as if seeking emphasis, she added,
> 'So Dada won't come back again?'
> 'No', Sekyiwa replied.
> 'Who will play with me on Saturdays if you
> can't take me to the shop?'
> 'I will find somebody.'
> 'Why can't you play with me?'
> 'Because I have to make money to look after
> us.'
> 'So when you finish making money, will you
> play with me?'

But before Sekyiwa could answer that, she was summoned to talk to the new house help she wanted to employ to look after Tika. (20)

Darko advances the view that socially construction of male and female gender roles is essentially discriminatory and unjust. Therefore, reversal of the same cannot constitute an emancipatory strategy for a new order that aspires to equity and more humane familial relations. The experiment to base division of labour on ability rather than gender in Sekyiwa's household is meant to emancipate both gender, not to reverse roles. But due to entrenched attitudes it is the latter that inadvertently prevails. Sharing familial resources and responsibilities implies co-operation, complementarity and interdependence, which entail power with others. But Sekyiwa interprets it retrogressively to mean transfer of male gender roles signified dominance by power over which logically implies subordination of the other. She embraces individual economic independence complete with the old vices in the only culture she has known hitherto. Through this character Darko demonstrates the kind of social change, as opposed to social transformation, that occurs when women are copted into a system that idealizes supremacy. The irony of intended gender equity turned reversed female supremacy in Sekyiwa's household suggests that dominance, by its very nature, is indivisible. At most it can be transferred, wholesale, from one centre to another.

For example Dolphyne (1991) cited earlier notes that in West Africa wealthy women are "referred to in terms that may be loosely translated as 'woman-man' or 'woman-like-man' and this, not in derogatory terms, but with admiration" (43). Darko negates admiration for this character and prompts the reader to re-examine the emancipatory potential of value-free property ownership.

In *The Housemaid* the "man-like" wealthy women are only "stinking rich" in the literal sense of the cliché but they are not emancipated. It is even a misnomer to describe their lifestyle as a reversal of male supremacy because they acquire property at some men's expense. Tika detests her

mother's materialistic and masculine tendencies, yet she grows up to be a replica of the same. paradoxically she lays claim to power on the basis of her spurious wealth. For her "money is the power word. Not books" (1998:24). She does not bother to scrutinize the nature and value of this power. Incidentally she fails to bribe her first love Owuraku into marrying her. Owuraku is also satirized caricature who probably makes good decisions but for the wrong reasons inclined toward perpetuation of male supremacy. Just like in Emecheta's *Naira Power* the locus of money power without reference to its source and function is illusory. Yet the general public in both novels is captivated by the dehumanizing of money power. A taxi driver posits: "these market mammies are taking over the country. They dazzle you with their monkey humility, wheedle all your money out of you, then aim for your power --- 'Dashing for money. Dashing for power. The ultimate control!'" (1998:52). Like Emecheta, Darko subverts this conception of money power by examining its limitations.

Sekyiwa and Tika discover that there are priceless valuables in life which money cannot buy. The former is guilt ridden and the latter frustrated. Both of them need an heir for their wealth. Whereas Sekyiwa attempts to appease her deceased husband by buying forgiveness from their daughter, Tika hopes to compensate him by assisting his extended family at Kataso. But her relatives at Kataso who are equally captivated by the emancipatory efficacy of money devise an elaborate inheritance plan which is meant to enable them recover their lawful wealth. Efia's father who devices Kataso poverty eradication plan is a drunken idler, yet he hopes to acquire easy wealth through a dream grandchild. His daughter is instructed to take up housemaid position in Tika's house and ensure that she gets pregnant somehow and hopefully beget an heir for her barren employer. Indeed the housemaid conceives but the plan backfires culminating in her desertion. Shortly after she accidentally aborts but the general public presumes the incident to be a deliberate illegal abortion. The drama that ensues challenge material power further and reveals some aspects of contemporary controversy on the issue of abortion.

Darko offers a background to this problem. In her view, abortion emanates from rampant teenage pre-marital unplanned pregnancies. Illiterate Kataso villagers try to solve the problem by expelling the men responsible. The problem is also rampant in the city where it is compounded by promiscuity. However, the women who resort to abortion are not the ignorant villagers but the urban elite. In the cases depicted in *The Housemaid* abortion has irreversible and regrettable consequences. Efia does not abort but the allegation to that effect generates debate from local to national level – the latter is expressed through the mass media. In the process abortion is portrayed as a national gender concern as distinct from an exclusively women's issue. At the end of the novel Efia is due to give herself up to the police. Superficially and true to the satirical mode the issue seems to remain in abeyance, but at a deeper level the idea of abortion as an indicator of women's productive right is negated. In *The Housemaid* the women who deliberately abort are in fact disempowered in a very crucial way as a consequence.

At surface level, *The Housemaid* is a woman-centred novel that paradoxically appears to be anti—women at the same time. It echoes some of the accusations that have been made against gender-insensitive male writers. The female prostitute is an ancient stereotype. One is prompted to scrutinize the female artist aim in this characterization. In this context, all the characters in the novel are empathetically but also justifiably portrayed negatively. This is the challenge that faces the committed African feminist artist who must engage the complex business of subverting both discriminatory patriarchal ideology and simultaneously veto equally discriminatory feminist ideologies that merely seek to reverse the status quo. Paradoxically, Darko affirms emancipation of African women by subverting superficial indicators of the same in contemporary empowerment discourse.

CHAPTER FIVE

AMA ATA AIDOO: *Changes: A Love Story*

5.1 Politics of Love

Love poetry is a legitimate genre in literary art. It engages one of the major issues that humanity grapples with in an attempt to understand the meaning of life. Rudolf Unger (1929)lists the concept of love as one of the problems of man which include: "The concept of man; but also man's relation to death, man's concept of love --- problems of society, family, state" (Wellek and Warren, 1949: 115). The concept of love is broad, but love poetry genre focuses on the aspect of romance. The genre is a controversial subject in feminist discourses. Radical feminists' have dismissed it as a masculine form. They argue that love poetry "has been formed from a man's point of view, rendering the form itself exclusively male" (Minogue, 1990:181). In 1967 Aidoo protested against writing love poetry, out of nationalist commitment rather than feminist conviction. At the time African literature focused on political themes. Aidoo recollects that her first love poetry turned out to be one of her "most political poems" (James, 1990: 14). Thereafter she abandoned the theme. She revisits it in *Changes* (1991) on realization that "the workings of love is also political. Even when it is a so-called a-political treatment of love" (ibid 14). In an authorial statement Aidoo emphasizes that *Changes* "is not meant to be a contribution to any debate, however current". Despite this authorial intention the novel inadvertently contributes to contemporary feminist debates because it situates romantic love in contemporary empowerment discourse.

The Oxford Dictionary defines romantic love as "a strong feeling of affection for somebody you are sexually attracted to". This definition denotes mutuality which means "feelings which two people have for each other equally". In this sense romantic love connotes power with a partner. On the contrary, existence of politics in any interpersonal relationship denotes "getting or using power within a group". Power in this case is

assumed to mean controlling or regulating the behaviour of group members. It is therefore paradoxical that the workings of a mutual sexual relationship should at the same time be political. In *Changes* Aidoo explores this paradox. She shows that love which is ideally a non-gender concept is ironically trapped in the politics of gender discrimination and conflict. In effect, the meaning of love is adulterated. Love becomes a strategy for entrenching male supremacy and female subordination. It is this adulterated notion of love that is counter-productive in the struggle for gender equity. African female writers in particular negate this adulteration. Critics who interpret their works as negation of conjugal relationships therefore achieve misinterpretations. Indeed *Changes* has been interpreted in this light. Allan (1991) concludes that "the novel offers a parable of the incompatibility of female autonomy and romance" (183). This conclusion is entrapped in the adulterated notion of love which Aidoo attempts to deconstruct.

Aidoo interrogates and exposes politics of love. She transcends the adulteration and reconstructs the meaning of love by examining the different forms of power at play in conjugal relationships. In a subtle way she depicts love as spontaneous and noble. In its unadulterated form, love entails mutuality and equity in sexual relationships. Ideally romance should transcend supremacy – subordination power games. Aidoo recognizes that this ideal is not achievable within the culture of gender discrimination. This is a realistic vision that should not be mistaken for affirmation of the given misnomer. Nevertheless, Aidoo explores possibilities of meaningful complementarity and mutuality in conjugal relationships based on power with the partner. It is possible to decipher this meaning only when we use a gender analysis of power which recognizes other meanings of the term besides the monolithic meaning of power as dominance. However, the later is so pervasive that it engulfs critical perspectives. It is imperative to extricate oneself from the vicious cycle in order to discern alternative meanings in this love story. A suitable point of departure is to investigate the author's deconstruction of the adulterated notion of love in the context of the monolithic notion of power before analyzing her notions. The former is the grand narrative while the

latter constitutes counter narrative. It is simplistic to assume that the author affirms the grand narratives as Allan (1991) and Elia (1999) do. The grand narrative which entails politics of love defines the problem and lays ground for debate on the subject. The counter narrative grapples with probable solutions to the problem or alternative notions of conjugal relationships that are free of dominance by either partner.

5.2 Supremacy and Romantic love

Changes (1991) comprises the stories of three Ghanaian elite working class women: Esi, Opokuya, Fusena and their lovers-cum-husbands: Oko Sekyi, Kubi Dakwa and Ali Kondey. Esi, the protagonist, is a common factor in these relationships. Aidoo engages the concepts of love as well as forms of power at play in these conjugal relations. Prior to generating debate on the politics of love the author affirms independent existence of love through the plot. Esi meets a prospective lover and second husband Ali Kondey in the first episode of the story. She falls in love with the latter, in spite of herself too soon after her separation from Oko Sekyi. A spontaneous emotion overwhelms Esi and forces her to rescind her decision to avoid romance after the painful experience in her first marriage. Ali Kondley also experiences a spontaneous affection for Esi Sekyi despite his earlier determination not to seduce married women. Later he discovers that Esi has since divorced Oko. What follows is a mutual love affair which initially exemplifies cooperation and complementarity. However, it later degenerates into a power game.

It is Esi's affair with Ali that prompts her grandmother Nana's narratives on politics of love. Aidoo's characterization of Nana is subtle. Nana signifies tradition as well as dissenting voice against it. A keen attention to Aidoo's use of stylistic devices is essential for a plausible interpretation of Nana's narrative. Her first narrative is a sarcastic analysis of stereotypical sexual relations emersed in gender power relations. In the counter narrative Nana attempts to extricate love from politics of domination. Using satirical devices and negative imagery, Nana censures the notion of love in the grand or traditional narrative. She acknowledges the existence of love but

also insists that it is subsumed in gender discrimination. In this context she sarcastically dismisses love as fantasy:

> Love? --- Love? ---Love is not safe, my lady silk, love is dangerous. It is deceitfully sweet like the wine from fresh palm tree at dawn. Love is fine for singing about and love songs are good to listen to, sometimes even to dance to. But when we need to count on human strength, and when we have to count pennies for food for our stomachs and clothes for our backs, love is nothing. Ah my lady, the last man any woman should think of marrying is the man she loves (42).

However, Nana is careful to preempt affirmation of this flawed notion of gender relations which consequently adulterate meaning of romance.

In Nana's sarcastic analysis marriage, like love (if at all), is yet another strategy for male supremacy. It is depicted as a symbolic death for the wife to be. It is the process by which a woman sacrifices whatever form of power she may have had to her husband's ego. Thereafter a wife supposedly becomes powerless. This portrait is an indictment of male supremacy. The notion of power that arises in this context is a myth born out of hypothetical power imbalance between the two sexes. If women's power must be deliberately destroyed for men to feel powerful, it follows that male supremacy has no independent existence. It is parasitic on contestable female powerlessness. Superficial credibility for this myth is manipulated by patriarchal culture which decrees deliberate diminution of women: "A good woman was the one who quickened the pace of her own destruction. To refuse, as a woman to be destroyed, was a crime that society spotted quickly and punished swiftly and severely" (110). The binary opposition to the good woman is "the man who eats his wife completely, and pushes her down with a gulp of alcohol" (109). The great men of the past fall in this category. Nana observes: "In our time, the best citizen was the man who swallowed more than one woman, the more the better. So our warriors and our kings married more women than other men in their communities. To prove that they were by that single move, the best

in the land" (109). Nana's sarcasm invalidates the notion of male supremacy versus female subordination

Nana describes men derogatorily as devouring gods followed only by European colonialist "gods":

> Men were the first gods in the universe, and they were devouring gods. The only way they could yield their best – and sometimes their worst too – was if their egos were sacrificed to: regularly. The bloodier the sacrifice the better. Oh yes. There are other types of gods. No less bloody, and equally implacable. We Africans allowed ourselves to be regularly sacrificed to egos of the Europeans, no? So that, among other things, they can build strong machines of fire to burn us all and then go to the moon---(110).

Perceived in the context of this macabre hyperbole replete with derogatory metaphor, romance would indeed amount to a destructive process for a woman. At the end of the process she would be a mere passive victim in conjugal relations as opposed to a proactive sexual partner. But this is not the only narrative on love in the text. There are counter narratives. Nana provides first the popular but most contestable one that has been constructed by patriarchal ideology. But she reminds the reader that gender relations have not been acrimonious throughout the history of humanity:

> They say it was not always like this. I mean about women and men. They say a long time back, it was different. But it has been as it is for far too long for it to matter how it was in that far away yesterday. Besides, no one remembers what it was like then. Certainly from as long as even our ancestors may have been able to remember, it seemed to have always been necessary for women to be swallowed up in this way. For some reason, that was the only way societies were built and societies survived.(110)

Nana dismisses the popular view that gender discrimination is the defining character of humanity and history. She invokes the dim past in order to

deconstruct this view. Although gender discrimination has a long history, it is only a part of the history of humanity. She insists that women are not naturally powerless and it is in recognition of this truth that patriarchal culture constructs structures for the diminution of womankind.

Nana is optimistic about possible change towards equitable gender relations:

> Do I think it must always be so? Certainly not. It can be changed. It can be better. Life on this earth need not always be some humans being gods and others being sacrificial animals. Indeed, that can be changed. But it would take so much. No, not time. There has always been enough time for anything anyone really wanted to do. What it would take is a lot of thinking and a great deal of doing. But one wonders whether we are prepared to tire our minds and our bodies that much. Are we human beings even prepared to try? Otherwise, it is very possible for life on this earth to be good for us all. My lady silk, everything is possible (111)

We can infer that in Nana's wishful world, characterized by gender equity, love would have a different meaning that does not connote a game over supremacy.

Nana's first narrative is meant to discourage Esi from entering into a polygamous marriage. It also provides insight into the nature of conflict in Esi's first marriage to Oko Sekyi. Superficially, Esi's experience in this marriage seems to affirm the view that romantic love is a strategy for male supremacy and therefore it is incompatible with empowerment of women. Allan (1991) and Elia (1999), mentioned earlier, subscribe to this view. But a closer reading reveals that Esi never loved Oko in the first place. She only felt gratitude to him for having married her despite her age and shape. She pursues her career relentlessly and ignores Oko's need for her company. Oko assumes that Esi does not love him because she has acquired supremacy by virtue of her education and career. He also assumes that if he could disrupt her career, he would regain her love. But

this is an illusion. Indeed from Oko's point of view empowerment of women is a problem. His perception becomes even more complicated when Esi abdicates nurturing their only child and other gender roles. From an African feminist perspective both partners' perception of power and empowerment of women is flawed. Neither of them elicits empathy from the reader.

Esi epitomizes the modern "emancipated" Ghanaian woman. She has all conventional indicators of empowerment: higher education, a successful career, property ownership, economic independence and mobility. The form of power in question is presumed stereotypically to be power over the other because it is based on the same indicators by which patriarchal ideology rationalizes male supremacy. In addition, it is accompanied by abdication of female gender roles. It makes Esi appear to be what Dolphyne (1991) describes as "a-woman-like-a-man". Both Oko and Esi are trapped in this monolithic concept of power. In the circumstances Oko resolves to reassert his masculinity, but he does not seem to know how best to demonstrate this against his successful wife. Since he assumes that male supremacy is basically biologically determined, he resorts to the display of phallus power. One Monday morning he forces his wife to have sex against her wish. This demonstration of supremacy over his wife's body translates what would have been mutual sexual intercourse into a violent assault. Oko describes the act as a reconciliatory gesture. On the contrary, Esi names it 'marital rape' and uses the incident as an excuse to end their troubled marriage.

Oko's misnomer for marital rape exemplifies the good warrior husband in Nana's narrative. Indeed Oko loves Esi but he cannot distinguish between his deep affection for her and his socialized masculine desire to force her to submit and become the stereotypical African "good woman". Two forms of power exist in this scenario but they are conflated and perceived as supremacy which is the only familiar form of power. Aidoo represents the need to extricate the two forms of power from each other as the main challenge that Esi and Oko face. The couple is depicted as victims of a

status quo that celebrates the monolithic concept of power and confuses romantic love for supremacy.

Ali Kondey, Esi's second husband, is her perfect march. He makes no demands on Esi's time, but then he is also not available when she needs him. Compared to Ali's lifestyle, Esi's is quite 'man-like'. In her encounter with Ali, Esi comes to a realization that women's empowerment is not incompatible with romantic love. But this new knowledge is destabilized by Ali's behaviour. Esi's friend Opokuya sarcastically sums up the elite woman's dilemma as follows:

> Ah. So you gave extra time to your job. You did the necessary travelling and attended the necessary conferences. You competed effectively and got promoted. Now look what happened to your marriage. Where does that leave you?--- Your male colleagues still have got their wives(50).

There are no easy answers to this question because empowerment of women and its commensurate indicartors are not clearly defined. Like Nana, Opokuya is opposed to male supremacy, but she is equally opposed to reversal of roles. Yet, no one seems to provide a clear distinction between male supremacy and the kind of power that emancipated women claim or should possess. Allan (1991) quotes Trinh Minh- ha's solution to such dilemma: '"Between knowledge and power, there is room for knowledge without power'" (175). Opokuya echoes such wisdom which could be paraphrased as follows: between love and power [read 'power over'], there is room for love without power over. The marriage between Oko and Esi exemplifies an adulteration of love with power over. The marriage between Kubi Dakwa and Opokuya is an experiment on love and power with the spouse. To some extent even the marriage between Ali Kondey and his first wife Fusena exhibits the couple's attempt at cooperation and compromise.

5.3 Romantic Love and Power with Spouse

According to Rowlands (1997) alternative conceptualization of power effects a redefinition of empowerment in three dimensions: at personal, interpersonal and the collective levels. The first dimension entails "developing a sense of self and individual confidence and capacity, and undoing the effects of internalized oppression" (15). Within a relationship empowerment involves "developing ability to negotiate and influence the nature of a relationship and the decisions made within it" (ibid.). We can evaluate Opokuya's and Fusena's version of empowerment in light of the two dimensions.

Like Esi, Opokuya is fairly well educated. She has a successful career in nursing. Her concept of power and empowerment is demonstrated by her confidence and ability to make decisions affecting her life. She exercises this as a right without infringing on other people's rights. As Rowlands (1997) argues: "Empowerment is thus more than participation in decision-making. *It must include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to make decisions"* (14). Unlike Esi, Opokuya makes great effort to negotiate with her husband. For example she has constant disputes with Kubi over the use of their family car. She negotiates for her turn to use the car. Even though there is still imbalance in the allocation, Kubi recognizes his wife's right in this regard. Eventually Opokuya buys Esi's old car. She refuses to accept it for free. Although she buys it cheaply, she becomes a dignified owner. Conversely Esi's right to ownership of her new car is ambivalent since it is a gift-cum-bribe from her absentee second husband Ali Kondey.

Due to patriarchal division of domestic work, Opokuya is overworked at home but it is evident that her household is gradually moving towards a reconstruction of this division of labour. The relative harmony in the home stems from the couple's willingness to co-operate and compromise in an attempt to exercise power with the other. They discuss all major family issues even though they do not always reach a consensus. They do have

misunderstandings over some issues such as Kubi's constant delays at work. However, that does not inhibit Opokuya's confidence and ability to make decisions affecting their relationship. When Oko avers that "Opokuya is a good woman" implying that she is a submissive African woman, the reader is aware of his understatement.

At the hospital Opokuya is also overworked especially during public holidays but this is more or less optional. She chooses not to misuse her position as head of department by allocating herself offs on such days. This considerate exercise of her power over others is commendable. It reveals her commitment to the ethics of balance of power and enables her to exercise authority as distinct from supremacy over her subordinates.
In the last episode of the story, Kubi's suppressed affection for Esi inadvertently comes to the surface. Esi stops him just in time because she values her friendship with his wife. Kubi is repentant and pleads with Esi to keep the incident secret. This reveals the extent to which he recognizes his wife's rights.

Fusena, Ali Kondey's first wife is also fairly well educated and financially independent. She runs her own business. She meets Ali at a teacher training college. The two marry after years of mutual friendship shortly before Ali goes to England for further studies. Fusena joins him later. While in England she concentrates on caring for her family. In the process she forfeits the chance to get a university degree. Thereafter she considers this as an inhibition to her empowerment. Ali eventually acquires two university degrees. When he decides to marry a university graduate as a second wife, Fusena is deeply hurt. Ironically it is Esi, the master's degree holder, whom Ali dominates overtly. On the other hand, in spite of his womanizing tendencies, Ali makes a lot of effort to maintain an element of power balance with Fusena. He cares about the way his home is run and he is a sensitive father. Like Kubi and Opukuya, Ali and Fusena discuss major family issues. Ali reckons that he could never establish such a relationship with Esi.

When Ali tells Fusena his intention to marry a second wife, she resists. In order to convince Fusena to give her consent as Islamic religion requires, Ali appeals for help from community elders. The elders in turn use their wives to convince Fusena to give consent. But religious doctrine notwithstanding, the elders notice Fusena's power through Ali's reluctance to confront her directly. His commitment to his first marriage is foregrounded on his wedding day with Esi. Ali opts to disappoint the newly wed and goes home to Fusena and their children. His decision to keep Esi out of home denotes much more than love and respect. It exemplifies Ali's recognition of the need to co-operate and compromise with Fusena in order to sustain a relatively harmonious marriage.

Both Fusena and Opokuya are depicted as Esi's alter ego. The two exude a greater level of confidence and ability to negotiate the nature of relationship in their marriages, than Esi with all her higher conventional indicators of empowerment. The former's marriages are as good as can be in the circumstances. It would have been unrealistic for Aidoo to inject absolute equity in the two marriages.

Contrary to Allan's (1991), conclusion cited above, *Changes* does not offer a "parable of incompatibility" of romantic love and women's autonomy in the sense of analogy. Instead, the novel challenges the flawed notion of conjugal relations as power relations predicated on polar as opposed to binary gender relations. Aidoo satirizes this paradoxical postulation in an interjectory narrative presented in the form of dialogue between Aba and Ama. The dialogue is strategically situated as a prologue to part II of the story in which Esi and Ali formalize a polygamous union. The dialogue is basically a list of some of the many reasons given to justify polygamy. Incidentally the term power underpins most of the reasons:

> Said Aba to Ama:
>
> My sister, the number of reasons for which men leave their women for other women –
>
> Ama: Or just add those new women to their older ones---

Aba: – are many.
– – –

Aba: But then let us just say people with power – – –
– – –

Aba: – Sometimes, the daughters of people with power.

Aba: We must not forget that these days it could be the woman herself who would have such power.

Ama: Indeed it is not necessary for her to be anybody's daughter if she has the power of beauty, of youth, political, financial – – –

Aba: A top athlete, a film star!

Ama: Nor should we forget high education, a degree or two.

Aba: A government job with side benefits.

Ama: One of the topmost jobs.

Aba: One of the largest pay packets?

The satirical tone of this dialogue implies that power in the sense of dominance on whatever basis is a misnomer in love relations. Significantly the word "love" does not feature among the many reasons. Aidoo deconstructs these reasons by depicting romantic love as the basis of harmonious conjugal relationships. In such relationships partners aspire to some level of equity. Conversely, the relationships in which dominance is foregrounded either collapse or survive on a different plane. The latter is the norm in a discriminatory society but the author intimates that change is possible and preferable. This line of argument recurs in the works of the other female writers discussed earlier in this study: Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* and *Scarlet Song*, Emecheta's *The Slave Girl* and *Naira Power*, and Darko's *The Housemaid*.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusions and Recommendations

6.1 Conclusions

An alternative conceptualization of power and empowerment by African women writers has emerged from the critical analyses of selected texts in the preceding chapters. In this final chapter we summarize its main features. It comprises five forms of power: power over others, power from within, power to act, power with others, and the Supreme Power of God. To constitute literary criticism analysis of these features must involve literary stylistics. It is through a multiplicity of stylistic devices that the writers interrogate, subvert, validate, affirm or negate each of these forms of power. Failure to scrutinize the coalescence between content and form is partly responsible for the misreadings cited in Chapter One. Once various forms of power are identified and clearly defined, the meaning of empowerment based on these root words changes accordingly.

All strands of feminism and feminist creative writers basically oppose male supremacy. However, the most striking finding in this study is the philosophical scrutiny of power achieved by African female writers. These writers transcend mere opposition against patriarchal ideology and problematize the very concept of power that engenders the vice. The struggle against gender discrimination becomes an integral part of a more holistic view of oppression and emancipation. The bases of the notion of power in patriarchal ideology are logically deconstructed. In the ensuing debate, all assumptions that originate in this notion of dominance are subverted. The idea of biological determination is convincingly challenged. The indicators of supremacy are depicted as fleeting qualities that can be appropriated by either gender. The concept of sexism based on this notion of power is portrayed as a unisex experience that hurts both sexes equally. Okolie and Pa Palagada in *The Slave Girl* are ideal examples of the double-edged nature of sexist victimization. The assumption that supremacy is self-sufficient is depicted as a fallacy because this form of power is found to be essentially parasitic on the labour, collaboration, and even complacence of others. In other words, the idea of

a static supremacy that resides in an entity or feature such as sexual difference, race, caste or class paradoxically denotes powerlessness.

There is textual evidence of this perspective in overt dialogue in the texts as well as implicit exposition through various stylistic devices. In all the primary texts in this study all female and male characters who embody dominance are portrayed in negative imagery and turn out as villains, caricatures or flat characters. This gender-sensitive objectivity demonstrated by African female writers is ignored. Western woman-centred feminist critique focuses mainly on male writers' negative portrait of women. The objective approach should not be mistaken for internalized oppression on the part of African female artists. It is this objectivity that enables them to supersede woman-centredness and achieve a humanistic gender perspective that entails genuine equity.

On the whole, power over others is portrayed as fundamentally baseless, vain, negative, oppressive, dehumanizing and even non-existent. Dominance is clearly distinguished from consensual authority that signifies duty, obligation and responsibility in all human relations such as family, group, and state. This analysis subverts the popular view that acquisition of supremacy is the ultimate goal of all feminist movements. By inference this perspective on dominance advocates the need for emancipation of both men and women from internalized fallacy of biological supremacy or subordination. It is also a caveat to all people who aspire to the creation of an equitable society. It is commendable that African female writers are particularly harsh to women characters who signify intra-female-gender oppression. At the same time they empathize with male characters who fall victims to female bullies such as Ma Palagada in *The Slave Girl*, and Sekyiwa and Tika in *The Housemaid*.

In all the selected texts, the notion of supremacy is as an antonym to the logic of equity and democracy. If supremacy was indeed as supreme as it is assumed to be, its very nature would defy redistribution. Once it is subjected to any level of devolution it translates into some level of democracy. It becomes a version of power with others. That is suicide for

ideal supremacy. The struggle for empowerment of African women is first and foremost skeptical about the very nature of supremacy but even much more importantly it aspires to a higher level of democracy which implies power with others. It would be suicidal or impossible for ideal supremacy to be shared. The portrait of power and empowerment in the selected texts aspires to a higher level of democracy, and embraces alternative forms of power and that are commensurate with its ideals. Empowerment within patriarchal structures, if at all, implies that women are passive receipients of tokenism as opposed to proactive appropriators of rights. The popular phrase "women should be empowered" in non-fiction discourse of power presumes the powerful male - powerless female dichotomy. It is rare that we ask "who by?" Non-Western feminist social theories emphasize the need for such skepticism. In 'The myth of Empowerment' (1991), Taliaferro posits that "true power cannot be bestowed: it comes from within. Any notion of empowerment by one group hides an attempt to keep control ---" "(qtd. In Rowlands, 1997:16). And Rowlands observes that empowerment by delegation is counter-productive because "it can just as easily be withdrawn: empowerment as a gift does not involve a structural change in power relations" (12).

In the contemporary real world myth, truism, fact and fallacy in empowerment discourses especially in activism have been conflated. In some cases they are trivialized into propaganda against women's movements worldwide. This confusion is manifested in feminist criticism of African literature. The perspective categorizes African writers into a male camp which is assumed to perpetuate patriarchal ideology and demean female characters on the one hand, and female writers who are expected to axiomatically advance empowerment of women – its orientation notwithstanding. This reading of literary texts as social documents is simplistic and in fact non-literary. Such an approach alienates African writers from their African audience. In the process, African female writers' effort to bail out contemporary power discourse from misconceptions goes to waste.

We assume that the African female artist is entitled to all the roles that African people attribute to the literary artist such as: "conscience of society", "self-ordained priest" [priestess], "novelist the teacher", "bard", "oracle", "visionary", "warning voice and builder of the future", "connoisseur of power", "artist the ruler". In these capacities the writer's responsibilities are best summarized in Wole Soyinka's words: "expose, reflect, indeed magnify the decadent, rotten underbelly of a society that has lost its directions, jettisoned all senses of value and is careering down a precipice as fast as the latest artificial boom can take it" (Petersen, 1988:19). In his article 'The Writer in Modern Africa', Per Wästaberg concludes that African writers "take the side of the powerless and important, they write of victims of the arbitrariness of others, they sing no songs in praise of the victor" (ibid. 19).

African female artists handle the three responsibilities above in a subtle way. Using their poetic licence they recreate a debate in a fictional world in which they can subvert grand patriarchal narratives and create alternative narratives. They demonstrate the vanity of co-opting women into oppressive structures that idealize supremacy because the process merely mutates the vice. It nurtures a category of women who remain true to patriarchal culture. Such women include Aunty Nebou, Farmata, Binetou in *So Long a Letter*, Ouleymatous, Yaye Khady, Mireille in *Scarlet Song*, Ma Palagada in *The Slave Girl*, Amina in *Naira Power*, Auntie Teacher, Sekyiwa, Tika in *The Housemaid*, Esie, in *Changes*. Their pseudo empowerment adulterates the noble concept of emancipation. This category of female characters is comparable to a category of male characters that signify variants of supremacy: Tamsir, Modou Fall, Sekyi, Pa Palagada, Ramonu and Ali Kondey. A different category of people who embody meaningful empowerment includes: Ramatoulaye, Aissatou, Young Nabou, Daouda Dieng, Daba, Ojebeta Opokuya who have the capability to emancipate themselves and others by exploring different forms of power. By decentering empowerment discourse in this manner, African female writers transcend a major stricture in western feminism and development discourse. In *Arguing with the Crocodile: Gender and Class in Bangladesh* (1992), Sarah White concludes that "it is in its avoidance of

discussing power that the fundamental weakness of literature on women and development lies" (qtd. in Rowlands, 1997:v). In this sense, the African female writers discussed in this study make a major contribution to contemporary discourse by engaging the central concept: power. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize African women's works and appropriate practical criticism as a vital site for serious engagement with power discourse.

Power from within is the antonym of power over. It connotes potential, positive and productive energy that is common to all human beings irrespective of sexual differences. It can be nurtured and exercised for individual and social benefit. The authors in this study depict this form of power as an effective force against supremacy. In the final analysis it is the Ojebetas, not the Palagadas of this world, who demonstrate true power. Recognition of this form of power entails acceptance of spirituality which is an essence in African feminism.

Society recognizes the value of this form of power. Patriarchal ideology affirms it, but only in men and suppresses it in women in order to construct the mythical powerful male versus powerless female identities. However, society also realizes the limitations of this myth. This poses a threat to gendered patriarchal structures hence the need for differential socialization for the two sexes. If indeed women were indeed innately powerless the force expended in socializing them to internalize the idea would be unnecessary. In *Changes*, Old Nana defines the "good woman" as the one who allows herself to be destroyed. The specific target of this social destruction is the human inner power in the female being. It can be destroyed intricately through socialization or voluntarily through convenient suppression as in the case of Amina in *Naira Power*. In materialistic empowerment models this dimension of power is suppressed because it unsettles the very foundation of patriarchy. An emancipatory ideology that does not endeavour to deconstruct this fundamental basis of gender inequity cannot envisage structural change. And this is where African feminism makes the essential difference. The African female writer who dramatizes this discourse makes an even greater difference.

6.2 Recommendations

The conceptual framework guiding this study has been applied to six texts by four West African female writers. We have acknowledged this scope as the major limitation of the study. The framework can be replicated in similar studies of African female writers' works that address the theme of power explicitly such as Nadine Gordimer's *The Conservationist* (1972), Bessie Head's *A Question of Power* (1974) and *Tales of Tenderness and Power* (1989) Posthumous), Muthoni Likimani's *What Does a Man Want?* (1974), Margaret Ogola's *The River and the Source* (1994). Studies of autobiographies of African female writers could also replicate the framework and investigate the concepts of power that obtain in the genre and specific texts such as Ellen Kuzwayo's *Call Me Woman* (1985), Buchi Emecheta's *Head Above Water* (1986), Emma Mashinini's *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life* (1989), and Sindiwe Magona's *Forced to Grow* (1992).

The conceptual framework is fundamentally gender inclusive in so far as it addresses all forms of oppresion affecting both men and women. It can therefore be replicated in analyses of African male writers' works with the aim of discovering their conceptualization of power and empowerment of society from external and internal oppressive structures. The African literary texts that are categorized as protest writing and critical realism may have unique concepts of power that have probably been overshadowed by the ubiquitousmonolistic concept of power. There are many examples such as Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Sembene Ousmane's *God's Bits of Wood* (1960), Alex Lagumas's *In the Fog of the Season's End* (1972), Francis Imbuga's *Betrayal in the City* (1976), Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* (1977), Joe De Graft's *Muntu* (1977), Ayi Kweh Armah's *The Healers* (1978) and Aminata (1988). The framework could also be replicated in studies of African men's autobiographies such as Nelson Mandela's *No Easy Walk to Freedm* (1956) and Oginga Odinga's *Not Yet Uhuru* (1967).

Analysis of a variety of texts would provide more bases of assessing the value and magnitude of African female writers' contribution to power and empowerment discourses.

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